

A weekend in Cairo

David Lock, director of international projects, witnessed rather more than he expected while visiting Cairo to contribute to a TEMPUS project in January.

The Leadership Foundation was awarded the scoping contract for the UWIC-hosted TEMPUS project, and work was going well. Visits had been made to Egypt, Lebanon, Morocco and Tunisia, a report delivered, and a plenary session was scheduled for 29-31 January in Cairo.

Two weeks before the session, the long-serving president of Tunisia fled after protests against him. There were protests on the streets of Cairo, but nothing so serious as to cause the Foreign Office to advise against travel. The Leadership Foundation's normal risk assessment was completed and I took off for Cairo.

'Arrival Friday' started normally - it was not until mid-morning, when the internet and the mobile phone network went down, that anything untoward was suspected. CNN, BBC World News and Egyptian TV were reporting that protests were expected after Friday prayers. Security forces took to the streets

- and the scenes that followed monopolised international TV for the next 10 days.

But while tensions mounted out on the streets, there was calm in the hotel. A curfew was imposed making it difficult for the Egyptians to join in, but they telephoned in with support. The cooperative multinational spirit was a joy to work with, as we assessed the risks and the options.

It was decided to postpone the meeting. With mobile phones and the internet down, going to the airport was the only way to find out whether flights were available. On Sunday the Foreign Office advised Brits to leave by commercial means if they could. Very fortunately, when I got through the crush at the airport, I was eventually given a seat on a BMI flight.

While not quite what was anticipated, the weekend did provide first-hand experience of some elements of leadership in a crisis.

It showed the impact and speed of a global world, with President Obama responding just over an hour after the Egyptian president had addressed his people, and mobile phone networks being restored the following morning.

The importance of contingencies for things that we take for granted (mobile phones, electronic payment systems) became apparent as well as the ability to be responsive to a changing situation.

Without the strong local connections that the project organisers had in place in Egypt, participants would have been less well served. The calm that pervaded proceedings may not have been facilitated and participants without alternative means of payment could have had major difficulties. The warmth of the welcome given by locals also gave an air of comfort and confidence.

More fundamentally, deficiencies in the higher education systems in Tunisia and Egypt, as perceived by students, were one of the factors which led to the protests. The need for systems to consider the needs of all stakeholders has been given a new emphasis.

As for the Leadership Foundation, the advice it gives to staff, participants and associates working overseas was well tested, and a case study can now be added when the advice is given in future. **E**