

Confusion about International Mail Delivery: Some Clarifications

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*Guide to Worldwide Postal-
Code and Address Formats*

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When you send international mail you need to adhere to three sets of rules – and they don't always agree. (1) The country where you enter your mail into the postal system (country of origin) has regulations on what they will accept. (2) The Universal Postal Union (UPU) sets the rules, regulations and procedures that are followed by its 192 member countries for the international handling of mail. (3) The country where the mail will be delivered (country of destination) has its regulation on what mail it will handle and how.

When accepting international mail, a country must take into account what is allowed in international mail by UPU regulations and agreements. We can easily see why dangerous goods – radioactive, explosive, flammable, narcotics, psychotropic or infectious substances, for example – cannot be mailed internationally. Other restricted goods may be allowed domestically in some cases but not in international mail, such as live animals (with a few minor exceptions). Others may be subject to interpretation or local standards, such as counterfeit and pirated items or obscene or immoral items.

Other UPU agreements and regulations specify categories of mail and required international mail services, restrict size and weight, pertain to postage, discuss reimbursement between countries, and lay out delivery and return requirements. All of these regulations are laid out in great detail in the Acts of the UPU and the letter-post and parcel post regulations and manuals. Each of these is interpreted into the regulations of the postal operators of the UPU's members, creating 192 versions of the UPU's agreements. In addition, each country of the world sets the standards for its own domestic mail and its own addressing requirements.

Not surprisingly, misconceptions arise because of the different rules. Here are a few topics that come up regularly:

Addressing and Address Standards

There is an international standard for how addresses should be written. This is misleading: the UPU standard S42 contains descriptions of the address formats for participating countries. Each country has a separate template that covers the various address types (post office box, building delivery, etc.) used in that country. Since each country defines the types of its own addresses and the formats they use, addresses vary greatly between countries and this is reflected in S42.

The UPU's regulation on addressing begins, "The addressee's address shall be worded in a precise and complete manner." This leaves the format of the address – how it is written – to the standards or, if no standards exist, to the common practice of the country of destination.

Obviously, the country of origin must be able to send mail items on to the correct cities or sorting centers in the correct countries. This most often means that the address, or at least the city and country, must be written in a language that the postal staff (or automated machinery) in the country of origin can read. Further, if mail passes through any other countries between its origin and the destination country, the address should be clear to there as well. This leads to the UPU's practical requirement for how the city and country are written.

"[The address] shall be written very legibly in roman letters and arabic numerals. If other letters and numerals are used in the country of destination, it shall be recommended that the address be given also in these letters and numerals. The name of the place of destination and the name of the country of destination shall be written in capital letters together with the correct postcode number

or delivery zone number or post office box number, if any. The name of the country of destination shall be written preferably in the language of the country of origin. To avoid any difficulty in the countries of transit, it is desirable for the name of the country of destination to be added in an internationally known language."

Some countries, particularly neighboring countries, have established agreements that permit some variation in these requirements. The countries of the former U.S.S.R. that use the Cyrillic alphabet do not require the "roman letters and arabic numerals" in addresses exchanged among themselves. This is also true for the countries of the Middle East and North Africa that use Arabic, or among those in East Asia using Chinese, or in a few other cases.

Delivery of Incoming International Mail

Countries are required to deliver any international mail they receive. This is untrue. If the address is incorrect or insufficient, they will not be able to do so. International agreements require a country to make as much effort as they would for domestic mail. Fortunately, most countries make a greater effort to figure out the address on international mail because delivering the mail is less expensive than returning it to another country.

Some individuals may not be able to receive mail, although the UPU members agree to ensure that "all customers enjoy the right to a universal postal service involving the permanent provision of quality basic postal services at all points in their territory at affordable prices". (This is often referred to as the Universal Service Obligation.) However, it is left to each member country to determine how to accomplish this. There are broad differences among the countries of the world and even among the countries of the European Union where the European Postal Services Directive imposes minimum requirements on its members.

The UPU's regulations regarding the use of remailing from countries with very low terminal dues payments for international mail were amended in recent years. Since these countries often had very low postage rates, mailers from higher rate countries would take advantage of the differences for large mailings. This resulted in lower payments to the country of destination for the delivery of that mail. Mail that originates in a country where the mailer is not located and that pays a lower fee to the destination country may now be held while resolving the payment differential to the country of destination. Since this may be a discussion between the governments and postal operators involved, mailers may not be aware of the problem with delivery.

Additionally, the mail may contain items that are not allowed by the country of destination. For international mail, each country sets the standards for what it accepts. That an item was accepted by the postal operator in the country of origin does not mean that the destination country is obligated to deliver the item. Embargoes and sanctions, trade restrictions, what is permitted and restricted in international mail, and customs requirements all affect what mail will be accepted for delivery from other countries. (For more information on specifics, see www.upu.int/en/activities/customs/list-of-prohibited-articles.html.)

Finally, the addressee may refuse delivery. What happens in this case depends on how the item was mailed and any additional services requested by the mailer and any agreements between the countries in question.

Return of Undeliverable International Mail

The return of undeliverable international mail to the sender is required. This depends on how the mail was sent, particularly the class of mail and on any additional services purchased by the sender. The UPU

regulations specify the return of first-class letter mail to the country of origin. The sender's return address should be in that country. If that is the case, the item will be returned to the sender.

However, there are many other classes of letter mail and parcels, some of which do not require return. Return of undeliverable mail can be affected by special services purchased by the sender and by bilateral agreements. If the return of undeliverable items is desired, the mailer should verify before mailing that the way it is mailed – the class of mail and additional services – will require that return. And, of course, all mail needs a complete and valid return address or return is impossible.

Fortunately for international mailers, the UPU members agree in general to pass along mail that meets the UPU regulations. The postal operators often take extraordinary measures to deliver international mail. (Japan, for example, hand processes all mail that arrives with addresses that are not written in Japanese.) That there is this agreement allows mail to flow between countries; it is one of the reasons the UPU was founded in 1874. Without it, each country could, and often did, set its own unique rules for mail that passed through it. Three sets of rules aren't so bad.

About the author

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