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# United States Senate

COMMITTEE ON  
HOMELAND SECURITY AND GOVERNMENTAL AFFAIRS  
WASHINGTON, DC 20510-6250

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October 30, 2017

The Honorable Steve A. Linick  
Inspector General  
Department of State  
2121 Virginia Avenue, NW  
Washington, DC 20037

Dear Inspector General Linick:

I have inquired with the Department of State about the circumstances surrounding the death of 20-year-old Wisconsinite, Abbey Conner, in Mexico in January 2017.<sup>1</sup> According to Ms. Conner's family, and other victims who have since come forward, the consumption of allegedly tainted alcohol at Mexican resorts has led to violence, physical abuse, and even death. I respectfully ask the Office of Inspector General to examine how the Department monitors, records, and reports overseas incidents involving physical abuse or death after the potential consumption of tainted alcohol.

On August 16, 2017, I wrote to the State Department requesting information about Ms. Conner's death and reports of potentially tainted alcohol at Mexican resorts frequented by U.S. tourists.<sup>2</sup> In addition to requesting information about the Department's communications with the Mexican government regarding Ms. Conner's death, I asked for information about the prevalence of tainted alcohol-involved incidents at Mexican resorts.<sup>3</sup> The Department responded that it was unable to report on the number of incidents involving potentially tainted alcohol at Mexican resorts.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Raquel Rutledge, "U.S. State Department Warns Tourists about Tainted Alcohol at Mexico Resorts after Blackouts Reported," *Journal Sentinel* (July 26, 2017), <http://www.jsonline.com/story/news/investigations/2017/07/26/u-s-state-department-issues-travel-warning-tainted-alcohol-mexico-resorts-after-tourists-blackouts/513563001/>.

<sup>2</sup> Letter from Ron Johnson, S. Comm. on Homeland Sec. & Gov't. Affairs, to Rex W. Tillerson, Sec. of Dep't. of State (Aug. 16, 2017).

<sup>3</sup> *Id.*

<sup>4</sup> Letter from Charles S. Faulkner, Dep't of State, Bureau of Leg. Affairs, to Ron Johnson, S. Comm. on Homeland Sec. & Gov't Affairs (Sept. 1, 2017).

In July 2017, the Department updated its Mexico travel warning to caution tourists “to stop and seek medical attention if [they] begin to feel ill” when consuming alcohol.<sup>5</sup> Reportedly, as much as 43 percent of all alcohol consumed in Mexico is illegal, “produced under unregulated circumstances resulting in potentially dangerous concoctions.”<sup>6</sup> Many tourists who alleged that their alcohol was tainted say that they consumed only one or two alcoholic beverages before blacking out and waking to signs of physical abuse.<sup>7</sup>

In addition, family members and victims who have been affected by tainted alcohol at Mexican resorts have conveyed concerns about their interactions with Embassy or Consular officials.<sup>8</sup> In some cases, consular officials in Mexico have reportedly taken several days to notify family members of a tourist’s death in Mexico.<sup>9</sup> In light of the allegations of tainted alcohol being served to American tourists, the Department ought to be closely working with Mexican officials to ensure the safety of our citizens abroad.

Accordingly, I respectfully request that the Office of Inspector General review the Department’s actions in monitoring, recording, and reporting overseas incidents involving physical abuse or death after the potential consumption of tainted alcohol. Specifically, I request that you review the following:

1. The number of reports made to the Department about incidents involved alleged tainted alcohol in Mexico, including:
  - a. The number of complaints lodged at U.S. Consulates in Mexico, and
  - b. The disposition of each of those complaints.
2. The actions and policies of the Department in responding to reports of alleged tainted alcohol poisoning, both immediately after the incident and in the following months.
3. The actions of Department officials in Mexico in assisting victims of potential physical abuse, such as sexual assault, after the consumption of alleged tainted alcohol.
4. The adequacy of assistance provided by the Department’s American Citizens Services in helping Americans following incidents of physical abuse or violence overseas.

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<sup>5</sup> *Id.*

<sup>6</sup> Raquel Rutledge, “Tourists to all- inclusive resorts in Mexico suspect they were given tainted alcohol,” *Journal Sentinel*, (Jul. 21, 2017), <http://www.wfaa.com/news/nation-world/tourists-to-all-inclusive-resorts-in-mexico-suspect-they-were-given-tainted-alcohol/458161907>, (A 2015 report from Mexico’s Tax Administration Service).

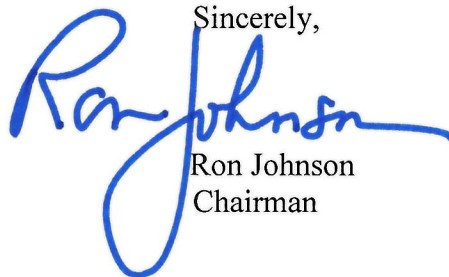
<sup>7</sup> *Id.* (One victim’s blood alcohol level was .002, below the U.S. .08 standard evidencing impairment).

<sup>8</sup> Comm. staff telephone briefing with Ginny McGowan (Aug. 14, 2017).

<sup>9</sup> “Davon’s Story, Davon Green Franklin Foundation, Inc., (Mar. 12, 2015), <https://www.dgffoundation.org/single-post/2015/03/12/Davons-Story>.

5. The Department's decision-making process for issuing or modifying a travel warning for a particular country.
6. Currently, the Department does not include deaths from "natural causes"—the Department's description of Ms. Conner's death— in its total number of U.S. citizens killed abroad.<sup>10</sup> Please review the Department's process to consider a death with suspicious surrounding circumstances, such as possible tainted alcohol poisoning, as death from "natural causes."

If you have any questions about this request, please ask your staff to contact Brian Downey or Amber Selig of the Committee staff at (202) 224-4751. Thank you for your attention to this matter.

Sincerely,  
  
Ron Johnson  
Chairman

cc: The Honorable Claire McCaskill  
Ranking Member

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<sup>10</sup> Raquel Rutledge, "State Department numbers minimize tourist deaths tied to blackouts at Mexico resorts," Journal Sentinel, (Oct. 6, 2017), <http://www.jsonline.com/story/news/2017/10/06/abbey-conners-death-mexico-goes-state-department-numbers-minimize-deaths-mexico-abbey-conner-not-lis/736139001/>.