

GAO
Accountability · Integrity · Reliability

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