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Oklahomans Trapped in Kenya Return Home

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After a harrowing experience, six Oklahomans have made it back home from Africa after the Kenyan government had kept them from leaving, due to coronavirus concerns.



Senator Jim Inhofe (R-Okla.) used his connections in Nairobi to get the group a flight out the country just before the borders were closed to both entering and leaving Kenya. Personal medications and safe food supplies were almost gone when almost 20 previously-schedule flights were cancelled. The group went to Kenya on a Christian mission trip before there were any concerns about COVID-19, especially in the warmer climate of Kenya. They were part of a group called the Maisha Project, based in Oklahoma City, which provides medical aid to impoverished Kenyans in rural villages.

The only travel restrictions they were given prior to their trip to Kenya was to not travel to either China or Italy. At that time, there were no cases of COVID-19 in Kenya, but shortly after arriving in Africa the president of Kenya announced a student had returned from studying in the United States, where he had contracted the coronavirus.

This led to an order by the Kenyan government that every person who had flown in from the United States within the past 14 days had to be quarantined. Prepared to leave once the quarantine was over, the group saw flight after flight cancelled. “Every flight they booked us got cancelled within an hour,” Amanda English of Moore told the Daily Oklahoman newspaper.

Calls to the U.S. Embassy did no good. They were told they could travel directly to Nairobi and buy a ticket personally, but the embassy could not guarantee they would not be arrested by the Kenyan police for violating the quarantine in place order.

They called their state representative in Moore, Oklahoma, Mark McBride, who placed them in contact with U.S. Senator James Inhofe.

“You could feel the hysteria that they were expressing at that time,” Inhofe told the Oklahoman.

Fortunately, Inhofe had been traveling to Kenya for nearly a quarter of a century for his own Christian mission trips, and this had led him to have multiple contacts in Nairobi. These “close friends,” as Inhofe described them, contacted the Kenyan ambassador to the United States, and eventually flight out of the country on Kenya Airways was arranged for the desperate group.

It was the last flight out before the border was closed.

Abbie Manske, a nurse; Amanda English, a teacher at an Oklahoma City tech center, and her son, Erik Bargewell; Kristin Ceder, a master sergeant with the Oklahoma City police department; Beatrice Williamson, project director; and Kristin Miller, a medical doctor, made it home this week.



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Certain lessons can be taken from this experience. One, if traveling outside of the U.S., it might be wise to have the telephone number of a powerful member of the U.S. Senate in one's possession — especially if he has friends in the country that is your destination.

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