

October 2007

STATE
DEPARTMENT

Evacuation Planning
and Preparations for
Overseas Posts Can
Be Improved



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Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-08-23](#), a report to congressional requesters

Why GAO Did This Study

Since 1988, the Department of State (State) has ordered over 270 evacuations from overseas posts due to civil strife, terrorist incidents, natural disasters, conventional war threats, and disease outbreaks. To prepare for evacuation, overseas posts rely on a variety of guidance, plans, and training, such as Emergency Action Plans (EAP). GAO was asked to assess State's (1) guidance and plans to prepare for evacuation, (2) training and exercises to prepare post staff for crisis, and (3) efforts to collect, analyze, and incorporate evacuation lessons learned into guidance and training. GAO examined State and Department of Defense (DOD) documents, spoke with State and DOD officials, conducted a survey of 243 overseas posts, and completed 22 structured interviews with State personnel.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that State take four actions to improve its guidance and training for staff and systematically collect, analyze, and incorporate evacuation lessons learned. GAO also recommends that State and DOD review their MOA for large-scale evacuations to improve planning and coordination when State requires DOD assistance. State concurred with three of our five recommendations and partially concurred with two. DOD partially concurred with the recommendation regarding the MOA and did not comment on other parts of the report.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on [GAO-08-23](#). To view our survey results, click on [GAO-08-24SP](#). For more information, contact Jess T. Ford at (202) 512-4268 or fordj@gao.gov

STATE DEPARTMENT

Evacuation Planning and Preparations for Overseas Posts Can Be Improved

What GAO Found

Using its guidance and training, State has carried out numerous evacuations in the recent past—notably the safe evacuation of nearly 15,000 American citizens and family members from Lebanon. However, GAO found areas where State can improve its guidance, plans, and training to prepare for and manage evacuations of post staff, dependents, and American citizens. For example, posts do not find State's primary guidance particularly useful in preparing for evacuation. In addition, while State requires posts to update EAPs annually, almost 40 percent of posts surveyed have not updated their plans in 18 months or longer. Post-produced estimates of American citizens in a country are best guesses and more than three-quarters of posts said their last estimate was, at best, only somewhat accurate. We also found weaknesses in a memorandum of agreement (MOA) between State and DOD that could limit these agencies' ability to effectively work together during a large-scale evacuation.

While State provides crisis management training to post staff, GAO found gaps in training related to preparing for evacuations. Over one-quarter of posts reported that Emergency Action Committee (EAC) members have not received training necessary to meet their emergency responsibilities. In addition, officials from several posts reported that newer staff have not received training for their EAC roles. Although posts reported that crisis management exercises are an important training tool, post staff said exercises should be more practical and reflect scenarios more likely to occur at post.

State's evacuation preparations are constrained by the lack of a systematic process to collect, analyze, and incorporate evacuation lessons learned. Almost 60 percent of posts evacuated in the past 5 years said they did not produce an evacuation "after action" report, as required. Further, State has no entity to ensure posts are producing after action reports and no formal review process to analyze and incorporate lessons learned from these reports into guidance and training. Although State has developed some documents on evacuation lessons learned and distributed them to all U.S. overseas posts, the documents are sometimes vague and can be overlooked by posts due to the volume of material they receive. Limited institutional memory of prior evacuations at posts reinforces the need for a process to collect, analyze, and disseminate lessons learned from evacuations to all post staff.

U.S.-Assisted Evacuees from Lebanon in a Cyprus Seaport



Source: U.S. Embassy Nicosia, Cyprus

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Abbreviations

CLO	Community Liaison officer
CME	crisis management exercise
DOD	Department of Defense
DVD	digital video disc
EAC	Emergency Action Committee
EAP	Emergency Action Plan
EPH	Emergency Planning Handbook
FAQ	frequently asked question
FSI	Foreign Service Institute
MOA	memorandum of agreement
SARS	severe acute respiratory syndrome
State	Department of State

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United States Government Accountability Office
Washington, DC 20548

October 19, 2007

The Honorable Tom Lantos
Chairman
The Honorable Ileana Ros-Lehtinen
Ranking Member
Committee on Foreign Affairs
House of Representatives

The Honorable Thelma Drake
House of Representatives

The Department of State (State) operates overseas posts¹ all over the world, some in unstable, dangerous, or crisis-prone regions where threats against post staff, dependents, or private American citizens can result in State-ordered evacuations. Evacuations can occur in response to various types of crises, including civil strife, terrorist incidents, natural disasters, conventional war threats, and disease outbreaks. They can range from the more common and relatively simple departures of post staff and dependents on regularly scheduled commercial flights to the more rare, complex, and massive sea and air lift of thousands of American citizens on U.S. government-chartered and U.S. military ships and planes. According to State officials, since 1988, State has ordered more than 270 evacuations from overseas posts. Based on a survey we conducted, 1 in 5 overseas posts reported they had experienced some type of evacuation of post staff and dependents in the past 5 years.

To plan and prepare for possible evacuation, overseas posts rely on a variety of guidance, plans, and training. Emergency Action Committees (EAC) at overseas posts are responsible for assisting the ambassador in planning and preparing for crises, including the possible evacuation of post staff, dependents, and American citizens, with support from State offices in Washington, D.C. State's primary guidance is the Emergency Planning Handbook (EPH), which contains policies and procedures for crisis management, including planning, preparing for, and conducting evacuations. In addition, all posts are required to create and annually update an Emergency Action Plan (EAP) that includes planning for

¹Overseas posts are State-operated U.S. embassies and consulates in other countries.

potential, post-specific emergencies, using the EPH as a guide. State's Foreign Service Institute (FSI) trains overseas-bound staff in crisis management and conducts crisis management exercises (CME) at all overseas posts every 1 to 2-1/2 years to improve crisis preparedness.

Due to your concerns regarding threats against overseas posts that have resulted in evacuations, we reviewed State's efforts to plan, prepare for, and manage evacuations of post staff, dependents, and American citizens. In this report, we (1) assess State's guidance and plans to prepare for possible evacuations of post staff, dependents, and American citizens; (2) assess the training, drills, and exercises used to prepare staff at overseas posts for crises, including possible evacuation; and (3) evaluate State's efforts to collect, analyze, and incorporate lessons learned from previous evacuations into modifications of guidance and training. As part of this review, we collected information on State's and the Department of Defense's (DOD) efforts to evacuate American citizens from Lebanon in July 2006. To address questions specifically about the Lebanon evacuation, we briefed members of your staff on April 30, 2007, and issued a separate report on the Lebanon evacuation in June 2007.²

To meet these three objectives, we examined State and DOD documents related to evacuation planning, preparations, training, and execution. We spoke with State and DOD officials in Washington, D.C., and traveled to Cyprus, Lebanon, and Saudi Arabia, where we met with State and DOD officials responsible for planning and implementing evacuations, including the July 2006 evacuation from Lebanon. In addition, we conducted a [survey](#) of all 243 EACs at State's overseas posts; 86 percent of these committees responded to our survey.³ We requested that the post's EAC members collectively complete the survey.⁴ We also conducted 22 structured interviews with State employees who had experienced a variety of evacuation-related events over the last 5 years. We performed our work from June 2006 through July 2007 in accordance with generally accepted

²GAO, *State Department: The July 2006 Evacuation of American Citizens from Lebanon*, [GAO-07-893R](#) (Washington, D.C.: June 7, 2007).

³Survey questions, results, and number of respondents per question are presented in an electronic-supplement to this report, which may be accessed at [GAO-08-24sp](#). Survey percentages reported do not include nonresponses to each question in our survey.

⁴Survey responses collectively completed by State overseas posts' EAC members will hereafter be presented as "Posts reported that..."

government auditing standards. Appendix I provides a more detailed description of our scope and methodology.

Results in Brief

In recent years, State has conducted numerous evacuations—most notably the safe evacuation of nearly 15,000 American citizens and family members from Lebanon. State provides a variety of guidance and training to prepare overseas staff for managing evacuations of post staff, dependents, and American citizens. However, we found that State guidance and plans to prepare for possible evacuation of post staff, dependents, and American citizens could be improved. First, although the EPH is State’s primary guidance, posts reported it was too generic, voluminous, and not particularly useful in preparing for the possibility of evacuation. For example, one post reported that the EPH had too much generic boilerplate language and another indicated the EPH was large and not user-friendly. Second, while all posts are required to review and update their EAPs once a year, we found almost 40 percent of posts surveyed had not updated their EAP in 18 months or longer. Without EAPs that are reviewed and updated on a timely basis, posts’ planning and preparedness for crisis situations, including evacuations, can be impaired. Third, State requires posts to produce estimates of the number of private American citizens in country; however, more than three-quarters of posts said their last estimate was, at best, only somewhat accurate. State officials told us these estimates, called F-77 reports, were best guesses and not based on a particular methodology. Lastly, when State requires DOD assistance with a large-scale evacuation, the two departments rely on a memorandum of agreement (MOA); but we found weaknesses in the agreement that could limit State’s and DOD’s ability to quickly and effectively work together during a crisis, such as not addressing the logistical capabilities and limitations of each department, and not referencing contact lists to expedite practical communications between State and DOD personnel in a crisis.

State provides crisis management training to post staff—including instruction for EAC members, CMEs conducted at each post, and classroom training for overseas-bound staff at FSI’s U.S. campus. However, we found gaps in this training as it relates to preparing for evacuations. For example, while the EPH states that a “robust training program” for overseas staff “is essential for emergency preparedness,” over one-quarter of posts reported that EAC members have not received training necessary to meet their assigned emergency responsibilities. As a result, EAC members may not be fully prepared to make decisions in a crisis. Specifically, officials from several posts reported that newer staff

have not received training for their roles on the EAC. For example, one post noted that the frequent turnover at unaccompanied posts, where staff serve for only 1 year, means that EAC members at these posts need training to make them better equipped to work as a team. Although CMEs are widely recognized as an important tool, post staff told us that the exercises should be more practical and reflect scenarios that are more likely to occur at the post. Finally, FSI's crisis management training for overseas-bound staff covers a variety of topics, including evacuation, through various training methods. However, regular input from staff with evacuation experience could improve this training. State is beginning to implement new training tools, such as recent workshops on hurricane-related evacuations, that feature colleagues with evacuation experience and allow for more relevant, frequent, and inclusive training.

State's preparations for evacuation are constrained by the lack of a systematic process to collect, analyze, and incorporate lessons learned from previous evacuations. Most posts did not complete a required after action report following an evacuation, and there is no State entity to ensure their production. Almost 60 percent of posts that have had an evacuation in the past 5 years reported that they did not produce such a report. State has no standardized format for after action reports, and these reports could include staffing and morale lessons learned. When posts do submit after action reports, State has no formal review process to analyze and incorporate lessons learned from these reports into guidance and training. Although State has distributed some cables and other documents on lessons learned from evacuations on an ad hoc basis, these documents are sometimes vague and can be overlooked by posts. We also found post staff have limited institutional memory of prior evacuations, particularly at unaccompanied posts, which reinforces the need for a process that captures, analyzes, and disseminates lessons learned from prior evacuations to all post staff.

To help improve State planning, preparations for, and management of evacuations of post staff, dependents, and American citizens from overseas posts, we recommend the Secretary of State

- designate an entity within State to (1) ensure that EAPs are prepared annually, (2) ensure that posts generate standardized evacuation after action reports with lessons learned, and (3) systematically collect and analyze these reports to assess State's performance and recommend modifications to State guidance, plans, training, and exercises, if necessary;

-
- direct posts to complete narrative sections in the F-77 report documenting the processes and data sources used to produce their estimates, as well as lessons learned on generating estimates for that particular country;
 - review post and FSI crisis management training for EAC members to meet assigned emergency responsibilities, including planning and preparing for possible evacuation, and identify areas for improving training, particularly for less experienced EAC members; and
 - strengthen CMEs by having posts play a greater role in designing them and incorporating the most likely threats to occur at the post into exercise scenarios.

To help improve State planning, preparations for, and management of large-scale evacuations of post staff, dependents, and American citizens from overseas posts when State requires DOD assistance, we recommend the Secretary of State and the Secretary of Defense

- review the MOA between State and DOD (and its amendments) to ensure it expedites practical communication and coordination between the two departments before and during a large-scale evacuation, particularly in areas regarding logistical capabilities and limitations of each department (such as capabilities to contract and track passenger aircraft and ships).

We received written comments on a draft of this report from State and DOD, which are reprinted in appendixes III and IV. State concurred with our recommendations that the Secretary of State improve the F-77 process, review training for EAC members, and strengthen CMEs.

State partially concurred with our recommendation that the Secretary of State designate an entity within State to ensure that EAPs are prepared annually. In its response, State said that it was already taking actions to address this part of the recommendation. State concurred with the rest of the recommendation.

DOD and State partially concurred with the recommendation in our draft report that State and DOD review their MOA. While DOD and State agreed on the need to review the MOA, both departments said that the current coordination structure was working well. In addition, DOD expressed concern that our recommendation could hinder DOD's ability to conduct military operations. In response, we modified the recommendation to clarify that the Secretary of State and the Secretary of Defense review the MOA (and its amendments) to ensure it expedites practical

communication and coordination between the two departments before and during a large-scale evacuation.

We also received technical comments from State, which we have incorporated throughout the report where appropriate.

Background

Evacuations occur in response to diverse crises and differ considerably in scope, size, and complexity; large-scale evacuations of American citizens are rare. To pre-empt the need for or, if necessary, facilitate, evacuations of American citizens, State has tools for warning American citizens about potential crises. It also provides varying degrees of assistance to Americans wishing to leave a country. A number of State units, including the affected post, are involved in planning for and implementing an evacuation, which typically takes the form of an authorized or ordered departure of staff and dependents; State ends a departure of post staff and dependents by terminating the authorization or order.

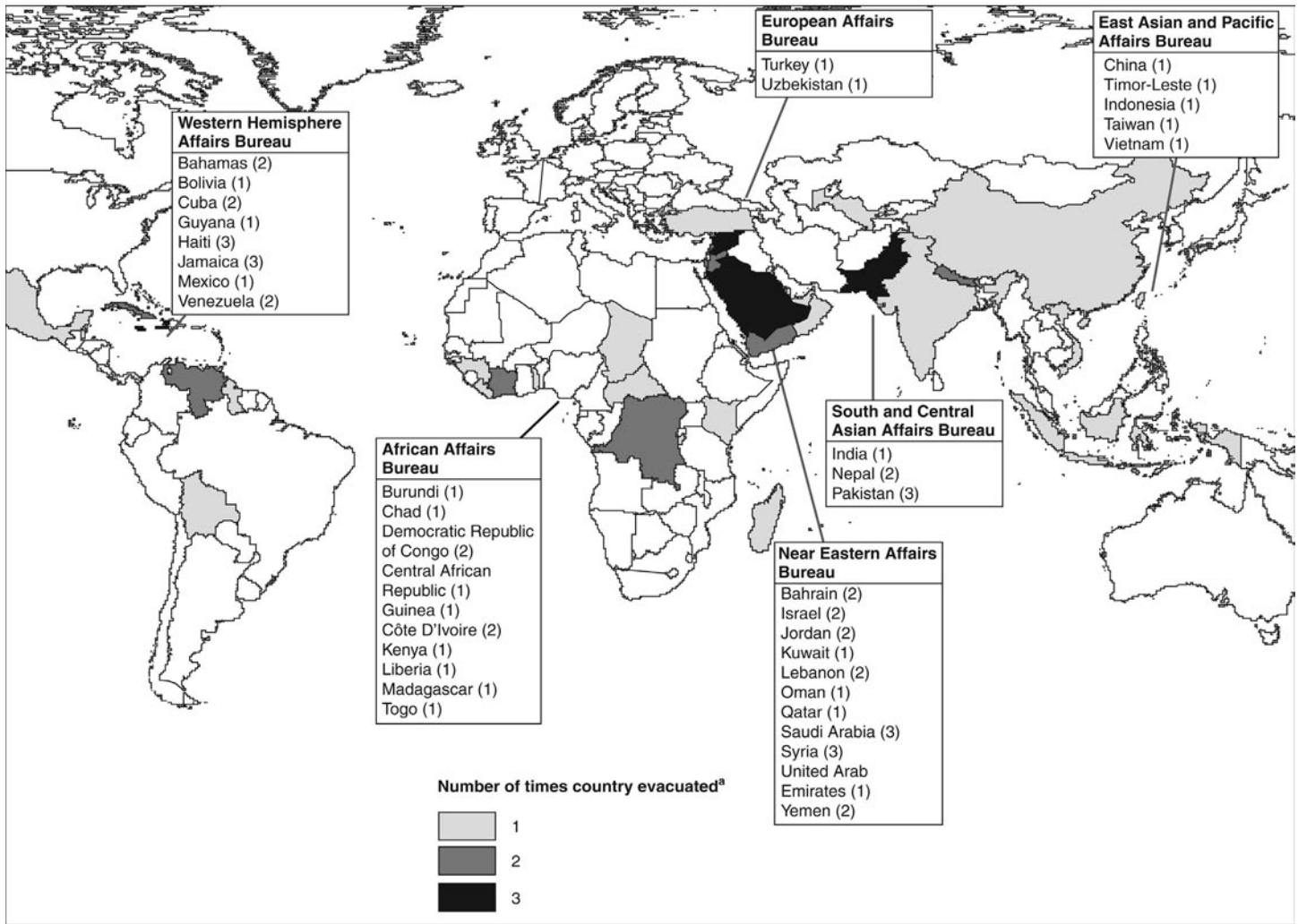
Evacuations Occur in Response to Diverse Crises and Differ Considerably in Scope, Size, and Complexity

State evacuates staff, dependents, or private American citizens in response to various crises, including civil strife, terrorist incidents, natural disasters, conventional war threats, and disease outbreaks. For example, according to information compiled by State,⁵ of the 89 evacuations over the past 5 years, almost half were clustered in the Middle East, Turkey, and Pakistan (see fig. 1). Twenty-three of these evacuations were due to the impending U.S. invasion of Iraq in early 2003; the remaining evacuations in the Middle East, Turkey, and Pakistan were due primarily to terrorist threats or attacks. Ten other evacuations in Southeast Asia resulted from the outbreak of severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) in the spring of 2003, and nine in the Caribbean were due to hurricanes. During 2006 and 2007, State evacuated 11 posts for various reasons, including civil unrest, elections that could lead to civil unrest, a coup attempt, a U.S. embassy bombing, a hurricane, and war.⁶

⁵State's FSI compiled these records on an informal basis to provide context for its crisis management training.

⁶See app. II for a timeline showing authorized and ordered departures by year since 1988.

Figure 1: State Overseas Posts Evacuated by Country from March 2002 to August 2007



Sources: GAO (map) and State data on authorized and ordered departures from March 2002 to August 2007.

^aNumber of times one or more posts in the same country were evacuated simultaneously (e.g., State evacuated all posts in Turkey in March 2003).

Evacuations differ considerably in scope, size, and complexity and can involve (1) authorized departure of post staff and dependents, (2) ordered departure of post staff and dependents, or (3) assisted departure of

American citizens.⁷ When authorizing departure, State grants permission to nonemergency post staff and all dependents to voluntarily depart the country at U.S. government expense. In contrast, when State orders departure, State directs nonemergency post staff and all dependents to leave the country. The number and type of post staff and dependents actually departing a country can vary greatly depending on the size of the post, the nature of the crisis, and the type of departure. For example, evacuations can range from massive, complex events like the safe extraction of almost 15,000 Americans and family members from Lebanon in the summer of 2006, to the relatively small-scale evacuation from Conakry, Guinea, in February 2007 during a period of civil strife. The latter involved flying a few dozen people (dependents of embassy staff, State employees temporarily deployed to the embassy, and private American citizens) to a nearby city in another West African country, where U.S. embassy personnel assisted the evacuees in obtaining commercial flights back to the United States or an alternate approved safe haven.

While authorized departures and ordered departures of post staff and dependents typically occur several times a year, according to State and DOD officials large-scale evacuations of private American citizens are rare.⁸ Based on the information State compiled, the department has implemented 271 authorized and ordered departures from overseas posts since 1988. According to the results of our survey, approximately 20 percent of posts reported that they had experienced an authorized departure within the past 5 years, and about 10 percent reported experiencing an ordered departure within this period.

State Has Tools for Warning American Citizens and Provides Varying Degrees of Assistance to Americans Wishing to Leave a Country

State has several tools for helping American citizens during crises overseas, including evacuation. These tools include (1) travel warnings, (2) registration and warden systems, and (3) varying degrees of assistance to Americans wishing to leave a country. State issues travel warnings to urge Americans considering trips abroad to stay away from potentially dangerous areas. For example, as of July 2007, State had current travel warnings for 27 countries. The reasons for these warnings include the

⁷“Evacuations of post staff, dependents, and American citizens” will be used interchangeably with “authorized or ordered departure of post staff and dependents, and assisted departure of American citizens.”

⁸Even less frequently, State will close a post after evacuating all staff and dependents. The last time this occurred was Embassy Bangui, Central African Republic, in November 2002.

threat of terrorism, civil strife, violent crime, and targeted attacks against U.S. citizens. Almost 45 percent of posts reported that State has issued a travel warning for their country within the past 5 years.⁹

State also encourages, but cannot require, U.S. citizens to register with the department when traveling abroad.¹⁰ According to State officials, this allows State to have better information on the number and location of American citizens in a country should a crisis arise. In the event of a crisis, wardens—which consist of business contacts, hotel representatives, nongovernmental organization officials, or other individuals connected to communities of Americans in the country who have agreed to serve as a liaison between the post and the parties they have agreed to contact—forward messages from the post to these parties. These messages, often conveyed via phone trees in the past but now typically sent via mass e-mails, text messages, or faxes, contain information about potential security threats or urgent directives such as where and when to gather in the event of an evacuation. Almost three-quarters of posts reported issuing a threat or security warning within the past 5 years.

Although State cannot order American citizens to leave a country due to a crisis, State officials said they provide varying degrees of assistance to Americans wishing to leave. State officials told us American citizens typically leave on commercially available flights; the U.S. government does not generally arrange transportation for departing American citizens. State sometimes assists by creating greater availability of commercial transport, such as by requesting U.S. flag carriers to schedule more flights. Infrequently, when commercial transportation is not available, State officials contract transportation for American citizens.¹¹ More serious

⁹A list of current travel warnings issued by State can be found at State's Web site, http://travel.state.gov/travel/cis_pa_tw/tw/tw_1764.html.

¹⁰According to statistics compiled by the Commerce Department's Bureau of Travel and Tourism, U.S. citizen overseas air travel is increasing. U.S. citizen overseas air travel rose over 50 percent from 1996 to 2006, from 19,786,300 to 29,947,055 U.S. citizen departures, excluding travel to Canada and Mexico.

¹¹Pursuant to statutory requirement, State has a mechanism for seeking reimbursement from American citizens for commercial transportation costs associated with an evacuation. State evacuates U.S. citizens from overseas locations according to 22 U.S.C. 2671(b)(2)(A), which authorizes expenditures from the department's appropriation for Emergencies in the Diplomatic or Consular Service (the "K Fund") for "the evacuation when their lives are endangered by war, civil unrest, or natural disaster of (i) United States Government employees and their dependents; and (ii) private United States citizens or third-country nationals, on a reimbursable basis to the maximum extent practicable... ."

crises may require the assistance of DOD; according to data compiled by State, DOD has provided assistance on only four occasions in the past 5 years. For example, during a period of civil unrest in a Caribbean country in 2004, DOD provided military assistance to help embassy personnel and their families depart the country. On very rare occasions, large numbers of American citizens depart the country on U.S. government-contracted and U.S. military transportation.¹²

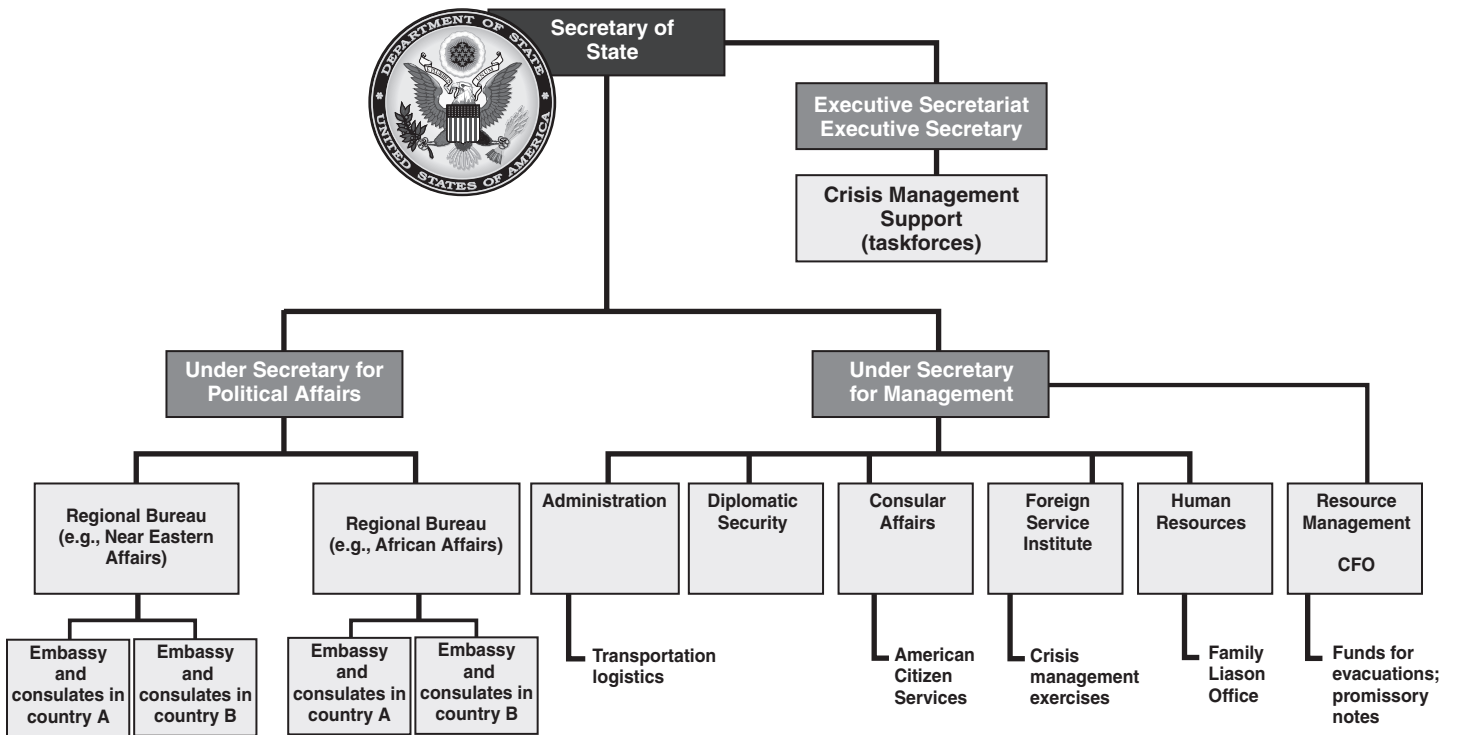
A Number of State Units Are Involved in Planning for and Implementing Evacuations

A number of State units are involved in planning for and implementing the authorized or ordered departure of staff and dependents and assisting American citizens who wish to leave (see fig. 2). In Washington, D.C., State headquarters provides guidance and training to prepare for evacuations. A Crisis Management Support unit coordinates crisis response with other State units and U.S. government agencies, supports taskforces that assist posts in handling crises, and trains headquarters staff in evacuation procedures and policy. Several State bureaus also are involved in preparations for possible evacuations and implementing evacuations. These include the Bureau of Diplomatic Security, which generates emergency guidance and oversees planning for crises; the Bureau of Human Resources, which includes a Family Liaison Office that assists evacuated spouses and dependents; the Consular Affairs Bureau, which responds to the needs of American citizens abroad; and the Bureau of Administration, which is responsible for chartering flights or other transportation out of the country, if needed. In addition, FSI in Arlington, Virginia, provides training for staff before they leave for their first overseas post or rotate to a new post, and conducts periodic CME training at each post.¹³

¹²During the summer of 2006 evacuation from Lebanon, State suspended its policy of collecting promissory notes from evacuees regarding reimbursement for evacuation-related costs; State officials said they viewed this policy as a potential hurdle in the evacuation process due to the significant potential danger associated with the situation on the ground in Lebanon.

¹³According to State guidance, CMEs are to be conducted annually at 1-year tour of duty posts, and every 2 to 2-1/2 years at other posts.

Figure 2: State Department Units Involved in Implementing the Authorized or Ordered Departure of Staff and Dependents



Source: GAO analysis of Department of State data; clip art (Corel).

Overseas, posts also are responsible for preparing for crises, including a potential evacuation of staff, dependents, and private American citizens in the country. For example, the post’s EAC develops an EAP to prepare for crises; the plan includes trip wires that can be used to determine when to authorize or order the departure of staff and dependents. Each post also prepares an estimate of the number and location of private American citizens present in the country and practices responding to crises that could lead to an evacuation through CMEs and other drills.

During a crisis, the ambassador can request that State headquarters approve a departure of post staff and their families and is expected to recommend post evacuations on a timely basis when circumstances

warrant it.¹⁴ These evacuations may be approved “when it is of national interest to require the departure of some or all employees and/or their eligible family members, or if there is imminent danger to the life of the employee or the lives of the immediate family of the employee.” The formal decision on evacuating post staff and dependents is made by the Under Secretary for Management in an Action Memorandum. The decision is communicated to the relevant overseas post via an approval cable, or if necessary, by other means. The Bureau of Diplomatic Security, which is responsible for providing a safe and secure environment for the conduct of U.S. foreign policy, also plays a role in this decision.

Beyond security concerns, other factors such as staff morale or political considerations can affect an ambassador’s decision regarding whether to request evacuation of post staff and dependents. For example, according to State officials, an ambassador may be reluctant to disrupt the lives of staff and their families, particularly those staff who would have to remove their children from school. The officials also said an ambassador may be hesitant to authorize or order people to leave due to concern that a drawdown of staff and dependents could send a signal to the host country that the United States no longer considers the country safe for its employees and their families. Former and current State officials noted that these factors can sometimes create tension between State headquarters in Washington, D.C., which often is focused primarily on security concerns and therefore in favor of evacuation, and leadership at post, which may be more reluctant to initiate an evacuation.

While a post is in evacuation status, there is generally a change in the composition of staff and an increased workload, both of which can affect staff morale. Some staff, whom the ambassador¹⁵ considers critical for addressing the crisis, assisting American citizens in the crisis, or keeping the post up and running, remain at the post. In addition, non-U.S. staff also generally remain at the post. These staff, referred to as locally employed staff, are typically from the country in which the post is located, although

¹⁴Pursuant to the President’s Letter of Instruction to Chiefs of Mission, the ambassador is responsible for protecting all U.S. government personnel on official duty abroad, other than those under the protection of a U.S.-area military commander or on the staff of an international organization, and their accompanying dependents.

¹⁵Decisions regarding staff drawdowns at individual posts are made by the chief of mission at the post. The chief of mission at an embassy is the ambassador; the chief of mission at a consulate is the charge d’affaires or the principal officer.

they can also be from third countries.¹⁶ Locally employed staff range from professional office staff to drivers, groundskeepers, and others. These remaining U.S. and local staff are often joined by U.S. government officials from State and other agencies who are sent to the post temporarily to help manage the crisis. The changed work environment, including the absence of family members, the crisis-related workload that can involve long hours, and the addition of new co-workers can affect staff morale both positively and negatively. According to State officials, the crisis atmosphere can create a special bond among the remaining post staff. In addition, these staff may feel freer to dedicate more time to their work knowing they will not be neglecting their families, who also are safely removed. On the other hand, State officials said that staff remaining at the post can experience extreme stress and feel isolated without the support of their families.

When the ambassador, in consultation with State officials at headquarters, determines that it is safe for departed staff and families to return to a post, the Under Secretary for Management concludes an authorized or ordered departure by terminating the authorization or order. If an authorized or ordered departure is not terminated within 6 months, the post switches to “unaccompanied” status. Since such posts have experienced prolonged crises, State deems them more dangerous and Foreign Service officers rotate there for just 1 year instead of the more typical 2 to 4 years. Unaccompanied status means that there are restrictions on whether spouses, children, or any other dependents can stay at the post. There can be several gradations of unaccompanied status. For example, Abidjan, Côte D’Ivoire, is currently a partially unaccompanied post, where spouses and preschool-aged children are allowed; however, State does not consider the post safe enough for school-aged children who generally travel to and from school and other activities on their own. A post can continue on unaccompanied status for some time. Three posts in one Persian Gulf country were placed on ordered departure in April 2004 and switched to unaccompanied status in August 2004; all three remain unaccompanied as of April 2007.

¹⁶For example, many locally employed staff at U.S. posts in Saudi Arabia are not Saudi nationals.

Deficiencies in State's Guidance and Plans Can Hinder Post Efforts to Prepare for a Possible Evacuation

Deficiencies in State's guidance and plans can hinder post efforts to prepare for a possible evacuation of post staff, dependents, and American citizens. State's primary crisis management guidance, the EPH, has limited usefulness in preparing overseas posts for evacuation. In addition, posts are not comprehensively reviewing and updating their EAPs in order to plan and prepare for potential evacuation. Post-produced estimates of American citizens in country are frequently inaccurate best guesses, and weaknesses in a State and DOD MOA need to be corrected to prepare for large-scale evacuations.

State's Emergency Planning Handbook Has Limited Usefulness in Preparing Overseas Posts for Possible Evacuation

The EPH contains State's emergency policies and procedures and is State's primary crisis management guidance. State officials said the EPH was revised in November 2005 to minimize boilerplate language and simplify its presentation. However, we found in our survey conducted from January 2007 to April 2007 that posts do not consider the EPH particularly useful in preparing for the possibility of evacuation. In our survey to posts' EACs, we asked respondents to rate the usefulness of eight resources a post could use to prepare for the possibility of evacuation.¹⁷ Among these eight resources, posts rated the EPH last in terms of being "very useful" in preparing for the possibility of evacuation. Almost 60 percent of respondents rated the EPH, at best, only "somewhat useful" in preparing for the possibility of evacuation.¹⁸

In addition, a number of State officials reported that the EPH, which is hundreds of pages long, was too generic, formulaic, and voluminous, all of which inhibits its usefulness in preparing for possible evacuation. For example, one post reported that the EPH had too much boilerplate language, which concealed important information, and another reported

¹⁷We asked posts to rate the usefulness (very, somewhat, not very, not at all) of the following resources in preparing for the possibility of evacuation: (1) Emergency Planning Handbook; (2) Emergency Action Plan; (3) Emergency Action Plan checklists; (4) crisis management exercises; (5) other crisis management training; (6) F-77 Report of Potential Evacuees; (7) advice from colleagues who have experienced evacuations; (8) input from local staff on situations in country, including previous evacuations; (9) the Transfer and Evacuation Management System; (10) the Crisis Management Support "Heads Up" package, and (11) Other. The last three options were removed from the analysis because these three options received a large number of "no basis to judge" or non-responses in our survey.

¹⁸In rating the usefulness of the EPH in preparing for the possibility of evacuation, 31 percent of respondents said it was "very useful," 50 percent said it was "somewhat useful," 7 percent said it was "not very useful," 2 percent said it was "not at all useful," and 10 percent said they had "no basis to judge."

that the EPH was a large, unwieldy document with no easy index and information that was not easy to access. One senior State official told us that the EPH was not helpful during a major evacuation because it was quickly rendered irrelevant by fast-moving events.

Moreover, the EPH is missing some elements that could be useful to prepare for the possibility of large-scale evacuation of American citizens. For example, while the EPH provides guidance on communicating with the media in various crisis situations, we found it has no specific guidance for addressing the public through the media during a mass evacuation of American citizens from a war zone. In addition, it does not contain guidance, such as lessons learned, best practices, or tips from experienced consular officers, on producing accurate estimates of the number of American citizens in country for F-77 reports.

The handbook is also a post's principal reference for preparing and revising its EAP. However, over half of posts reported that the EPH was, at best, only "somewhat useful" in developing the post's EAP. For example, some posts reported that the EPH is too general and cumbersome to use to develop an EAP.

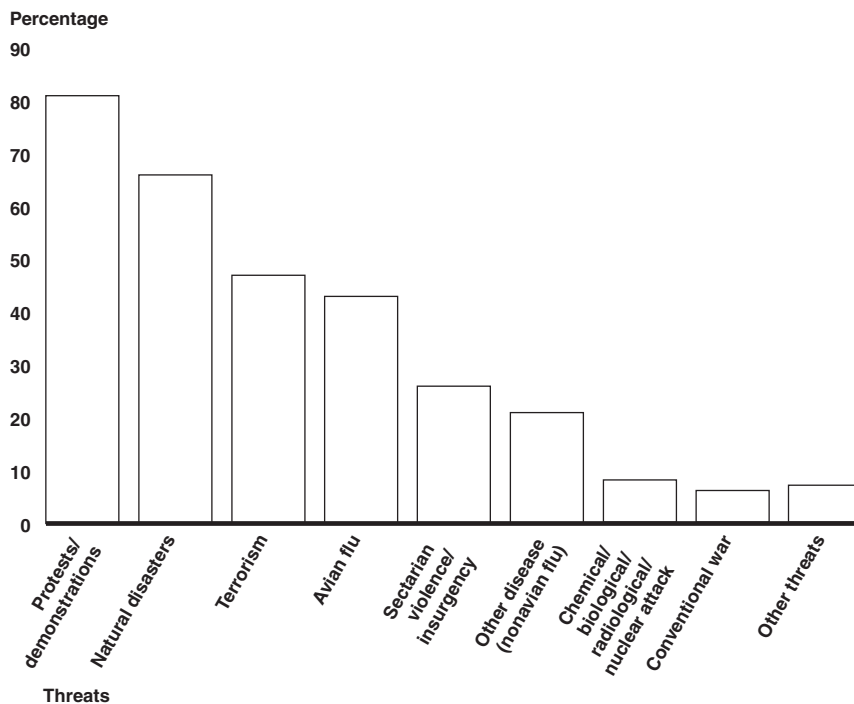
State Is Not Comprehensively Reviewing and Updating Emergency Action Plans

Posts are required to create and periodically update an EAP that includes planning for crises and "trip wires" used to determine when to authorize post staff and dependants to leave, order them to leave, close down the post, or initiate the evacuation of American citizens.¹⁹ According to State guidance, all posts are required to conduct a comprehensive review and update of their EAPs once a year. However, we found almost 40 percent of posts who gave a date reported that it has been 18 months or longer since they most recently updated their EAP. When EAPs are not comprehensively reviewed and updated on a timely basis, important logistical information that is critical during an evacuation may not be available to post. For example, State officials told us that updated contact lists of local government officials in an EAP are particularly important for the Consular Section at post in the event that American citizens need assistance to evacuate from a country.

¹⁹State has recently instituted an electronic system to facilitate the drafting of EAPs, and many posts are currently using the system.

Moreover, some posts have not updated trip wires in their EAPs to cover likely threats. According to State officials, each post is required to develop trip wires (an event such as the closure of the main road from an embassy to a country’s only airport) that can trigger a post response (such as evacuation of post staff and dependents). Posts reported that (1) protest and demonstrations, (2) natural disasters, and (3) terrorism are the top three most likely threats at their posts. Figure 3 illustrates posts’ responses to the survey question, “Which three of the following threats are the most likely to occur at your post?”

Figure 3: Most Likely Threats to Occur at Post Identified in Survey Results



Source: GAO.

However, almost 25 percent of posts reported that they do not know whether their trip wires cover likely threats or, at best, their trip wires leave some likely threats unaddressed. Trip wires in a post’s EAP need to be reviewed and updated to ensure that likely threats at post are covered.

In addition, State guidance encourages posts to plan and coordinate with other foreign missions during crises, such as evacuations. However, almost 60 percent of posts reported that they do not have standing

arrangements with foreign missions on evacuation planning and coordination or do not know if such arrangements are in place.²⁰ The importance of working with other foreign missions in planning, preparing, and coordinating an evacuation was highlighted by the July 2006 evacuation from Lebanon. State officials said that good coordination with other foreign missions was an important contributor to the success of the evacuation. Close coordination and communication with other foreign missions can also be important for smaller evacuations. For example, a State official reported that during an evacuation of about 400 American citizens from West Africa in 2004, the post extensively coordinated and communicated with foreign missions because all American citizens were evacuated on foreign government-arranged aircraft.

Estimates of American Citizens in Countries Abroad Are Frequently Inaccurate and Not Based on a Particular Methodology

State's estimates of the number of American citizens in countries abroad are frequently inaccurate. Posts are supposed to provide an estimation of the number of private American citizens in a country in F-77 reports, based in part on traveler registration. These reports play a central role in State and DOD's planning for and conducting evacuations of American citizens. However, we found that more than three-quarters of posts reported that the last F-77 at post was, at best, only somewhat accurate in its estimation of the American citizen population. In addition, of those posts able to provide an estimate of the nature of the inaccuracies, over two-thirds reported that the F-77 report tends to underestimate the American citizen population.

Several factors may complicate the estimation of American citizens in country. First, according to State officials, countries can experience wide fluctuations in their American citizen populations at certain times of the year (such as the summer tourist season, religious festivals, or pilgrimages) and it can be challenging to estimate the location of American citizens in country. Second, State encourages American citizens to register with the department whenever they travel internationally, and State relies on registration numbers to generate estimates of American citizens in country. However, State officials said that American citizens often do not register and cannot be compelled to register. Third, State officials also said

²⁰In commenting on a draft of this report, State said standing arrangements with other foreign missions are impractical in many situations because State's first priority is assisting U.S. citizens. According to our survey, 26 percent of posts reported that, during the last 2 years, they had discussions with other foreign missions on at least a quarterly basis regarding emergency evacuation planning and coordination.

it is difficult to estimate the number of dual nationals. For example, according to a State official, there are a number of Saudis in Saudi Arabia who were born in the United States when their parents were studying or traveling abroad. These Saudis are eligible for U.S. citizenship and may choose to obtain U.S. passports at any time, depending on the situation in their country.

In addition, State officials said sometimes dual nationals with passports are not captured in any U.S. citizen entry data received from the host government. Dual nationals may use their non-American passports to enter foreign countries to avoid host country-imposed fees or to maintain a non-American profile in country. Even when a post can make estimates of the number of dual nationals in country, it can be difficult to predict when and if they would evacuate from a country. Dual nationals often have close ties with friends and relatives in country, which can influence their decision on when to evacuate.

According to State officials, the estimates posts produce in the F-77 are best guesses and not based on a particular methodology. Based on our review of F-77 reports, the reports typically do not contain the source data used to generate estimates or explanations from consular officers on how they used these data to generate estimates. Considering the complications of producing accurate estimates of American citizens in country, consular officers need to document the processes and data sources used to produce their estimates. If processes and data sources used were documented, consular officers would have an understanding of how prior estimates were generated using available information. According to a State official, State is in the process of updating the instructions for producing F-77 reports to include frequently asked questions (FAQ) on preparing estimates of American citizens. However, in our review of the FAQs, we found only basic guidance with little detail on how to produce estimates or how to address the complexities of estimating a diverse and changing American citizen population overseas.

In addition to the above challenges to producing an accurate estimate, some posts are not updating their F-77 reports on a timely basis. According to State guidance, posts are to submit F-77 reports annually. However, over one-quarter of posts reported that their F-77 was updated 18 months or longer ago or that they do not know when the F-77 was updated. The F-77 plays a central role in evacuation and other crisis management planning and provides the figures that State and DOD rely on when planning for and conducting evacuations of American citizens. If the

F-77 reports are not updated on a timely basis, State and DOD risk planning and preparing for evacuations with out-of-date information.

State and DOD's
Memorandum of
Agreement to Prepare for
Large-scale Evacuation
Has Weaknesses

When State requires assistance with a large-scale evacuation (e.g., during the 2006 evacuation from Lebanon), it may request help from DOD. Guidance for coordination between State and DOD is included in an MOA²¹ meant to define the roles and responsibilities of each agency in implementing such large-scale evacuations. According to the MOA, State is responsible for the protection and evacuation of all U.S. citizens abroad and is generally responsible for evacuating U.S. citizens. However, State may request assistance from DOD to support an evacuation. Once DOD assistance has been requested, DOD is responsible for conducting military operations to support the evacuation in consultation with the U.S. ambassador. During an evacuation, the MOA calls for coordination between State and DOD through a liaison group responsible for evacuation planning and implementation.

However, we found weaknesses in the MOA (and its amendments) that could reduce State and DOD's ability to quickly and effectively work together during a crisis. The MOA does not address the logistical capabilities and limitations of each department, such as DOD's substantial capability to contract and track large volumes of aircraft and ships. In addition, unlike EAPs at post, the MOA does not reference contact lists (which could be updated on a regular basis) that could expedite practical communications between State and DOD personnel in a crisis. Moreover, a majority of posts reported that they have had little or no training or preparations for a potential large-scale evacuation with DOD.²² Since large-scale DOD-assisted evacuations occur infrequently and posts have minimal training with DOD for such evacuations, explicit guidance between State and DOD is needed to speed communication and coordination between the departments. The lack of readily available, hands-on information needed to quickly arrange logistics could limit State and DOD's ability to quickly coordinate and collaborate during a large-scale evacuation.

²¹“Memorandum of Agreement Between The Departments of State and Defense on the Protection and Evacuation of U.S. Citizens and Nationals and Designated Other Persons From Threatened Areas Overseas,” last updated July 1998.

²²According to State officials, DOD conducts its own mock embassy evacuation training exercises. On an ad hoc basis, DOD asks State staff from Washington, D.C., to role play as embassy staff during the exercises. However, this U.S.-based training is for DOD units tasked to carry out such operations and is not typically conducted with overseas posts.

For example, as we reported previously,²³ weaknesses in the MOA and other factors, such as State and DOD having different institutional cultures and systems, resulted in miscommunication between State and DOD and possible delays in chartering ships and planes to evacuate American citizens from Lebanon in July 2006.²⁴ A State official in charge of logistics said State personnel did not know DOD’s chain of command, and it took time to determine whom to contact at DOD for transportation logistics. State officials found a DOD organization chart online, but it did not have names and contact information. Consequently, State may have lost time during the evacuation trying to determine whom to contact within DOD.

There Are Gaps in the Crisis Management Training State Provides to Post Staff

While State provides general crisis management training to overseas-bound staff, there are gaps in this training as it relates to preparing for and implementing evacuations. For example, insufficient EAC training and infrequent drills can hurt posts’ readiness to act in the event of an evacuation. In addition, while CMEs are recognized as useful, posts reported that they could be more relevant and practical. Further, FSI crisis management training at its campus in Arlington, Virginia, for new and returning Foreign Service officers covers a variety of topics, including evacuation, and uses a variety of tools; however, it does not regularly include input from colleagues with evacuation experience. State is beginning to implement new training tools that allow for more relevant, frequent, and inclusive training.

Insufficient EAC Training and Drills Can Hurt Posts’ Readiness for Evacuations

As mentioned earlier, EAC members at overseas posts are responsible for assisting the ambassador in planning and preparing for crises, including possible evacuation. Almost 90 percent of posts reported that the EAC has enough staff to meet its assigned emergency responsibilities. According to the EPH, a “robust training program” for staff manning overseas posts “is essential for emergency preparedness,” including possible evacuation.²⁵ Despite this guidance, we found that insufficient training of EAC members,

²³GAO-07-893R.

²⁴For example, officials at both agencies noted that State and DOD speak different “languages,” which made it difficult for State to communicate its needs and the urgency of the crisis to DOD. In addition, State consular and DOD officials in Lebanon and Cyprus used data systems with different classification levels, which inhibited the exchange of important logistical information.

²⁵EPH, 12 FAH-1 H-761.

coupled with infrequent drills for post staff, can hurt posts' readiness to act in the event of an evacuation. The EAC is required to conduct at least one tabletop exercise²⁶ per year to ensure that all members understand their roles and responsibilities, are familiar with the EAP, and to identify out-of-date or flawed information in it. However, we found that EAC members at several posts are not receiving the training needed to be prepared to assist the ambassador in the event of an evacuation or other crisis.

About 24 percent of posts reported that EAC members are only somewhat aware or not aware of their responsibilities and need to make more preparations for evacuation under the EAP. For example, officials from several posts reported that newer staff have not received training necessary to meet their assigned emergency responsibilities. EAC members at one post reported that their newer EAC colleagues are not familiar with retrieving and using evacuation-related information in the EAP and could use more training in this area. Over 75 percent of posts reported that EAC members receive training or rehearse their assigned emergency action functions on the EAC at most once a year, if at all. One post reported that no formal training of EAC members or tabletop exercises have been conducted at the post since April 2003. Even when exercises are conducted, not all EAC members are fully engaged. For example, a Regional Security Officer who has led several training exercises stated that there is little participation from other EAC members and as a result, they are not prepared to make decisions in a crisis. He added that other EAC members should be prepared to make such decisions because the regional security officer often is engaged in specific tasks during crises and does not make all the decisions related to addressing them.

In addition, over one-quarter of posts reported that EAC members have not received training necessary to meet their assigned emergency responsibilities. For example, one post noted that the frequent turnover at unaccompanied posts, where staff serve for only 1 year, means that EAC members at these posts need training to make them better equipped to work as a team. Another post suggested that EAC members should be better trained on how to coordinate crisis response with U.S. government agencies other than State. A third post, which had received a large influx

²⁶A tabletop exercise is a simulation in which an event, like a crisis that could lead to an evacuation, is discussed along with possible reactions to the event.

of temporary duty staff to assist with the evacuation of American citizens from Lebanon in the summer of 2006, commented that its human resource officer needs training in coordinating temporary duty staffing. Without such training, posts trying to address the needs of temporary staff and deploy them where they would be most useful risk diverting resources from the evacuation effort itself.

The EAC also is tasked with preparing and conducting briefings, drills, exercises, and other crisis preparedness functions for the post as a whole.²⁷ For example, the EAC is supposed to conduct drills that test the post's emergency notification system and the consular warden system, which is used to notify American citizens in the country in the event of a crisis. However, over 40 percent of posts reported that they had never used drills or exercises to test parts of their EAP related to drawing down post staff and dependents, and almost half of posts reported that they had never used drills or exercises to test parts of their EAP related to evacuation of private American citizens. In addition, even though the EPH recommends that posts consider involving host country response services in the training and drills conducted, less than a third of posts reported that host government officials have participated in evacuation drills or exercises to test the post's EAP.²⁸

Crisis Management Exercises Considered Useful but Could Be More Relevant to Posts

While CMEs are widely recognized as an important tool, they could be made more relevant to posts. CMEs are simulations meant to prepare staff at overseas posts for handling crises, including evacuations. According to the EPH, these exercises are supposed to be conducted at each post every 2 to 2-1/2 years, and every year at 1-year (unaccompanied) posts. FSI designs the exercise scenarios and hires contractors to conduct them at the posts. FSI officials said the training typically lasts 2 days, starting with an overview of the EPH and EAP followed by several crisis simulations for

²⁷ According to the EPH (12 FAH-1 H-231), "Responsibilities of the EAC include ... drills, exercises and other crisis preparedness functions (see 12 FAH-1 H-244 and 12 FAH-1 H-700) and ... ensuring mission-wide familiarity with the EAP and representative participation in its preparation process."

²⁸ Almost three-quarters of posts have identified and contacted local government officials, such as airport and seaport officials, who might help facilitate the evacuation of large numbers of American citizens. Further, 65 posts, or 31 percent of posts responding to our survey, indicated that such officials would be both "extremely" or "very" *willing* and "extremely" or "very" *able* to help facilitate the evacuation of large numbers of American citizens. However, a majority of these posts reported that they did not include local government officials in evacuation drills or exercises to test the post's EAP.

all post staff on the first day and continuing on the second day with longer and more involved simulations for EAC members. Over 70 percent of posts reported that they have used these exercises to refine their EAP, and more than three-quarters of this group reported that the exercise was very or extremely useful in doing so. Staff from a few posts characterized the exercises as realistic and timely, and FSI officials cited several instances in which the exercises improved crisis preparedness in a concrete manner, such as by prompting post staff to identify a location for their alternate command center.

State guidance directs that scenarios in CMEs be post-specific and drafted with post input. However, staff from some posts described the exercises either as not practical or relevant, too long, tying up too many resources, or “too far-fetched.” For example, staff at one post said the exercises focused on a catastrophic but unlikely scenario, such as a weapons of mass destruction attack, rather than smaller-scale, more likely events, such as an ordinary bomb blast. Staff at another post pointed out that such catastrophic scenarios are inappropriate because they involve post staff making decisions that would normally be made at a much higher level in Washington, D.C. The Defense Attaché at this post said it would be helpful if after action reports were collected on crises that have actually occurred, and if CMEs could be designed to simulate those scenarios. The post’s management counselor added that FSI should do a better job of gathering ideas on how to improve CMEs, and that one way to make the exercises more realistic would be to have the post’s more experienced staff develop them and the more junior staff run through them. This would allow the junior staff to prepare for possible crises, during which they may have to fill in for more senior colleagues who may be absent. Some post staff reported that more practical, frequent, and less formal, hands-on exercises would be helpful, for example, “so people can learn who does what, and when.”

Staff at one post cited examples of shorter, more practical exercises, or “mini CMEs,” lasting only a few hours each that they had found useful. For example, these included an exercise focused on bird flu, which preceded an actual case of bird flu in the country, and one in which they practiced text messaging their colleagues to warn of a car bomb at the embassy so people would know not to go back to the building after returning from lunch. Staff at this post also have used their crisis management training time to discuss lessons learned *after* an event. The event in this case was a large-scale evacuation of American citizens, during which this post served as a temporary safe haven for the evacuees. In a cable describing this CME, the ambassador wrote that it “enabled us to ‘Monday-morning

quarterback' our recent experiences while they were still fresh in our collective minds, and before transfer season robbed us of considerable institutional knowledge." He also said that the exercise allowed EAC members to consider lessons learned and "allowed the crisis management trainer to hear firsthand many of the difficulties overcome, which are details that often slip through the cracks in the final wrap-up versions of after action reports."

According to a State document on evacuations, locally employed staff should be involved in all stages of emergency planning. The EPH also encourages posts to include locally employed staff in crisis management training. Further, a majority of posts reported that input from local staff is "very useful" in preparing for the possibility of an evacuation. A number of State officials with evacuation-related experience said that these staff, who generally remain at the post during a crisis, often at great risk to themselves, have played critical roles during evacuations because of their contacts with the host government and fluency in the local language. According to FSI, local staff are included in the first day of crisis management training.

Regular Input from Staff with Evacuation Experience Could Improve FSI Crisis Management Training

Crisis management training at FSI in Arlington, Virginia, for new and returning overseas staff covers a variety of topics. However, those portions of the training we attended,²⁹ which covered evacuation-related information, were limited to tabletop exercises and ad hoc input from participants who happen to have experienced evacuations or other crises. FSI trains State and other U.S.-government staff for their postings overseas. It provides courses for new Foreign Service officers about to be sent to their first post and for more experienced staff rotating to new posts. It also provides courses targeted to specific positions, such as ambassadors and deputy chiefs of mission, or Community Liaison officers (CLO).³⁰ All these courses have crisis management segments, which last anywhere from a few hours to a few days, and cover evacuation-related

²⁹We attended crisis management segments for three courses: the general course for experienced State and other U.S. government staff about to rotate to new posts, one for new Foreign Service officers, and one for CLOs.

³⁰CLOs who work in conjunction with State's Family Liaison Office typically are employee spouses who are paid to address the needs of family members at an overseas post and ensure the cohesiveness and morale of the post community, such as by planning social events. CLOs are responsible for addressing families' practical and emotional needs during an authorized or ordered departure and typically leave the post with families.

information, including a brief description of the EPH, EAP, EAC, the warden system, and the post's obligations to private American citizens, among other evacuation-related information. As a result, all staff receive some training to prepare for possible evacuation before being sent overseas. The training we attended included lectures accompanied by PowerPoint presentations. Two of the three course segments we attended also included tabletop exercises with hypothetical crisis scenarios involving escalating trip wires and role playing as part of a mock EAC.

While the material presented in the courses provided some useful information, such as descriptions of the EPH, EAP, and EAC, some of the most practical, as well as engaging, parts of these course segments—comments from participants who happened to have been through evacuations—were included by chance rather than being formally incorporated into the program. For example, a participant in one class who had been evacuated twice from Jakarta, Indonesia provided much more specific information than the instructor was able to provide regarding the importance of contact information for evacuating family members. Fifty percent more posts rated advice from experienced colleagues as “very useful” in preparing for the possibility of evacuations compared to the number that rated crisis management training at FSI “very useful.” Given this finding, FSI crisis management training could be improved by incorporating guest speakers who have been through evacuations (either as evacuees, critical staff remaining at post, or temporary staff sent to help with the crisis). A consular official at the embassy in Beirut who worked through the 2006 evacuation of American citizens from Lebanon told us such training would be valuable and she would like to contribute to it.

State Beginning to Implement New Training Tools

State is beginning to implement training tools through which staff with evacuation experience can share their insights with colleagues, and it is experimenting with new mechanisms to allow more frequent and inclusive training. For example, the Consular Affairs Bureau recently conducted two workshops in the aftermath of Hurricanes Wilma and Katrina that featured staff with experience evacuating American citizens from hurricanes. In addition to State employees, the first hurricane workshop included officials from other U.S. government agencies, the private sector, and other entities, so participants could learn what the roles of these entities

were in the evacuations and discuss any challenges in coordination.³¹ The second workshop primarily included State employees but was conducted via videoconference, which allowed local staff from affected posts to participate. According to the Director of Consular Affairs' Office of American Citizen Services, these staff are especially valuable because they tend to remain at a post much longer than rotating U.S. staff and therefore have long institutional memories and a wealth of experience. The Consular Affairs Bureau also is in the process of developing training based on lessons learned from staff involved in the 2006 evacuation of American citizens from Lebanon.³²

FSI is beginning to use new tools as well, including conducting some exercises via videoconference. For example, it has used videoconferencing to conduct exercises tailored to specific upcoming, potentially crisis-prone events, such as major sporting events held in overseas cities. It also has conducted videoconference-based exercises from hubs in several countries that have allowed staff from outlying posts to participate without having to travel to the training location. While posts in some developing countries may lack the needed infrastructure to participate in videoconferencing and differing time zones can create scheduling problems, this technology can allow for more frequent, on-demand exercises with greater participation from staff at all posts as well as locally employed staff. In addition, a State official involved in training said FSI would consider other options for improving CMEs, including possibly reevaluating their 2-day structure and introducing online training.

³¹In addition to Consular Affairs staff, participants included staff from affected posts in Mexico and the Caribbean, and related State regional and functional units such as the Western Hemisphere Affairs Bureau and Crisis Management Support; officials from other U.S. government agencies such as DOD, the U.S. Agency for International Development, and the Federal Aviation Administration; private industry representatives from the travel, airline, cruise, and other industries; international organizations (the Pan American Health Organization); and foreign government officials whose citizens had also been stranded by the hurricanes.

³²State previously produced a digital video disc (DVD) ("Crisis Response") and a video ("Lives on Hold") that share lessons learned by former Ambassador Prudence Bushnell and other State officials in the aftermath of the Nairobi and Dar es Salaam bombings and crises, including evacuations, at other posts.

State's Lack of a Systematic Process to Collect, Analyze, and Incorporate Lessons Learned Constrains Preparation for Evacuation

State lacks a systematic process to collect, analyze, and incorporate lessons learned from previous evacuations, which constrains posts' efforts to prepare and plan for future evacuations. The majority of posts do not complete after action reports detailing lessons learned following an evacuation, and there is no State entity responsible for ensuring their production. Evacuation-related after action reports do not have a standardized format, and these reports could include lessons learned on recurring staff and morale issues. State has no systematic mechanism to ensure lessons learned included in after action reports are analyzed and incorporated into modifications of training and guidance. Although State headquarters has disseminated some ad hoc guidance based on lessons learned from prior evacuations, the guidance is sometimes vague and may be overlooked by posts due to the high volume of material they receive. Post staff have limited institutional knowledge of earlier evacuations, which points to a need for a more comprehensive process that captures and disseminates lessons learned from prior evacuations to all post staff.

Most Posts Did Not Complete an After Action Report Following an Evacuation, and There Is No State Entity to Ensure Its Production

Following an authorized or ordered departure, posts are required to complete an after action report that includes lessons learned. Furthermore, State guidance for cables terminating authorized or ordered departure directs that posts submit an after action report within 15 days. Despite this explicit guidance, almost 60 percent of posts that have experienced an authorized or ordered departure in the past 5 years reported that they have not produced an after action report. As a result, State does not have the opportunity to assess most posts' evacuation experiences. It is therefore difficult for State to determine common themes or trends among evacuations. There may also be similarities among posts that do produce after action reports that would not be truly representative of post evacuations as a whole.

According to State officials, there is no single entity at State responsible for ensuring that posts produce after action reports following an evacuation. We were told of specific cases where valuable lessons were learned during a recent post evacuation, but this information remained generally unknown because State has not systematically collected after action reports. For example, one evacuation was due to civil unrest where several hundred Americans were evacuated from an African country. The official told us the warden system collapsed during the crisis; wardens either fled the violence, could not get to their phone lists, or could not charge their cell phones and make calls. The post had purchased a computer program that allowed it to send text messages over cell phones en masse. The official said this capability was critical to getting messages

out to American citizens, and the system undoubtedly saved lives. The official further stated that the ability to text message is crucial in a crisis and should be a standard tool for assisting American citizens. While some posts also are implementing this communication tool, the lessons learned from using this technology during an actual crisis may have been lost because the official did not report the lessons learned to State headquarters. In another example, a post in Asia went to authorized departure during the SARS epidemic. An official who served at the post during the epidemic said that before the event, there had not been much thought on how posts would deal with a worldwide epidemic, but the experience increased the post's preparedness for such an event. However, the official said the post did not produce an after action report detailing lessons learned during this event.

Evacuation After Action Reports Lack a Standard Format

Though required after action reports are to include lessons learned, policies to be clarified, resource needs, training needs, and an assessment of host government actions, their lack of a standard template may cause key information to be missed and make the information hard to use and assess. We reviewed about a dozen after action reports and found that while they were well-organized and presented information in a logical manner, they generally varied in style and presentation. For example, some after action reports we reviewed presented information as a narrative, in which the author described the event and reported observations. Other after action reports we reviewed presented information on what went well, followed by what could be improved or recommendations for action. A single post also may produce multiple reports from different State entities at that post, such as one report for lessons learned by Consular Affairs and another report from the management officer. The lack of a standard template that highlights key information to guide posts in their reporting makes it possible that posts may omit important information. For example, an ambassador at a post involved in a recent evacuation noted that many challenges posts encounter during evacuation are not included in after action reports.

After Action Reports Could Include Staffing and Morale Lessons Learned

State's guidance to posts does not include providing lessons learned in response to recurring staffing and morale issues, such as the process of deciding whom to evacuate and what happens at a post after nonemergency staff and family members have left. Problems involving staff and morale can occur at posts during evacuations and may affect the ability of posts to effectively carry out operations during and after a crisis.

According to State officials, a challenge during evacuations is determining which personnel will be designated as “emergency” and required to stay at post and which staff will be designated “nonemergency” and told to leave.³³ There often are tensions over who leaves and who stays. For example, some post staff have appealed their designation as “nonemergency” in the hope of staying. While certain senior and security-related positions would likely be designated “emergency” positions in any situation, one State official said that decisions regarding emergency personnel are often made based on individual employees’ ability to handle crises or their family situation rather than their position.³⁴ As a result, making these decisions and communicating them to employees often requires considerable skill and tact. State officials said that decisions regarding the reasons for evacuations are sometimes not transparent, and a State official said post staff can be suspicious of why certain personnel were designated to leave. The State official said staff may be concerned that an evacuation is really an attempt to “right size” a post. After action reports could provide lessons learned on how to improve personnel decisions in order to minimize damage to staff morale and allow the post to function smoothly both during the crisis and when the departing staff return.

Locally employed staff at two posts and one State official said another concern is that local staff, who are generally from the host country or a third country and typically remain at a post during an evacuation, may be nervous over job security, since their supervisors are leaving the post. They also may be unprepared for carrying out their duties in the absence of a familiar supervisor. A State document to posts recommends posts address local staff supervision issues before departure and establish a clear chain of command for remaining personnel. However, a State official said post staff who are evacuated often do not explain to local staff who they will report to or what their new responsibilities will be. In addition, State officials said that local staff may fear for their personal safety during a crisis, after nonemergency staff and dependents depart. A State official and a State document emphasized that it is important to keep local staff as

³³The EPH provides no specific definition of “emergency” or “nonemergency” staff or positions, but states that “if an authorized or ordered departure is necessary, post must plan to keep a sufficient amount of staff available at post to maintain certain operating functions....” (12 FAH-1 H-222 Drawdown Staffing). These functions include security and logistics; communications with State personnel in Washington, D.C.; U.S. citizen and other consular services; communication of U.S. foreign policy; and public affairs.

³⁴For example, single parents in a key role will likely need to leave with their children.

informed as possible about an unfolding crisis, what actions the post is taking and why, and what their roles should be. After action reports could provide lessons learned on how to best keep local staff informed about an unfolding crisis and what their new roles will be when nonemergency staff and dependents leave.

Further, two State officials with extensive overseas experience told us that after nonemergency staff and dependents leave the post, the role of the CLO, who is responsible for addressing staff morale and related issues, remains important. However, the CLO typically departs the post with family members. These officials said post morale can drop substantially when family members depart and staff can suffer burnout, working exceedingly long hours. A State document to posts recommends that posts retain as many CLO functions as possible after nonemergency staff and dependents have left. After action reports could provide lessons learned on the role of the CLO in maintaining staff morale and could include best practices, such as the designation of a temporary or backup CLO after the CLO departs.

State Has No Systematic Mechanism to Analyze and Incorporate Evacuation Lessons Learned

State has no systematic mechanism to ensure lessons learned from after action reports are analyzed and incorporated into modifications of State training and guidance. According to State officials, there is no entity at State responsible for systematically reviewing and analyzing the evacuation lessons learned contained in after action reports, and no entity responsible for determining whether modifications to State evacuation guidance and training are necessary. As a result, lessons learned from evacuation-related events are not being comprehensively analyzed, and lessons learned are not systematically incorporated into guidance and training. Under the current system, the majority of posts reported they have not received, or do not know if they received, written guidance from State headquarters on earlier evacuations.

Although State headquarters has disseminated some ad hoc guidance based on lessons learned from evacuated posts, the guidance can be overlooked and is sometimes vague. State headquarters issued two lessons-learned cables to all posts following the evacuation of almost 15,000 American citizens from Lebanon in the summer of 2006.³⁵ State also has issued cables on lessons learned from evacuations related to

³⁵These two cables also were posted to the State Crisis Management Web site.

hurricanes and avian flu. However, the current system involves distributing cables on lessons learned together with numerous cables on other subjects, and posts easily can overlook these important lessons due to the volume of cables received. In addition, cables do not always include actions posts should take to prepare for evacuation. As a result, the lessons from these sources can be inconsistent and vague.

Post Staff Have Limited Institutional Knowledge of Earlier Evacuations

Posts reported that advice from colleagues experienced in evacuations is one of the most useful tools in preparing for evacuations. However, State's policy of changing staff assignments at overseas posts every 1 to 3 years limits the knowledge gained from evacuations, since staff who experienced an evacuation at a post soon move on. The most frequent rotations occur at unaccompanied posts, which are often in dangerous and unstable areas. According to State officials, staff at unaccompanied posts often are less experienced than other posts, and staff generally change every year. Additionally, midlevel positions at many hardship posts³⁶ continue to be staffed by junior officers who lack experience and have minimal guidance.

According to State officials, the number of positions at unaccompanied posts is at its highest level in history. State officials said less experienced staff can be stationed at unaccompanied posts for several reasons; they have less seniority in State's posting process, they often do not have families and are less affected by unaccompanied status, or they may seek out placements at unaccompanied posts because such postings may enhance their career development. For example, State recently made service in a hardship post a prerequisite for promotion to the senior Foreign Service. This may result in a trend toward less experienced personnel serving shorter terms at unaccompanied posts that could be vulnerable to future crises and potential evacuations. Since post staff have limited institutional memory of prior evacuations, particularly at unaccompanied posts, it is important to have a process that captures and disseminates lessons learned from prior evacuations to all post staff.

³⁶State defines hardship posts as those locations where the U.S. government provides differential pay incentives of an additional 5 percent to 35 percent of base salary, depending on the severity or difficulty of the conditions, to encourage employees to bid on assignments to these posts and compensate them for the hardships they encounter.

Conclusions

State's diplomatic mission requires its staff and dependents to work in posts all over the world, including in unstable, dangerous, or crisis-prone regions from which staff and dependents might have to be evacuated. In recent years, evacuations have occurred on a regular basis—over the past 5 years, State has authorized or ordered the evacuation of an average of one overseas post every 3 weeks. Private American citizens also are present in increasing numbers all over the world, sometimes in unstable, dangerous, or crisis-prone regions where they might need evacuation assistance. To meet these challenges, State has made a concerted effort to prepare staff to manage the wide variety of crises they might face. For example, State has developed crisis management guidance, plans, and training such as the EPH, EAP, and instruction in Washington, D.C., and at post. State also has been proactive in seeking to improve its ability to prepare for and implement evacuations.

However, while we found no major adverse impacts, we did find deficiencies in State's guidance and plans and gaps in its training to plan, prepare for, and manage evacuations of post staff, dependents, and American citizens. In addition, State lacks a systematic process to collect, analyze, and incorporate lessons learned from previous evacuations. As a result, State misses opportunities to assess its performance and make modifications to improve its evacuation guidance and training. Further, the memorandum of agreement governing State and DOD's division of responsibility has weaknesses that could hamper communication and cooperation between the two departments. State should improve its planning, preparations for, and management of evacuations through updating its guidance and plans and improving the training for overseas staff with emergency responsibilities. With thousands of U.S. government personnel and their families working at U.S. posts and ever-increasing air travel of private American citizens living and traveling overseas, evacuations will continue, and large-scale operations such as the evacuation of American citizens from Lebanon could happen again.

Recommendations for Executive Action

To help improve State planning, preparations for, and management of evacuations of post staff, dependents, and American citizens from overseas posts, we recommend the Secretary of State

- designate an entity within State to (1) ensure that EAPs are prepared annually, (2) ensure that posts generate standardized evacuation after action reports with lessons learned, and (3) systematically collect and analyze these reports to assess State's performance and recommend modifications to State guidance, plans, training, and exercises, if

necessary;

- direct posts to complete narrative sections in the F-77 report documenting the processes and data sources used to produce their estimates, as well as lessons learned on generating estimates for that particular country;
- review post and FSI crisis management training for EAC members to meet assigned emergency responsibilities, including planning and preparing for possible evacuation, and identify areas for improving training, particularly for less experienced EAC members; and
- strengthen CMEs by having posts play a greater role in designing them and incorporating the most likely threats to occur at the post into exercise scenarios.

To help improve State planning, preparations for, and management of large-scale evacuations of post staff, dependents, and American citizens from overseas posts when State requires DOD assistance, we recommend the Secretary of State and the Secretary of Defense

- review the MOA between State and DOD (and its amendments) to ensure it expedites practical communication and coordination between the two departments before and during a large-scale evacuation, particularly in areas regarding logistical capabilities and limitations of each department (such as capabilities to contract and track passenger aircraft and ships).

Agency Comments and Our Evaluation

We provided a draft of this report and our survey results to the Secretaries of State and Defense for their review and comment. We received written comments from the Departments of State and Defense that are reprinted in appendixes III and IV. State concurred with three of our five recommendations and partially concurred with two. State also provided us with technical comments, which we incorporated as appropriate. DOD partially concurred with the recommendation regarding the MOA between State and DOD (and its amendments), which was the only recommendation relevant to DOD, and did not comment on any other aspect of the report.

Specifically, State concurred with our recommendations that the Secretary of State

- direct posts to complete narrative sections in the F-77 report documenting the processes and data sources used to produce their estimates, as well as

lessons learned on generating estimates for that particular country;

- review post and FSI crisis management training for EAC members to meet assigned emergency responsibilities, including planning and preparing for possible evacuation, and identify areas for improving training, particularly for less experienced EAC members; and
- strengthen CMEs by having posts play a greater role in designing them and incorporating the most likely threats to occur at the post into exercise scenarios.

State partially concurred with our recommendation that the Secretary of State designate an entity within State to ensure that EAPs are prepared annually. In its response, State said that this task is already covered under existing State regulations and added that the department is currently deploying a new software application that should facilitate keeping EAPs up to date. While we welcome these efforts, it is not clear that they are adequate to ensure that EAPs are updated on an annual basis. State concurred with the rest of this recommendation, which asks the Secretary of State to designate a central entity to ensure that posts generate standardized evacuation after action reports with lessons learned and systematically collect and analyze these reports to assess State's performance and recommend modifications to State guidance, plans, training, and exercises, if necessary.

Both State and DOD partially concurred with our recommendation regarding the MOA between State and DOD (and its amendments). While both agencies agreed to review the document, they misunderstood part of our recommendation. We did not recommend that a contact list be added to the MOA. Furthermore, State and DOD said they believed existing interagency communication channels are adequate for managing and implementing large-scale evacuations. In addition, DOD expressed concern that explicitly specifying general capabilities and limitations in the MOA could adversely affect ongoing military operations. In response, we have modified the recommendation to clarify that the Secretary of State and the Secretary of Defense review the MOA (and its amendments) to ensure it expedites practical communication and coordination between the two departments before and during a large-scale evacuation, particularly in areas regarding logistical capabilities and limitations of each department (such as capabilities to contract and track passenger aircraft and ships).

State also questioned whether the survey results, as we presented them in our report, accurately reflect posts' assessment of the usefulness of existing crisis planning resources and whether survey results contradict anecdotal comments/criticisms regarding FSI training. We obtained a high response rate to our survey of overseas posts; the survey results are a statistically valid reflection of posts' views on the guidance and training available to plan and prepare for potential evacuation. The survey results and findings derived from them are both factually correct and methodologically valid. The survey was developed based on a review of State documentation and interviews with State officials and was reviewed with State officials from Crisis Management Support, Consular Affairs, Diplomatic Security, and the regional bureaus. Survey methodology experts at GAO were directly involved in the collection, analysis, and review of survey results, as well as the findings and conclusions derived from those results.

We are sending copies of this report to interested Congressional Committees and to the Secretaries of State and Defense. We will also make copies available to others upon request. In addition, the report will be available at no charge on the GAO Web site at <http://www.gao.gov>.

If you or your staffs have questions about this report, please contact Jess T. Ford at (202) 512-4128 or fordj@gao.gov. Contact points for our Offices of Congressional Relations and Public Affairs may be found on the last page of this report. GAO staff who made contributions to this report are listed in appendix V.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jess T. Ford". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, looping initial "J" and "F".

Jess T. Ford
Director, International Affairs and Trade

Appendix I: Scope and Methodology

To examine the Department of State's (State) efforts to plan, prepare for, and manage evacuations of post staff, dependents, and American citizens from overseas posts, we (1) assessed State's guidance and plans to prepare for possible evacuations of post staff, dependents, and American citizens; (2) assessed the training, drills, and exercises used to prepare staff at overseas posts for crises, including possible evacuation; and (3) evaluated State's efforts to collect, analyze, and incorporate lessons learned from previous evacuations into modifications of guidance and training. We employed several methodologies to address these three objectives. We conducted a survey of all Emergency Action Committees (EAC) at State embassies and consulates worldwide. In addition, we conducted structured interviews with State employees who had experienced a variety of evacuation-related events over the last 5 years.¹ We also examined State and Department of Defense (DOD) documents regarding efforts to plan, prepare for, and manage evacuations. We met with State and DOD officials overseas in Cyprus, Lebanon, and Saudi Arabia; in Washington, D.C.; and at U.S. Transportation Command headquarters at Scott Air Force Base in Illinois.

As part of our efforts to collect information on all three objectives, we conducted a survey of all 243 EACs at State embassies and consulates (posts) worldwide.² EACs are responsible for crisis management at post and therefore are best qualified to discuss crisis management activities, including preparing for and implementing evacuations. The survey consisted of 49 questions covering a range of topics on how posts plan, prepare for, and implement evacuations, as well as how lessons learned are reported. The survey was sent to the principal officer at each post (typically the deputy chief of mission or consul general). We requested that the survey be completed collectively by members of the post's EAC, and completed surveys were intended to reflect the views of the EAC as a whole. We received 210 completed surveys, for an overall response rate of 86 percent. State posts are divided into six different geographical bureaus. The Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs had the highest response rate for any geographical bureau at 92 percent, and the Bureau of Near Eastern

¹These events included authorized departure, authorized departure that became an ordered departure, ordered departure only, evacuation of American citizens, or serving at a post that was a transit point for one of the above events.

²The survey was not sent to small posts that do not have an EAC.

Affairs had the lowest response rate at 73 percent.³ The survey was distributed by the heads of the State regional bureaus to posts under their supervision via e-mail as a Word attachment on January 30, 2007, and recipients were requested to complete the survey within 2 weeks. On February 15, 2007, the regional bureaus sent targeted e-mail reminders to posts that had not yet responded. We contacted all remaining posts that had not yet responded by telephone, starting on February 28, 2007. Completed surveys were accepted until April 4, 2007.

The survey was developed based on a review of State documentation and interviews with State officials. We conducted face-to-face pretests with two former State regional security officers as well as two current State officials who had recently served on an EAC. We also reviewed the survey in a meeting with State officials from Crisis Management Support, Consular Affairs, Resource Management, Human Resources, Diplomatic Security, and the regional bureaus. We conducted the review and pretests to make sure that (1) the questions were clear and unambiguous, (2) terminology was used correctly, (3) the survey did not place an undue burden on agency officials, (4) the information could feasibly be obtained, and (5) the survey was comprehensive and unbiased. We made changes to the content and format of the survey after the meeting with State officials and after each of the four pretests, based on comments received.

The majority of questions in the survey were close ended, which allowed us to develop statistics that are representative of the entire universe of Emergency Action Committees. The survey also allowed for some open-ended responses. Commentary from open-ended questions is reflected in the body of the report, but is not summarized statistically. Survey percentages reported do not include nonresponses to each question in our survey. Of responses analyzed in this report, there were relatively few nonresponses to individual questions. Survey questions, results, and number of respondents per question are presented in an electronic supplement, which may be accessed at [GAO-08-24SP](#).

We conducted 22 structured interviews, via e-mail and in person, with State personnel who had served on an EAC and experienced a draw down or evacuation within the last 5 years. Eighteen responded to our e-mail

³Posts in Iraq and Afghanistan did not respond to our survey. Given the ongoing political and security situations in both countries, State officials told us it would not be feasible for these posts to complete our survey.

with the structured interview questions. We also conducted four structured interviews in person. The purpose of the structured interview was to collect detailed qualitative information related to evacuations through open-ended questions, such as training, guidance, policies, implementation, morale, and lessons learned. We pretested the structured interview in-person with two State officials currently serving on an EAC who had experienced at least one evacuation. We made changes to the content and format of the structured interview based on comments from the pretests.

To identify candidates for structured interviews, we sent a brief questionnaire, along with the survey, to all 243 EACs. The questionnaire and survey were pretested at the same time to check for clarity and usefulness. We made changes to the content and format of the questionnaire based on comments we received. We received approximately 100 completed questionnaires with respondents indicating a willingness to participate in a structured interview via e-mail. We reviewed the completed questionnaires and selected interview candidates in order to obtain a wide variety of experiences. All six State geographical bureaus were represented in the structured interviews. Structured interview respondents had experienced many different crisis situations, including natural disasters, disease epidemics, war threats, and civil unrest. The respondents had experienced authorized departure, ordered departure, assisting private American citizens in evacuations, serving as a transit point for evacuees, departing posts during evacuations, and traveling to posts to serve as temporary employees while the post was in evacuation status. The respondents held different positions at posts; such as ambassador, deputy chief of mission, regional security officer, management officer, Consular Affairs chief, public affairs officer, general services officer, U.S. Agency for International Aid country director, and Peace Corps country director.

To review State and DOD's planning, preparation for, and managing of evacuations, we examined State and DOD documents, including State's Emergency Planning Handbook, numerous post Emergency Action Plans, several post-produced F-77 reports of potential evacuees, the Memorandum of Agreement between State and DOD on the Protection and Evacuation of U.S. Citizens and Nationals and Designated other Persons from Threatened Areas Overseas, and various other State cables and documents related to evacuations, including situation reports, lessons-learned cables, and other documents discussing lessons learned.

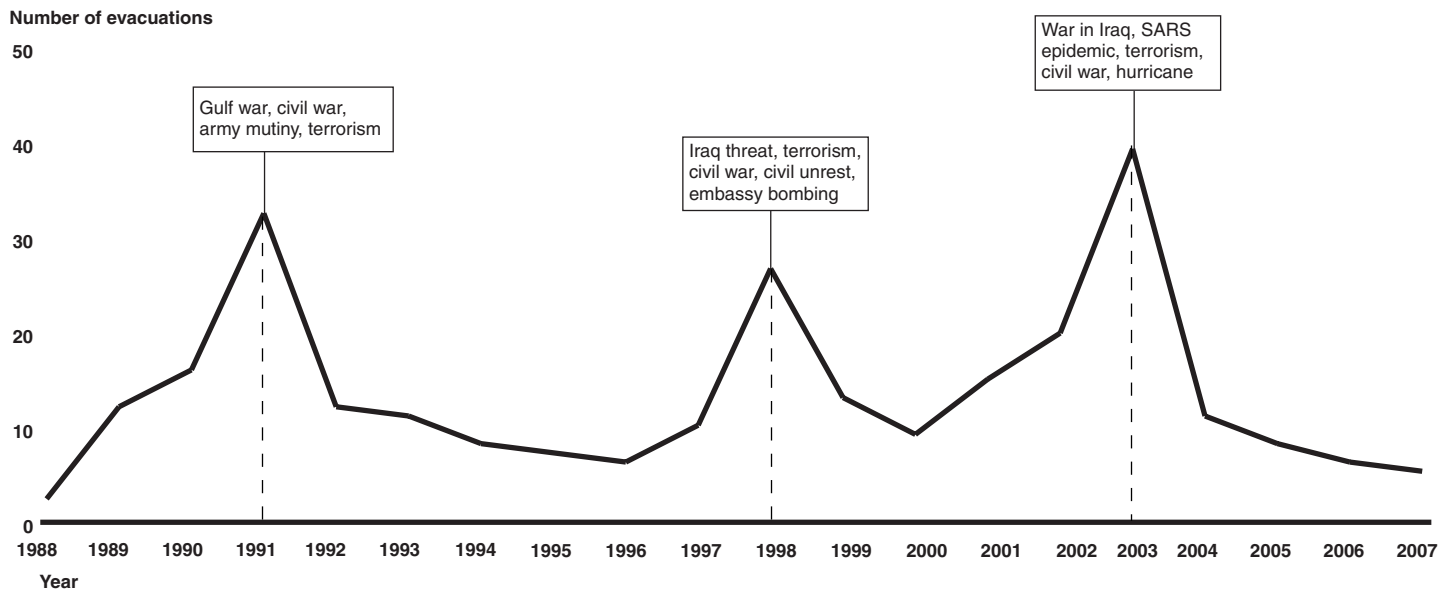
In the United States, we met with numerous State and DOD officials to assess how State and DOD plan, prepare for, and manage evacuations. In Washington, we met with the Under Secretary of State for Management; the Assistant Secretary of State for Consular Affairs and other officials from the Consular Affairs Bureau; officials from State's regional bureaus; and from State's bureaus of diplomatic security, administration, resource management, and political military affairs. We also met with Crisis Management Support officials, who support State taskforces during a crisis and train staff in evacuation policy and procedures, and toured State's Operations Center, where taskforces are located. In addition, we met with officials from State's Foreign Service Institute, which conducts crisis management training.

To review how State and DOD implement staff draw downs and evacuations of American citizens, and make observations on these agencies' successes and challenges in doing so, we traveled to Lebanon, Cyprus, and Saudi Arabia, where we met with U.S. embassy and host country officials involved in staff draw downs and evacuations. State officials in Lebanon and Cyprus implemented one of the largest evacuations of American citizens in U.S. history. The consulate in Jeddah and the embassy in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, have each experienced three evacuations in the past 5 years.

To assess how State interacts with DOD during DOD-assisted evacuations or draw downs, we met with DOD officials in the Office of the Secretary of Defense, the Defense Intelligence Agency, and the U.S. Transportation Command's Military Sealift Command. We also traveled to Scott Air Force Base in Illinois to meet with officials at U.S. Transportation Command headquarters and its Air Mobility Command. In addition, we spoke by telephone with Central Command officials in Tampa, Florida.

We performed our work from June 2006 to July 2007 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards.

Appendix II: Number of Overseas Posts Evacuated Since 1988 under Authorized and Ordered Departure Authority^a



Source: State data on authorized and ordered departures from June 1988 to August 2007.

^aIn 1991, 1998, and 2003, the most frequent reasons for posts evacuated under authorized and ordered departure authority are listed.

Appendix III: Comments from the Department of State

Note: GAO comments supplementing those in the report text appear at the end of this appendix.



United States Department of State

*Assistant Secretary for Resource Management
and Chief Financial Officer*

Washington, D.C. 20520

Ms. Jacquelyn Williams-Bridgers
Managing Director
International Affairs and Trade
Government Accountability Office
441 G Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20548-0001

OCT 02 2007

Dear Ms. Williams-Bridgers:

We appreciate the opportunity to review your draft report, "STATE DEPARTMENT: Evacuation Planning and Preparations for Overseas Posts Can Be Improved," GAO Job Code 320428.

The enclosed Department of State comments are provided for incorporation with this letter as an appendix to the final report.

If you have any questions concerning this response, please contact Mark Libby, Crisis Management Coordinator, Office of the Executive Secretariat, Crisis Management Support at (202) 647-7640.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Bradford R. Higgins".

Bradford R. Higgins

cc: GAO – David Maurer
S/ES – Dan Smith
State/OIG – Mark Duda

Department of State Comments on GAO Draft Report

**Evacuation Planning and Preparations for Overseas
Posts Can Be Improved**
(GAO-08-23; GAO Code 320428)

Summary and Comment

Thank you for allowing the Department of State the opportunity to comment on GAO's draft report "*Evacuation Planning and Preparations for Overseas Posts Can Be Improved.*"

The Department of State has built a strong record over many years in managing crises overseas that threaten U.S. embassies, personnel, citizens and interests. The GAO report notes that State has organized temporary reductions in staff (often accomplished through voluntary departures) or evacuations of U.S. personnel, dependents and private American citizens over 260 times in the past twenty years alone. The vast majority of those operations involved countries with limited infrastructure beset by instability or violence, or suffering from a natural disaster. Statistics alone cannot capture the enormous variety in conditions experienced by official and private Americans overseas or the wide range of possible scenarios to which the Department must be prepared to respond. Advance planning and preparation, central subjects of this report, are hallmarks of the Department's approach to crisis management. So are flexibility and innovation needed to deal with circumstances that do not fit the plan.

The Department's success in this regard reflects its determination to improve continuously its crisis management performance and training. It is strongly committed to learning from actual experience in order to better prepare for future crises. Toward this end, the Department welcomes the GAO review of crisis planning and preparation, and notes that the Department has already undertaken many of the measures that the GAO endorses. These include strengthened and sustained crisis management training, efforts to develop and disseminate more systematically lessons learned from crisis response and evacuations, including better use of after-action reports, and development of best practices that can be shared widely among posts.

Much of GAO's report focuses on basic planning and resources available to all embassies, and the Department appreciates GAO's efforts to review these

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planning efforts. This focus, while valid, perhaps overlooked key components of the Department's overall preparedness for crises and evacuations, including the process through which the Department and specific posts collaborate intensively in:

- evaluating possible risks;
- refining a mission's generic planning;
- identifying mission crisis managers' key duties specific to that crisis; and
- prioritizing required actions to respond safely and efficiently.

The Department is committed to supporting, including through evacuations, U.S. personnel and private citizens in every country. It believes every mission must have a base level of preparedness. But it also understands that U.S. embassies and personnel operate in wildly divergent threat environments. The most intense focus of its crisis management planning and preparation is therefore on those missions facing the greatest threats.

In handling these high-threat situations, moreover, the ongoing dialogue between the Department and posts is critical to our success in responding to situations that often escalate quickly and take unexpected turns. Preparation and planning are vitally important, but so is the ability to monitor conditions and adapt appropriately to ever-changing circumstances.

Planning and Preparation

With regard to the basic crisis-management guidance that State provides to overseas posts, the Department appreciates the GAO report's observations and recommendations, but notes an apparent contradiction between the report's suggestion, incorrect in our view, that Department guidance to posts is too long, laden with "boilerplate" language, and the report's recommendation that State provide additional, more comprehensive guidance on specific aspects of crisis management to the field. The Department notes that there is a fine balance between giving our overseas missions the support they need and overburdening them with additional guidance or reporting requirements. The wide range of geographical, political, and other factors with which each post must contend, moreover, means that no "one-size-fits-all" approach to crisis preparation is appropriate. Instead, Department training and contingency planning resources are designed to provide missions with a toolbox from which they

See comment 1.

can develop plans that realistically reflect their particular operating environments. The Department is nonetheless committed to ensuring that crisis management training and other tools used by posts for emergency planning (such as the Emergency Planning Handbook and Emergency Action Plans) are as useful, relevant, and fresh as possible.

The Department partially concurs with the recommendation that it designate an entity within State to ensure Emergency Action Plans (EAPs) are prepared annually. Chiefs of Mission are already Charged under 12 FAH 1 to "oversee the efforts of post personnel to prepare for crises." The Department is currently deploying a new software application (the Crisis and Emergency Planning Application - CEPA), which will ensure wider participation and further familiarize employees with Post's Emergency Action Plans. It will also help Emergency Action Committee members at post better understand their roles in a crisis situation -- and allow experienced staff at post to record useful evacuation-related information and tips for their successors' consideration. The Department believes this will largely address the concerns behind the GAO's recommendation regarding preparation of EAPs.

See comment 2.

See comment 3.

See comment 4.

The Department notes, however, that the conclusions drawn in some sections of the GAO draft report regarding these basic planning tools are at variance with the actual survey data collected by GAO about the usefulness of existing crisis planning resources. On page 15, for example, the report states that most posts feel the Emergency Planning Handbook (EPH) is of only limited usefulness in preparing for an evacuation. Yet the raw survey data shows that a solid 81% of respondents view the EPH as either "somewhat" or "very" useful – perhaps because the EPH includes guidance (such as checklists for planning evacuation routes, establishing helicopter landing zones, and identifying evacuation assembly areas) crucial to posts as they draw up the EAPs that will guide them in an actual crisis. EAP checklists, EAPs themselves, and crisis management exercises received even higher marks for usefulness in preparing for an evacuation (90%, 87%, and 87%, respectively). GAO's raw survey data indicates that nearly three-quarters of posts reported using Crisis Management Exercises (CMEs) to refine their EAPs, elements of which over 85% of respondents report rehearsing at least once yearly. Most respondents report that their EAPs address the likeliest threats at their post, including terrorism, natural disaster, and civil unrest.

In addition, the Department's EPH and individual posts' EAPs address contingencies (such as building fires, bomb threats, and certain health emergencies) that might involve responses other than evacuation. Much of the additional "volume" and "boilerplate language" identified by survey respondents provides guidance to posts on how to plan for these sorts of emergencies – and, while less useful for evacuation planning per se, the Department believes that this guidance is still important to include in the EPH.

See comment 5.

The Department also notes that the draft report's discussion of F-77 reports on American citizens in consular districts overseas (pages 18-20) incorrectly implies it would be possible for posts to generate a definitive number of Americans in any given country at any given moment. The draft states that the Department "encourages but does not require" U.S. citizens to register while overseas, implying that this might be a policy decision or a question of resource allocation. In fact, the Department *cannot* require or compel American citizens to register while overseas. Because of this, consular officials must rely on a range of other indicators to arrive at their F-77 estimates. These indicators vary from country to country, depending on the unique circumstances of each consular district, and therefore do not lend themselves to the sort of standardized methodology the draft report seems to recommend. The Department nonetheless feels that the statistics in these F-77 reports, which are based on consular officers' first-hand knowledge of the situations in their host countries, represent the best possible estimates given the reality of overseas operations.

See comment 6.

The Department concurs with the recommendation that it direct Posts to complete the narrative sections in the F-77 report and is investigating ways to implement the report's recommendation.

The GAO report criticized the lack of a "particular methodology" in estimating the number of Americans in country. While it did not offer suggestions on how the Department can reach more definitive estimates, the report did recommend that posts document processes and data sources in the F-77 report. When generating the F-77, many posts already use the "comments" field to describe how they have estimated the number of Americans present in their consular districts. These comments are accessible to any reader on the Department's sensitive-but-unclassified intranet website. The Department will explore modification of this software

application to make data entry in the comments field mandatory – and require posts to use this field to identify their particular data sources and methodology as they update their F-77s.

Crisis Management Exercises and Training

The Department concurs with the recommendations that the Department review post and FSI crisis management training for EAC members, and that posts play a greater role in planning CMEs, but notes that this is an existing and ongoing process carried out by FSI, in conjunction with posts.

See comment 7.

The overwhelmingly positive response and high marks given to FSI in the GAO’s comprehensive survey often contradict anecdotal comments/criticisms regarding FSI training contained in the report. These positive survey results reflect the views of the Department: that our training is effectively preparing our people for the challenges that they will face throughout their careers.

See comment 8.

While the Department is never “satisfied” with its training efforts – as evidenced by our continual review and updating of the FSI curriculum, including examining the possibility of distance learning programs for EAC members – we would note GAO’s survey reported 74% of the respondents answered “Yes” to the question of whether EAC members have received training necessary to meet their assigned emergency responsibilities (question 11).

The FSI role is to prepare Department and other US Government employees for the full range of potential contingencies. In some countries the stability of the society, economy, and political situation weighs heavily against the possibility of a mass evacuation of American citizens or a drawdown of our posts. Posts in these countries face a far greater likelihood of other contingencies: terrorism, mass casualty events (e.g., a plane crash), demonstrations near the embassy, etc. Including evacuation training in all of our exercises—including posts where evacuation is improbable—would not be the best use of training time and resources. Conversely, in selected major transportation hubs, an exercise that includes the receipt of evacuees from other posts is certainly a viable scenario to include in crisis management exercises. Our mission in Germany is not a likely candidate for evacuation, but the Consulate General in Frankfurt, located at a major transit point for international air travel, has received evacuees in the past from other

countries and posts. FSI has included such scenarios in its training of many of those posts.

With regard to the design of CMEs, FSI trainers always coordinate post-specific scenario development, working with each individual post through the designated point of contact. The FSI trainer also requests that members of the Emergency Action Committee be contacted for their input. FSI seeks to incorporate post-preferred scenarios to the extent possible into the actual crisis management exercise.

Regarding GAO's finding that crisis management exercises could be more relevant to posts, the statistics provided in the report indicate that the overwhelming majority of posts (72%) found they have used exercises to refine their EAP and 76% of this group reported the exercise was very or extremely useful in doing so (results of question 26 of the GAO survey).

See comment 9.

Integrating Lessons Learned with Training and Planning Mechanisms

The Department concurs with the recommendation that the Department establish additional procedures to ensure that EAPs are updated, after action reports are collected and that lessons learned are applied. State has begun to implement procedures that will address GAO's recommendation that the Department systematically capture and integrate lessons learned in future crisis planning. The Department is already implementing GAO's two recommendations regarding crisis management training and crisis management exercises by constantly reviewing the content and presentation of training modules and CMEs to ensure that they are relevant and that they incorporate lessons learned from previous evacuations.

See comment 10.

After-action reports are currently requested by the Executive Secretary in the same memo that authorizes the establishment of a crisis management task force. They are also requested by the Under Secretary for Management in the cable s/he issues to terminate a post's authorized or ordered departure status. In the future, the Executive Secretariat will follow up these requests by tasking the lead regional bureau to draft an after-action report that will incorporate lessons learned by domestic players and the overseas post(s) involved. The Executive Secretariat will work with the bureaus concerned to ensure the after-action report is comprehensive, useful, and prepared on a reasonable deadline -- and will archive the report for easy on-line access in the future.

Once an after-action report is received, the Executive Secretariat's Crisis Management Staff will follow up with the relevant bureaus and offices within State (including the Bureau of Consular Affairs, Diplomatic Security, the concerned regional bureau[s], the Foreign Service Institute, representatives from the Under Secretary for Management's office, the Family Liaison Office, and other regional and functional bureaus as appropriate) to ensure consideration and implementation, both domestically and at posts overseas, of crisis-management and training lessons learned. As appropriate, the Executive Secretariat will disseminate lessons learned to counterparts in other agencies.

Coordination with the Department of Defense

The Department partially concurs with the recommendation regarding review of the State –DOD Memorandum of Agreement and will continue to review the MOA with DOD, but does not believe that it requires revision at the present time.

The Department notes that although the GAO's draft report suggests there may be a need to strengthen the State-Defense Memorandum of Agreement (MOA), there is little specific information about how the MOA could be improved. With decades of experience managing successful evacuations with DoD, the State Department feels that the two agencies in fact have a clear idea of each other's capabilities and organizational cultures. The standing contact list recommended by GAO would not be a useful addition to the MOA since personnel in both Departments regularly rotate duty stations and such a list would quickly become obsolete.

The Department notes there are already several more useful channels of communication between State and DOD, including: consultation through the interagency Washington Liaison Group; the Military Advisor permanently stationed in State's 24-hour Operations Center; eighteen military officers currently serving in the Department's Bureau of Political-Military Affairs; and the State Department Political Advisors detailed to the military's various combatant commands. These personnel are experts who are in frequent contact with each other, and who regularly play key roles in State-Defense coordination of evacuation-related issues. Frequent contacts continue at other levels, as well. For example, following the summer 2006 Lebanon evacuation, representatives of State's Office of Logistics Management

See comment 11.

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traveled to USTRANSCOM headquarters to meet with their counterparts. The Department of State plans future such visits to TRANSCOM to maintain a positive working relationship and open communication channels. Furthermore, both Departments have 24-hour watches – such as State’s Operations Center and Political Military Action Team (PMAT) and DOD’s National Military Command Center – that are also in frequent and regular contact with each other, especially during crises.

The Department will ensure, through our ongoing training, that personnel involved in crisis response understand the highly-effective channels of interagency communication already available – and are aware of the central coordination role the Executive Secretariat plays in State’s communications with DOD and other agencies.

The following are GAO's comments on the Department of State letter dated October 2, 2007.

GAO Comments

1. State notes an "apparent contradiction" between our reference to lengthy and cumbersome State guidance and a recommendation that State "provide additional, more comprehensive guidance on specific aspects of crisis management to the field." Our report contains no such recommendation. According to the audit work we conducted, as detailed in appendix I, we found the Emergency Planning Handbook (EPH) to be both "too generic" and "voluminous," as well as lacking in information useful in preparing for and implementing a large-scale evacuation of American citizens.
2. We disagree with State's assertion that some of the conclusions in this report are at variance with the actual survey data collected by GAO about the usefulness of existing crisis planning resources. The survey results and findings derived from them are both factually correct and methodologically valid. Survey methodology experts at GAO were directly involved in the collection, analysis, and review of survey results, as well as the findings and conclusions derived from those results.
3. State has mischaracterized our statement. In our report, we stated that, based on survey results, posts do not consider the EPH particularly useful in preparing for the possibility of evacuation. Half of overseas posts rated the EPH as "somewhat useful" in preparing for an evacuation. This, along with the 9 percent who said the EPH was "not very useful" or "not at all useful," as well as comments by a number of State officials that it was too generic, formulaic, and voluminous, indicate that while the EPH is of some utility, there is a definite opportunity to improve the EPH when it comes to helping posts prepare for an evacuation.
4. State has attempted to reinterpret our survey results by combining the responses for "somewhat useful" and "very useful" for various tools; this obscures the point that the EPH could be improved. Please see the analysis as detailed in comment 3 above.
5. We did not imply that it would be possible for posts to generate a definitive number of Americans in any given country at any given moment; we understand that the F-77 is an estimate of American citizens and estimates vary in terms of accuracy. We reported that more than three-quarters of posts said their last estimate was, at best,

only somewhat accurate in its estimation of the American citizen population.

6. We have modified the text in the report to reflect that State cannot require American citizens to register with the department.
7. We disagree with State's assertion that our survey data contradict anecdotal comments/criticisms regarding FSI training and that the survey results are "positive." In our report, the survey results and findings derived from them are both factually correct and methodologically valid. We obtained a high response rate to our survey of Emergency Action Committees (EAC) at overseas posts; the survey results are a statistically valid reflection of posts' views on the guidance and training available to plan and prepare for potential evacuation.
8. We agree that 74 percent of the respondents answered "yes" to the question of whether EAC members have received training necessary to meet their assigned emergency responsibilities. However, the responses to our survey came from EACs, whose members are responsible for assisting the ambassador in planning and preparing for crisis, including possible evacuation. We are concerned that more than a quarter of EACs have reported that their members have not received training necessary to meet their emergency responsibilities; insufficient training for EAC members can hurt posts' readiness to act in the event of evacuation.
9. We agree that crisis management exercises (CME) are generally considered useful; in our report we have identified areas where CMEs can be improved, such as by having posts play a greater role in designing them and incorporating the most likely threats to occur at the post into exercise scenarios.
10. While we appreciate State's concurrence with establishing additional procedures to ensure that Emergency Action Plans (EAP) are updated, we did not make a separate recommendation to this effect. This is a misstatement of the first part of our first recommendation, which asks the Secretary of State to designate an entity within State to ensure EAPs are prepared annually.
11. We did not recommend that a standing contact list be added to the memorandum of agreement (MOA) between State and DOD. In addition, we have modified our recommendation to clarify that State and DOD should review the MOA (and its amendments) to ensure it expedites practical communication and coordination between the two

departments before and during a large-scale evacuation, particularly in areas regarding logistical capabilities and limitations of each department (such as capabilities to contract and track passenger aircraft and ships).

Appendix IV: Comments from the Department of Defense

Note: GAO comments supplementing those in the report text appear at the end of this appendix.



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OCT -2 2007


Mr. Jess T. Ford
Director, International Affairs and Trade
U.S. Government Accountability Office
441 G Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20548

Dear Mr. Ford:

This is the Department of Defense (DoD) response to the GAO draft report GAO-08-23, 'STATE DEPARTMENT: Evacuation Planning and Preparations for Overseas Posts Can Be Improved,' dated August 30, 2007 (GAO Code 320428).

The draft report contains several recommendations, one of which is addressed to the Department of Defense and the Department of State. The GAO recommends the two departments review the memorandum of agreement on overseas noncombatant evacuations and focus that review on two areas. DoD partially concurs in that recommendation with explicatory comments enclosed with this letter.

The Department has no comment on the draft report, which assesses Department of State programs, planning, and preparations for overseas evacuations.

Sincerely,

Joseph A. Benkert
Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense

Enclosure:
As stated



GAO DRAFT REPORT DATED AUGUST 30, 2007
GAO-08-23 (GAO CODE 320428)

“STATE DEPARTMENT: EVACUATION PLANNING AND
PREPARATIONS FOR OVERSEAS POSTS CAN BE IMPROVED”

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE COMMENTS
TO THE GAO RECOMMENDATIONS

RECOMMENDATION 1: The GAO recommends that the Secretary of State and the Secretary of Defense: review the Memorandum of Agreement between State and DoD (and its amendments) to ensure it addresses the general capabilities and limitations of each department, as well as ways to expedite practical communication and coordination between the two departments before and during a large-scale evacuation. (Page 36/GAO Draft Report)

DOD RESPONSE: Partially concur.

GAO report 08-23 assesses Department of State programs, planning, and preparations for overseas evacuations. Noncombatant evacuation operations (NEO) are included among the types of evacuations the report addresses. As the report notes, DoD does not participate in the large majority of State-ordered or authorized evacuations, but it does participate in NEOs at the request of the State Department.

DoD and State signed a memorandum of agreement (MOA) on NEOs several years ago. Because the MOA is almost 10 years old, DoD agrees it would be useful to review it. We will approach State to initiate a review by November 2007. However, DoD does not agree that the MOA should include a list of general capabilities or a contact list for the following reasons.

The MOA’s procedures are designed to facilitate communication between the agencies. It established the Washington Liaison Group (WLG), regional liaison groups, and other interagency working groups as the mechanisms to coordinate DoD’s and State’s NEO activities, logistics, and information sharing. Those groups work very well responding to requirements and including appropriate DoD support elements as needed. The WLG is the point of contact for DoD on *all* NEO matters. The WLG itself is augmented by the crisis management staffs of the Office of the Secretary of Defense and the Joint Staff. OSD recently established a focal point for global crisis management activities within the office of the ASD—

Attachment
Page 1 of 2

See comment 1.

See comment 2.

Homeland Defense and America's Security Affairs. This office serves as the entry point into DoD for the interagency during crisis operations, such as NEOs. It collaborates closely with the Joint Staff and shares information with State Department's operations center, facilitating contact among the required subject matter experts. OSD's crisis management staff maintains contact and responsibilities lists across the organization. Thus, the required experts within the organization can be identified according to the circumstances and contacted rapidly, while minimizing confusion and duplication of tasks. This approach is more enduring, more responsive, and less confusing during a crisis.

The MOA covers DoD's roles, responsibilities and authorities for noncombatant evacuations. It also contains a "Checklist for Increased Interagency Coordination in Crisis/Evacuation Situations" as appendix one, which sets up interagency processes that are used by the NEO-related interagency working groups. Those procedures in tandem with the WLG and other groups are well-established and work very well responding to requirements. DoD makes every effort to respond quickly to identify support requirements. Support capabilities will depend on the operational environment in which the NEO will be conducted. Capabilities and limitations should be identified during "Mission Analysis" by the operational commander when a NEO is imminent. Including a list of general capabilities and limitations has a high risk of unwitting, adverse affects on ongoing operations and operational planning if there are attempts to secure listed DoD capabilities independent of military operations. Section E "Responsibility for Military Operations" of the MOA further elucidates and addresses that concern. Finally, DoD is willing to consider participating in NEO training at State's Foreign Service Institute.

The following are GAO's comments on the Department of Defense letter dated October 2, 2007.

GAO Comments

1. We did not recommend that a contact list be added to the memorandum of agreement (MOA) between State and DOD. In addition, we have modified our recommendation to clarify that State and DOD should review the MOA (and its amendments) to ensure it expedites practical communication and coordination between the two departments before and during a large-scale evacuation, particularly in areas regarding logistical capabilities and limitations of each department (such as capabilities to contract and track passenger aircraft and ships).
2. We have modified our recommendation to address DOD's concern that explicitly specifying general capabilities and limitations in the MOA could adversely affect ongoing military operations. The intent of the recommendation is to have State and DOD review the MOA (and its amendments) to ensure it expedites practical communication and coordination between the two departments before and during a large-scale evacuation, particularly in areas regarding logistical capabilities and limitations of each department.

Appendix V: GAO Contact and Staff Acknowledgments

GAO Contact

Jess T. Ford, (202) 512-4128 or fordj@gao.gov

Staff Acknowledgments

In addition to the contact named above, Dave Maurer, Assistant Director; Ian Ferguson; Jonathan Fremont; Kay Halpern; Catherine Hurley; Monica Wolford; and Joe Carney made key contributions to this report.

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