

Statement of Senator Daniel K. Akaka
“Building a Stronger American Diplomatic Presence to Meet the Challenges
of a Post-9-11 World”

Subcommittee on Oversight of Government Management, the Federal
Workforce, and the District of Columbia
Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs

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An agency’s greatest asset is its human capital. Today’s hearing will examine staffing and resource needs at the Department of State in light of current and future global challenges. It will also examine how to encourage the employment of more Americans by the United Nations and its organizations.

The men and women who serve in the two hundred and sixty six embassies, consulates and other posts in one hundred and seventy two countries around the world are the face of the United States in the international community. It is these men and women serving overseas who defend and promote America’s interests on a daily basis.

The same can be said of those Americans who serve in organizations of the United Nations (UN). While the high level management positions Americans secure at the UN, the UN High Commission on Refugees (UNHCR), the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and the UN Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) are beneficial in helping to bring American perspectives and issues to the UN, it is the professional staff who design and manage projects. Americans serving in these positions are part of a professional network of employees who bring the culture and traditions of the U.S. to the international community.

The war on terror has brought new foreign policy challenges to the United States. These challenges can not be solved through grand gestures and proclamations; they must also be addressed in the routine work of our men and women who serve at the embassies and consulates of the State Department, in Washington, and within the halls of the UN and its organizations. These are the interactions that, at the end of the day, matter most. That is why it is so critical for the State Department assist Americans who seek employment in the UN.

Since the end of the Cold War, the world has dissolved into a patchwork of competing interests, threats, and unexpected challenges. The Cold War structure of our institutions, including the State Department, has had to change with the times.

In 2002, following the tragic attacks of September 11th, 2001, former Secretary of State Colin Powell created the Diplomatic Readiness Initiative (DRI) to revitalize the Department and to bring in one thousand one hundred and fifty eight new skilled, committed, and well-trained foreign and civil service employees. Congress appropriated over one hundred million dollars for the DRI, which enabled State to hire 360 new employees and 1,700 new Foreign Service officers.

On January 18, 2006, Secretary Rice announced her own program, the Transformational Diplomacy Initiative, which called for the global repositioning of foreign service positions from Washington D.C. and elsewhere to critical emerging areas including Africa, South and East Asia and the Middle East. Many of these posts are considered hardship posts, which the Department defines as locations where the U.S. government provides differential pay incentives to encourage employees to bid on assignments at these posts and to compensate them for the hardships they encounter there. Such incentives are necessary due to extraordinarily difficult living conditions, excessive physical hardship or notably unhealthful conditions affecting the majority of employees officially stationed there.

However, global repositioning has resulted in a hollowing out of foreign service staff, as State has continued to lose more staff than it has hired. To make matters worse, in implementing the global repositioning of positions, Secretary Rice did not obtain funding for additional positions in these critical emerging areas, but instead moved existing positions to them.

According to a report by the Foreign Affairs Council issued on June 1, 2007, between 2001 and 2005, one thousand sixty-nine new positions and program funding increases were secured through the DRI. But since that time, all of these new positions have been redirected to assignments in Iraq, Afghanistan, and other hardship posts. Roughly 200 existing jobs remain unfilled and an additional nine hundred training slots necessary to provide language and other skills do not exist. The report adds that in the first two years of Secretary Rice's tenure at State, no new net resources have been secured. Therefore, whatever gains the DRI secured at the Department were quickly eliminated because of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

In fact, in order to meet the ongoing needs in these two countries, Secretary Rice moved 280 mid-level Foreign Service positions from other posts to staff the U.S. embassies in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The Vice President of the American Foreign Service Association has testified that at least forty percent of State Department diplomats who have served in danger zones suffer from some form of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, or PTSD. It is important to remember that, unlike members of the military, these unarmed civilian diplomats are not well-prepared to function in active combat zones. Increasingly, service in hardship posts is a requirement for promotion within the Foreign Service, which means that PTSD will likely become a mainstay of the FSO experience over the long term. The State Department must develop more effective means to acknowledge this health risk and to provide the support that the FSOs returning from these posts so greatly require.

Staffing at State is not the only problem we face in our ability to execute U.S. foreign policy. Despite the fact that the U.S. contributes the largest portion of the UN budget, Americans continue to be under represented at the United Nations and its specialized agencies. At my request, the GAO surveyed five UN organizations last year

which comprise roughly 50 percent of total UN organizations' professional staff. They found that three of them, the UNHCR, IAEA, UNESCO, fell short of either formal or informal hiring targets agreed upon by the organizations and their Member States which staffing levels for Americans and others. This means that, the U.S. is losing an opportunity to contribute important skills, perspectives, and experience to the UN.

The September GAO report found that there are barriers keeping Americans from assuming positions at the UN. A critical finding in that report was that the State Department does not effectively support Americans who seek employment at these organizations and, when it does, tends to emphasize only director-level or higher posts.

As the Chairman of the Readiness Subcommittee of the Armed Services Committee and as Chairman of the Veterans Committee, I am committed to ensuring that our men and women in uniform, fighting overseas, and our returning veterans have the training, equipment, and support they need both to accomplish their mission and sustain morale.

We need to devote the same attention to the men and women serving our nation in a civilian capacity overseas that we do to our service personnel.

At the same time, I believe that if we are going to be successful in winning the hearts and minds of the rest of the world, which is so critical in the war on terrorism, we must do a much, much better job of promoting American participation in international organizations.

I want to thank our witnesses for being here today to discuss this critical issue.