Dominican Republic 2013 Crime and Safety Report

While the State Department rates the crime threat for the Dominican Republic as “High,” the 2012 nationwide statistics from the Dominican Republic National Police, in comparison to 2011 figures, displayed a 10 percent decrease in the number of reported homicides; a two percent increase in the number of injuries that resulted from acts of violence with weapons; a 14 percent increase in armed robberies; and a two percent increase in the number of fraud-related schemes. Some of the primary factors contributing to an increase in some crimes are unemployment, domestic violence, large scale migration to urban areas, abuse of drugs and alcohol, drug trafficking, and the availability of weapons. During the holiday season (November and January) and especially during carnival, the overall level of crime tends to rise, especially in the area of thefts and robberies. Crime is generally not violent if the victim cooperates; however, an assailant will not hesitate to use violence if it appears that the victim will resist.

Preliminary 2012 crime statistics revealed (per 100,000 inhabitants):
Homicides – Down 10 percent (from 2011). The five most violent cities were: La Altagracia (31.70), Santo Domingo Province (28.80), Bahoruco (28.80), Independencia (28.20), and Duarte (26.10).
Robberies – Up 4 percent (from 2011). Top five cities for reported robberies were: Santo Domingo Province, San Cristobal, National District, Santiago, and La Romana. Top five national district neighborhoods were: Arroyo Hondo, Naco, Gazcue, Cristo Rey, and Villa Agricola.
Assaults – Up 14 percent (from 2011). Top five cities for reported assaults were: Santo Domingo Province, San Cristobal, National District, Santiago, and La Romana.
Kidnappings – Down 63 percent (from 2011). Top five cities for reported kidnappings were: Santo Domingo Province, Duarte, National District, La Vega, and La Altagracia.
Rapes – Up 57 percent (from 2011). Top three cities for reported rapes were: Santo Domingo Province, La Vega, and Peravia. Based on a recent study that was conducted by the National
Police the method most utilized was strangulation followed by blunt force trauma and edged weapons (knives and machetes).

Fraud schemes continue to increase, with credit card fraud being the main dilemma. Teams of organized criminals either install equipment that captures personal bank information from legitimate bank ATMs or they have someone on the inside who has access to card and personal identification (PIN) numbers.

The most common, yet easily avoidable, type of crime is the drive-by robbery that is normally performed by one or two assailants (usually male) on a motorcycle, scooter, or even a bicycle. The assailant will drive up in front of or behind the potential victim and grab anything that is in arm's reach: purses, cellular phones, necklaces, etc. Some 65 percent of the reported incidents occurred while the person was walking on a public street; 70 percent of the items that were stolen were bags and/or purses; 40 percent of the assailants used black Yamaha RX 115 motorcycles; 45 percent of the assailants were armed with pistols; 35 percent of the incidents occurred on Friday, a pay day for many; a majority of the incidents occur between 10pm-11pm; and 85 percent of the motorcycles had two riders.

Armed assaults are becoming more frequent during hours of darkness and when victims travel alone.

The quality of local guard companies varies widely. The Embassy advises American businesses and private individuals to evaluate their options carefully before selecting a company.

Prostitution is legal, but illegal child prostitution also exists, including in the tourist areas. According to Dominican Republic law, the age of consent is 18. The code for minors has been revised to strengthen provisions against child abuse. Offenses of child abuse carry a sentence of between 20 and 30 years and fines of US $2,000 - $10,000.

**Overall Road Safety Situation**

According to a World Bank study, the country's road network is approximately 19,000 kilometers, of which 5,000 kilometers are highways, and the rest are rural roads that require rehabilitation; 81 percent of the paved highways (3,831 kilometers) are in good or fair condition and about 70 percent of the unpaved highways (1,222 kilometers) are in poor condition and in need of rehabilitation or reconstruction. The average traffic volume in the highway network is 1,280 vehicles per day. About 15 percent of the vehicles are trucks.
For those planning to drive, be aware that offensive and defensive driving skills are a necessity. Although traffic laws are similar to those in the United States, a lack of adequate traffic controls and enforcement have resulted in hostile driving conditions. Pedestrians do not have the right of way, so walking along or crossing busy streets can be very dangerous, even at intersections with traffic lights or traffic police present. Drivers should note that pedestrians tend to step into traffic without regard to corners, crosswalks, or traffic signals and are often dressed in dark clothing. This is further exacerbated by the lack of street lighting. Drivers are commonly aggressive and erratic, often failing to yield the right of way or engaging in road rage. Local laws require the use of seat belts, the use of hands-free cellular devices while driving and helmets by motorcyclists. During the evening hours, police conduct random stops of vehicles.

Traffic accidents and driving under the influence often result in serious injury or death. This is especially the case during the holiday season and when commercial vehicles, such as buses or trucks, are involved. Typically, vehicles that are involved in accidents are not moved until authorized by a police officer. Drivers who violate this rule may be held liable for the accident. Local law requires that a driver be taken into custody when an accident results in serious injury or death, even if the driver is insured and appears not to have been at fault. The minimum detention period is 48 hours; however, detentions frequently last until a judicial decision is reached (often weeks or months) or until a waiver is signed by the injured party (usually as the result of a settlement). In case of accidents, only the driver will be taken into custody.

As gasoline prices remain at a premium, most people convert their vehicles to propane gas, which is a cheaper fuel. The nozzles of the tanks that hold the propane tanks are easily ruptured in the event that the vehicle is involved in an accident. The result of a rupture is usually a massive explosion. These explosions usually end up killing or severely burning the occupants of the vehicles, along with any innocent bystanders.

In addition to traffic accidents, Dominican law requires that a driver be taken into custody for driving under the influence; the minimum detention period is 48 hours. Individuals under the influence can face severe penalties.

Licensed drivers who are familiar with local road conditions can be obtained through local car rental agencies.

For intercity travel, consider using one of the more reputable tourist bus companies, and for travel within the city, hotel taxis are recommended. For safety reasons, it is suggested to
avoid using public transportation, such as route taxis ("carros publicos") and urban buses ("guaguas").

Travel at night on intercity highways and in rural areas should be avoided due to animals on the road, poor road conditions, and vehicles being driven at excessive speeds often with malfunctioning headlights or taillights. Rolling blackouts within the urban and rural areas increase the danger of night travel.

Political, Economic, Religious, and Ethnic Violence

Since 1996, the Dominican Republic has seen a consolidation of political freedoms within its representational democracy with a series of elections seen as generally free and fair. The country still faces a serious problem with corruption, as measured by international indices. Politically-motivated protests, demonstrations, and general strikes occur periodically. Political demonstrations have turned violent, with participants rioting and erecting roadblocks and police sometimes using deadly force in response.

Local, Regional, and International Terrorism Threats/Concerns

Even though the Dominican Republic is considered a “Low” threat for terrorism, the country still faces the challenge of organized crime, which involves a variety of activities, including drug trafficking, and corruption. This situation is exacerbated by the lack of law enforcement resources in Haiti. Drugs are frequently channeled from Mexico and South America, either by aircraft or through maritime platforms, into the Dominican Republic. Local drug use continues to increase as drug couriers in the Dominican Republic are paid with narcotics rather than cash. Firearms are often used as collateral and exchanged for drugs. Finally, laundering the proceeds of drug sales undermines legitimate economic activity (i.e. real estate market, local casinos, and currency exchange houses).

The Dominican Republic is an integral part of the Caribbean and, as such, a likely transit point for extremists from within the region, Africa, and Europe.

Civil Unrest

Civil unrest has become a common occurrence in the last several years due to the lack of adequate electricity, water resources, and public opinion that the government is not actively pursuing a sufficient maintenance and improvement program for roadways, bridges, and other infrastructure. In addition to public protests within the National District, demonstrations and
strikes have occurred outside of Santo Domingo without advance notice and have turned violent.

**Post-specific Concerns**

**Environmental Hazards**

The Dominican Republic is in the center of the Antillean archipelago, a location that places the island in the pathway of a hydro-meteorological phenomenon. Such phenomena include hurricanes, tropical storms, tropical depressions, and other natural disasters (including earthquakes, floods, and droughts). Visitors to the island need to be aware that many buildings may not be in compliance with U.S. wind and seismic codes.

Santo Domingo is just 160 miles from the epicenter of the January 2010 Haiti earthquake, and the Dominican Republic, just like Haiti, lies on several fault lines running through the Caribbean. Of particular concern to several organizations specializing in seismic studies is the “Submarine Fault,” located between the easternmost part of the Dominican Republic and the island of Guadeloupe. These organizations predict that large earthquakes of magnitude 8.5 to 9.0 could occur, rupturing the fault’s entire 1,000-kilometre length.

By far the largest reoccurring natural disaster threat is the passage of hurricanes, its subsequent exposure to landslides, and the resultant flooding in low lying and coastal areas that are also susceptible to the influence of tidal waves. According to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), the Atlantic hurricane season runs from June 1 to November 30, a six-month period that encompasses over 97 percent of reported tropical activity in the Atlantic basin.

**Industrial and Transportation Accidents**

The potential for industrial accidents by large infrastructures and industrial facilities containing hazardous materials, especially after a natural disaster, does exist. The town of Bajos de Haina is severely contaminated with lead from a now out-of-business vehicle battery recycling smelter and is on the list of the world's 10 worst polluted places.

As of December 18, 2008, the U.S. Federal Aviation Administration assessed through its International Aviation Safety Program that the Dominican Republic meets International Civil Aviation standards. The last reported aviation incident occurred on February 6, 1996, when a Virgin Air Boeing 757 crashed, resulting in the death of 189 individuals, near Puerto Plata.
Regional Travel Concerns and Restricted Travel Areas/Zones

If traveling overland between the Dominican Republic and Haiti, it is highly recommended to consult the Country Specific Information Sheet for Haiti, as well as the website of the U.S. Embassy in Port-au-Prince for information about travel conditions in Haiti. This route is especially dangerous due to the January 2010 earthquake in Port-au-Prince.

Drug-related Crimes

Local news agencies have described the Dominican Republic as a springboard for drug operations by the Colombia and Mexican cartels to the United States and Europe. The table below lists seizure rates for various controlled substances in kilograms, except for ecstasy, which is expressed in numbers of pills. Such trafficking often involves frequent and violent clashes among rival drug traffickers, and in 2012, drug trafficking was identified as one of the contributing factor to the increase in reported violence in the country.

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Kidnapping Threats

There has been a dramatic 63 percent decrease in the number of kidnappings reported in 2012; however, American citizens of Dominican descent have been targeted because criminals believe that the victim’s family in the U.S. is capable of paying a large sum of money for their release. In response, the police are responding aggressively to reported incidents. Victims of reported cases included Dominican nationals, such as business persons, family members, and common citizens.

In one type of kidnapping tactic, victims reported that they were abducted by men in police uniforms or similar clothing and were told that their identity needed to be verified. Victims were taken to an undisclosed location and held from a few hours to a couple of days. During that time, abductors would contact the family members and demand huge sums of money for the release of their loved ones. Most families paid the requested amount, and the victims were released unharmed. Most families did not involve or contact the police, as they feared it would make things worse.

Police Response

Since 2010, in its effort to become a reliable and professional law enforcement entity, the National Police embarked on a set of reforms. The Chief of Police is striving to reach a level of professionalism, whereby the public’s perception is a positive one, rather than viewed as corrupt and inept.

Corruption and official misconduct remains a serious concern and is being investigated by the Internal Affairs Directorate for the National Police. As per the mandate of law 94-02, Internal Affairs is working to prevent, investigate, monitor, control and recommend corrective actions for any improper conduct. This is aligned with the government’s commitment to transparency and the elimination of internal corruption.

How to Handle Incidents of Police Detention or Harassment

Visitors are subject to local laws. The judicial process can last up to seven years, which may result in lengthy pre-trial detainment in a local jail. If arrested or harassed, contact the U.S. Consulate’s American Citizens Services Section at (809) 221-2171.

Synopsis on criminal procedures in the Dominican Republic:
PHASE ONE

Arrest: According to the constitution, a person detained or arrested by the police may be held without charges for up to 48 hours. During this period, the prosecutor and the police conduct an initial investigation of the case.

Right to an Attorney: A detainee is typically questioned as part of the investigation by the police. According to local law, a detainee is entitled to have an attorney present during any questioning, and at any of the hearings or trials. If the detainee cannot afford an attorney, the government will provide a public defender upon request. The detainee also has the right to remain silent.

Habeas Corpus: According to the constitution, any person who is detained for more than 48 hours without being formally charged is entitled to request a hearing of habeas corpus. Habeas corpus is a physical release of an arrestee from prison while awaiting trial; the defendant is required to remain in the country until the charges are finally resolved.

PHASE TWO

The District Attorney sends the case to a coordinating judge, who will assign one of the investigating judges to conduct a preliminary investigation. This judge will examine the evidence that is presented by the District Attorney. Based on that evidence, a determination will be made whether the detainee should remain in custody. Should the judge determine that there is sufficient evidence to detain, a date for a preliminary hearing, typically three months to one year, will be set. A defendant may request bail at any time during this process.

PHASE THREE

At a preliminary hearing, the investigating judge will hear evidence and make a decision on whether grave, sufficient, and corroborating evidence of guilt exists. If so, the detainee remains in custody, and the case is assigned to a First Instance Court.

PHASE FOUR

The First Instance Court is assigned the case, and a court date is set for Conocimiento de Fondo del Caso. The trial generally proceeds in the following sequence:
- Judge questions the prisoner to see if the testimony conforms to the statements in the documents;
- The prosecuting attorney may direct questions to the prisoner;
- The defense may ask further questions, call witnesses, and present defense arguments;
- The prosecuting attorney delivers a summation; and
- The trial is concluded, and the defendant remains in custody pending rendering of a sentence.

PHASE FIVE

If the defendant is found guilty, the detainee has 10 days to appeal the decision. If the case is appealed, the prisoner is incarcerated until a hearing is set before a five- or three-judge court of appeal.

Where to Turn to for Assistance if you Become a Victim of Crime

A prompt police response to reported incidents is normally limited due to local traffic conditions and available resources. The Dominican Republic has a specialized police force, known as "Politur," a cooperative effort between the National Police, Secretary of the Armed Forces, and the Secretary of Tourism that provides first responder type assistance to tourists. If a visitor is a victim of a crime, the Politur will help them to get to a police station, file a police report, and seek further assistance. However, Americans who are victims of a crime should contact American Citizens Services as soon as possible.

National Emergency Telephone Number: 911
U.S. Embassy, American Citizen Services: (809) 221-2171
Fire Department: (809) 682-2000 & 2001
Red Cross: (809) 682-4545
Tourist Police (Politur): (809) 222-2026/685-0508

National Police
- General Number: (809) 221-3004
- Information and Public Relations: (809) 685-1835, ext 2016
- Robbery Division: (809) 682-0039, ext 2135
- Homicide Division: (809) 685-6010, ext 2225
- Fraud Division: (809) 686-7652, ext 2118

Various Police/Security Agencies

The constitution was changed on January 26, 2010, to separate the National Police and the military. This constitutional change specifically identifies the military’s responsibility to
maintain the country’s sovereignty, leaving the National Police, with a force of 32,109 officers to handle the country’s internal security and the protection of its citizens (to include residents, visitors, and diplomats).

**Medical Emergencies**

Medical care in Santo Domingo is adequate for most problems. Appointments are generally easy to obtain and can be scheduled for the same week. Payment for services is expected at the time of the appointment (or when the ambulance arrives). Ambulance response times range from 15 to 45 minutes. U.S. insurance plans are not accepted nor will claims be filed for the traveler.

**Contact Information for Recommended Local Hospitals and Clinics**

**Hospitals**
- Clínica Abreu (809) 688-4411 Santo Domingo
- Clínica Abel González (809) 227-2235 Santo Domingo
- CEDIMAT (809) 565-9989 Santo Domingo
- Plaza de la Salud (809) 565-7477 Santo Domingo
- Clínica Corominas (809) 508-1171 Santiago
- Centro Médico Bournigal (809) 586-2342.. Puerto Plata
- Centro Médico Central Romana (809) 532-3333.. La Romana
- Hospiten Bavaro (809) 686-1414.. Bavaro/Punta Cana

**Ambulances**
- Movimed - (809) 532-0000 Santo Domingo
- Pro Med - (809) 948-7200 Santo Domingo

**CDC Country-specific Vaccination and Health Guidance**

For further country specific health guidance please visit: http://wwwnc.cdc.gov/travel/destinations/dominican-republic.htm

**Tips on How to Avoid Becoming a Victim**

**Areas to be Avoided**

During the hours of darkness, avoid walking in public parks or areas that are isolated, such as Parque Mirador del Sur, and areas that surround Santo Domingo’s National District, such as
Santo Domingo Oeste, Este, and Norte. Also be cautious in certain areas within the National District, including east of Avenue Maximo Gomez, Simon Bolivar, Luperon, Espaillat, and Capotillo; south of Parque Mirador del Sur; and west of Avenue Luperon, Avenue George Washington, Paseo Presidente Billini, and Avenue del Puerto.

Best Security Practices

Visitors to the island are reminded to maintain a high level of vigilance and to take appropriate steps to increase their security awareness.

Hotel rooms and telephones are not bugged; however, your business should be conducted with discretion to avoid the loss of proprietary information. Keep hotel room keys with you at all times, if possible. Valuables should be left at home. However, if one must carry valuables, secure them in your local offices or the hotel room safe. At night, secure passports and other valuables. Keep a copy of your passport at all times and keep the original in the hotel safe. Only relinquish it if you are required to identify yourself to local authorities. Do not divulge the name of your hotel or room number to strangers. Speak with the bellman, concierge, and front desk regarding safe areas around the city to jog, dine, or sight see. Ask about local customs and which taxi companies to use or avoid.

Invest in a good map of the city. Note significant points on the map such as hotels, embassies, and police stations. Make a mental note of alternative routes to the hotel or local office should the map be lost or stolen. Be aware of the surroundings. Look up and down the street before exiting a building. Learn how to place a local telephone call and how to use coin telephones. Make sure to always have extra tokens or coins for telephone use. Vary the time and route of hotel departures and arrivals. Be alert for persons watching your movements. Be cautious when entering public bathrooms.

Avoid jogging or walking in unfamiliar cities. If one must jog, be aware of the traffic patterns when crossing public streets. Joggers have been seriously injured by failing to understand local traffic conditions.

Avoid renting vehicles or driving unless familiar with the local traffic laws and customs. Visitors may want to consider hiring a professional driver during their stay in lieu of driving themselves.

The Regional Security Officer (RSO) office strongly urges all Americans to cooperate if confronted with any type of weapon.
Purse snatchers and briefcase thieves are known to work hotel bars and restaurants waiting for unknowing guests to place these items on chairs or under tables. Keep items in view or "in touch." Be alert to scams involving an unknown person spilling a drink or food on clothing. An accomplice may be preparing to steal wallets, purses, or briefcases.

Pools or beaches are attractive areas for thieves. Leave valuables in the hotel, but carry a token sum to placate violent thieves. Sign for food and beverages on your room bill rather than carry cash.

Avoid strangers. Prostitutes, both men and women, take advantage of travelers through various ploys: knock out drugs, the use of accomplices, and theft from the victim’s room.

To avoid becoming a victim of a drive-by robbery, try to avoid outwardly displaying expensive-looking items on your person while walking. Always remain aware of the surroundings and be alert for motorcycles and scooters approaching from any direction. If someone is approaching, simply move out of the way. If the assailant cannot get close enough, he will not stop, although he may circle around and try again later.

Individuals are encouraged to use their credit and ATM cards judiciously. The RSO office strongly urges that travelers contact their financial institution before scheduled departure to the Dominican Republic to provide them with dates and locations of the visit and limit the amount of money that can be withdrawn. If making credit card/debit card transactions while overseas, check your accounts periodically online or through contacting the institution directly to clarify there are no erroneous charges on your account. Always be aware of passersby when using an ATM and guard the key pad when entering the PIN so others cannot see the entry. Do not use an ATM that is suspected to bear a skimming device. Only carry cards that are absolutely needed, such as a credit card, in lieu of a debit card. Avoid using ATM machines to withdraw cash. Finally, it is recommended that travelers save receipts of purchases. In cases of fraud, immediately contact the financial institution and file a report with American Citizen Services Section at the U.S. Consulate. Fraudulent charges may not appear until well after the return home. To reduce the risk of possible ATM fraud, use only ATMs that are located in major hotels or co-located with banks.

U.S. Embassy/Consulate Location and Contact Information

Embassy/Consulate Address and Hours of Operation
The U.S. Embassy is located at the corner of Cesar Nicolas Penson St. & Leopoldo Navarro, Gazcue, Santo Domingo, DR. Hours of operation are 0800 – 1645 (8:00am until 4:45pm) Monday-Friday.

The Consular Section is located at the corner of Cesar Nicolas Penson St. & Maximo Gomez Ave., Gazcue, Santo Domingo, DR. Hours of operation 0700-1630 (7:00am until 4:30pm) Monday-Thursday, 0700-1100 (7:00am until 11:00pm) on Fridays.

Embassy/Consulate Contact Numbers

All embassy personnel can be reached at the embassy main telephone number: (809) 221-2171 (24 hours/day).
Regional Security Office: (809) 731-4266
Embassy Operator: (809) 221-2171
American Citizens Services: (809) 689-6142, afterhours call (829) 259-3094
Marine Post One: (809) 731-4398

American citizens are encouraged to register their visits to the country on the State Department website under the Smart Traveler Enrollment Program (STEP) in order to better assist you during an emergency.

OSAC Country Council Information

The U.S. Embassy in the Dominican Republic has an active OSAC Country Council. The Council takes an active role engaging issues of crime and security. These take the form of security reports, outreach to public officials for speaking engagements, training, and briefing seminars, as well as an extensive email network to promote ideas and facilitate the exchange of information and contacts. The Country Council represents over 45 major U.S. companies from a varied number of industries and meets on a quarterly basis.

Point of contact for the Santo Domingo OSAC Council is John A. Aybar, Regional Security Officer, at (809) 731-4475 or AybarJA@state.gov. The private-sector co-Chair is Alain Astacio (alan.astacio@aes.com). The private-sector vice co-Chair is José Burdie (jose.burdie@ups.com). The private-sector Secretary is José Manuel Peña (jm_pena@seadom.com.do).

Country Council information can be found at the OSAC website: www.osac.gov/countrycouncils.