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Report of Inspection

Regional Information Management Center Fort Lauderdale

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INTRODUCTION

Embassies and consulates worldwide are increasingly turning to Regional Information Management Centers (RIMC) for telecommunications, network, systems engineering, installation, and maintenance support. The RIMC located in Fort Lauderdale, Florida provides information technology (IT) support to Foreign Service posts within the Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs (WHA), as well as military installations in Florida through memoranda of agreement. In addition to regional IT support, RIMC Ft. Lauderdale supports the Department of State's (Department) antiterrorism initiatives by providing emergency telecommunications support to areas of escalating political instability. This report focuses on the results of the Office of Inspector General's (OIG) review of RIMC Ft. Lauderdale's maintenance and support services. The objectives, scope, and methodology for the review are discussed in Appendix A.

RESULTS IN BRIEF

The Bureau of Information Resource Management (IRM) provides telecommunications, network, systems engineering, installation, and maintenance support to U.S. embassies and consulates worldwide through four regional telecommunications support centers. RIMC Ft. Lauderdale, one of the four regional centers, provides support to 49 posts within its geographic region. Management has been effective in raising the level of service to meet or exceed customer expectations.

However, there are areas for improvement that should be addressed to ensure that RIMC Ft. Lauderdale can maintain its current level of customer service. First, the organizational structure with respect to the digital discipline should be examined and restructured to prevent overlaps in functional responsibilities with the operations officer and Regional Information Technology Support Office (RITSO) sections. RIMC Ft. Lauderdale should negotiate an agreement with the Foreign Service Institute (FSI) to formalize their relationship regarding funding of the training center. Also, the Department should grant technicians administrator-level access to the Department's OpenNet infrastructure to allow them better diagnostic capabilities when dealing with customers. RIMC Ft. Lauderdale technicians should increase their use of the Department's Infocenter and universal trouble ticket (UTI) tracking system, to allow for better recording and analysis of systemic issues.

Additionally, the Department should establish a satellite branch office with one or more resident technicians in Bogotá, Colombia to better meet the needs of that large and expanding mission. Finally, the Department should purchase maintenance or customer support contracts for Nortel switches, to ensure that technicians have access to the information they need to assist customers in the field.

BACKGROUND

RIMC Ft. Lauderdale is one of four regional telecommunications support centers. Through these support centers, IRM provides telecommunications, network, systems engineering, installation, and maintenance support to U.S. embassies and consulates worldwide. RIMC Ft. Lauderdale is based out of the Florida Regional Center, a facility housing multiple regional support entities. This location allows for convenient travel to almost all of the serviced posts within WHA. RIMC Ft. Lauderdale also maintains a satellite branch office in Embassy Mexico City that consists of one resident digital technician.

RIMC Ft. Lauderdale supports 49 embassies and consulates in Central, South, and North America. This support impacts all post operations by providing guidance for IRM program standardization, digital services, telephone services, information system services, radio system services, and telecommunications maintenance and logistical support. RIMC Ft. Lauderdale also operates a training facility with FSI-certified instructors, which offers courses in advanced information systems to systems administrators throughout the region. The facility also is a certified testing center, which allows students to test for certification on-site.

In addition to providing IT support and training, RIMC Ft. Lauderdale supports the Department's antiterrorism initiatives by providing temporary and emergency telecommunications support to areas of escalating political instability. This support includes efforts to ensure the viability of emergency communications in areas of political unrest, such as Port au Prince, Haiti, as well as temporary communications support for drug interdiction efforts in Colombia. RIMC Ft. Lauderdale maintains telecommunications equipment packages for use in emergency situations, which include Safe-Net devices for establishing sensitive-but-unclassified e-mail capabilities. This emergency support capacity of RIMC Ft. Lauderdale is often employed to aid posts in the Caribbean following hurricanes.

RIMC Ft. Lauderdale staffing includes management, senior personnel, and technicians. The staffing pattern shows 30 direct-hire Americans and three contractors in Ft. Lauderdale, as well as one direct-hire American stationed at the digital branch office in Mexico City.

FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

RIMC Ft. Lauderdale provides comprehensive regional information management support for the WHA region. Based on customer service questionnaires, the support has been excellent over the last year, and customer feedback indicates a high level of satisfaction that has met or exceeded expectations. However, there are areas for improvement that will be necessary to ensure that the current level of service continues. Most of these areas involve the consolidation of efforts to eliminate overlaps in responsibilities. Customer service could be improved by granting RIMC technicians greater access to Department computer networks. Finally, gains in efficiency and customer service could be found by expanding the Nortel systems maintenance contract to include direct access to the Nortel help desk for RIMC technicians.

SUPPORT PROVIDED TO POSTS

As part of the survey for this inspection, OIG solicited the 49 posts supported by RIMC Ft. Lauderdale for feedback on the level of support received, with 29 (59.1 percent) embassies and consulates responding. Of these responses, almost 83 percent indicated that the level of support provided by RIMC Ft. Lauderdale had been 'outstanding.' In fact, while some responses did indicate that certain disciplines had been less than satisfactory and needed improvement, all of the respondent posts gave the overall operation of RIMC Ft. Lauderdale at least a satisfactory rating.

The current management team has made great strides to revive the reputation of RIMC Ft. Lauderdale. Previously, RIMC Ft. Lauderdale was regarded as being reluctant to expend the resources for technicians to travel to post to provide assistance. As a result, the constituent posts became accustomed to seeking help elsewhere or simply doing their best to manage. However, the current management is committed to customer service and is always willing to find the resources necessary to assist posts. Survey responses indicate this positive shift in management toward a more proactive approach to assisting posts. The new approach has also had a positive effect on morale among RIMC staff, as most technicians are getting more opportunities to travel to posts and utilize their skills.

ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE

RIMC Ft. Lauderdale currently has an organizational structure that creates overlaps in functional responsibilities with respect to the digital discipline. The current structure includes the digital, RITSO, and operations officer branches. The RITSO office includes four information management specialists and a contractor, all of which have multiple responsibilities including making site visits to posts to provide operational oversight and performing communications security audits. The information management specialist personnel are also certified trainers who conduct technical classes held at the training center. The operations officer position serves as a separate branch that also performs operational oversight and communications security audits, but does not conduct classes. This structure creates an overlap in the operational support that RITSO and the operations officer are providing.

There are also overlaps in the functional responsibilities of the RITSO branch and the digital branch. The responsibilities of personnel in the RITSO branch have become increasingly involved in technical aspects of systems configuration and software, which is encroaching on the responsibilities of the digital branch. As a result, the digital branch, comprised of the more highly trained information management technical specialists, has been relegated more often to basic functions such as laying cable during installations, and have been unable to fully use their technical skills which include systems configuration. Because of this overlap in functional responsibilities, the digital technicians have been unable to maximize their effectiveness in their areas of expertise.

The ultimate goal of RIMC management is to combine the digital and RITSO branches into one branch with technicians possessing a comprehensive skill set in networking and systems configuration. A separate branch of operations officers would assist posts in assessing and improving information management operations. Splitting information systems responsibilities between digital technicians and operations officers would provide a clear separation of functional responsibilities.

Recommendation 1: The Regional Information Management Center Fort Lauderdale should realign functional responsibilities within the digital branch, operations officer position, and Regional Information Technology Support Office to prevent overlap of duties. Responsibilities should be split between one branch that combines the technical functions of the Regional Information Technology Support Office and the digital technicians, and a second branch of operations officers that perform operational oversight. (Action: RIMC Ft. Lauderdale)

TRAINING CENTER

RIMC Ft. Lauderdale provides technical training to students--generally Foreign Service nationals--through four staff members from the RITSO branch that serve part-time as certified trainers. RIMC Ft. Lauderdale plans their training schedule a year in advance, in coordination with FSI's School of Applied Information Technology, to complement the schedule of courses offered at FSI in Arlington and Warrenton, and the RIMC in Frankfurt. This helps ensure the same class is not offered simultaneously at more than one campus and provides students worldwide with access to a greater variety of available dates in a particular course.

While the training center is a valuable asset to RIMC Ft. Lauderdale that has demonstrated its efficacy with high student passing rates, there are still several organizational considerations that hamper its overall effectiveness. Although funding for materials is provided by FSI, there is no memorandum of agreement between RIMC and FSI regarding how the resources are to be used. Given that this FSI-derived funding is subject to year-to-year budgetary fluctuations, and the fact that training is a part-time, collateral duty for the RITSO personnel, long-range planning for classes can be difficult.

The current model of using RITSO staff as trainers is regarded by RIMC management as ideal because it allows the trainers to bring a wealth of field experience to the classroom, while maximizing their time when not on temporary duty overseas. However, trainers are sometimes left with little office time to review lesson plans and must generally do any studying to maintain competency on their own time. Additionally, the fact that the trainers are RITSO personnel means that if a class is in session, that trainer is unavailable to attend to overseas posts requiring assistance.

Finally, the recently constructed training center is underutilized, mostly due to general budget constraints, which have caused posts to stop scheduling students for training. In such cases, FSI's FasTrac distance learning program should be explored as an alternative because Foreign Service nationals are eligible to receive FasTrac account passwords.

Recommendation 2: The Bureau of Information Resource Management, in coordination with the Foreign Service Institute and the Regional Information Management Center Fort Lauderdale, should develop a memorandum of agreement detailing the types and number of training classes that will be offered by the Regional Information Management Center Fort Lauderdale using funding provided by the Foreign Service Institute. (Action: IRM, in coordination with FSI, RIMC Ft. Lauderdale)

ADMINISTRATOR ACCOUNT PRIVILEGES

Digital technicians at RIMC currently do not have any administrative authority within the Department's network architecture, except when they perform site visits. This creates difficulties in performing remote diagnostics when troubleshooting problems over the phone, because they do not have access to tools such as ping and trace route. The RIMC Director is currently working with the Enterprise Network Management Operations Center to acquire a limited level of administrator privileges for digital technicians to allow them to perform their duties more effectively.

Recommendation 3: The Bureau of Information Resource Management, in coordination with the Regional Information Management Center Fort Lauderdale, should provide Regional Information Management Center technicians with a level of administrator access to the Department network infrastructure sufficient to allow them to troubleshoot post problems. (Action: IRM, in coordination with RIMC Ft. Lauderdale)

INFOCENTER AND UNIVERSAL TROUBLE TICKETS

RIMC Ft. Lauderdale does not receive many UTT tickets through the Infocenter. Most of their constituent posts prefer to call RIMC directly. Telephone technicians receive so few tickets directly that when they do they often find that their UTT accounts have expired. The general perception is that 'when it counts, you are going to pick up the phone and call the people you know.' Most customers and technicians alike prefer to work directly with each other. Although they recognize the value of tracking calls and collecting aggregate data for analysis, they

do not believe that the UTT system effectively performs this task. On a practical level, technicians noted that the system takes too long to be useful during emergency situations and is also tedious to enter information into on a daily basis. Another complaint among technicians was that it could not be used as a knowledge base because the collected data cannot be searched in any meaningful way.

RIMC SATELLITE POSITION AT EMBASSY BOGOTÁ

Embassy Bogotá is one of the largest overseas posts in the world, with growing personnel and IT requirements. RIMC Ft. Lauderdale is finding it difficult to provide the customer service required by such a large operation from a remote location. In addition to being better able to serve the needs of Embassy Bogotá with a resident technician, having forward deployed staff would better position RIMC Ft. Lauderdale to meet the support needs of the immediate region. Due to the size of Embassy Bogotá, technicians of all three disciplines are desired, with digital and telephone being of particular necessity. The creation or transfer of a RIMC position to Embassy Bogotá has been requested in the post's 2005 mission performance plan, and has the support of WHA, IRM, and RIMC Ft. Lauderdale.

Recommendation 4: The Regional Information Management Center Fort Lauderdale, in coordination with the Bureau of Information Resource Management, the Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs, the Bureau of Human Resources, and Embassy Bogotá, should create or transfer digital and telephone technician positions to be posted resident at Embassy Bogotá. (Action: RIMC Ft. Lauderdale, in coordination with IRM, WHA, DGHR, Embassy Bogotá)

NORTEL TELEPHONE MAINTENANCE CONTRACT

The Department does not currently have a telephone switch maintenance contract that allows RIMC telephone technicians direct access to the Nortel help desk. This differs from the type of support technicians they were accustomed to under the Mitel contract, and they are finding it difficult to find sources of information to troubleshoot problems. Currently, there is one person in the Foreign Post Telephone help desk who has direct access to Nortel engineers and acts as a liaison for all RIMC locations. RIMC technicians must work through this Department

contact. Having only one point of contact for much needed technical assistance creates delays and frustration in providing assistance to RIMC customers. Foreign Post Telephone recognizes the need for RIMC telephone technicians in the field to have direct access to the Nortel help desk, and has been pursuing funding for such access for two years.

Recommendation 5: The Bureau of Information Resource Management should provide the necessary funding for purchase of the maintenance contract to allow direct access for Regional Information Management Center technicians to the Nortel help desk. (Action: IRM)

OFFICE MANAGEMENT SPECIALIST POSITION

The office management specialist position at RIMC Ft. Lauderdale has responsibility for a great deal of budget analysis, as well as logistical coordination for 35 travelers. The position's responsibilities have grown beyond the normal position description for an office management specialist to include more specialization in budget and fiscal duties, as well as travel management. Efficiency could be increased by reassessing position responsibilities to evaluate the need for professional staff in the areas of budget and fiscal analysis and travel management, as well as the overall need for additional office support staffing.

Recommendation 6: The Bureau of Information Resource Management, in coordination with the Regional Information Management Center Fort Lauderdale and the Bureau of Human Resources, should reassess office support position responsibilities and realign staffing as necessary to meet requirements. (Action: IRM, in coordination with RIMC Ft. Lauderdale, DGHR)

FLORIDA REGIONAL CENTER LOCAL INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY CHANGE CONTROL BOARD

RIMC Ft. Lauderdale currently has no position on or input to the local information technology change control board for the Florida Regional Center. As a result, the needs of RIMC technicians, such as having specialized diagnostic software installed locally, do not get sufficient consideration or advocacy.

Recommendation 7: The Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs should ensure that a representative from the Regional Information Management Center Fort Lauderdale is included in the Florida Regional Center local information technology change control board. (Action: WHA)

FORMAL RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation 1: The Regional Information Management Center Fort Lauderdale should realign functional responsibilities within the digital branch, operations officer position, and Regional Information Technology Support Office to prevent overlap of duties. Responsibilities should be split between one branch that combines the technical functions of the Regional Information Technology Support Office and the digital technicians, and a second branch of operations officers that perform operational oversight. (Action: RIMC Ft. Lauderdale)

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APPENDIX A - OBJECTIVES, SCOPE AND METHODOLOGY

The objectives of this review were to determine whether supported posts are receiving adequate maintenance and support services from RIMC Ft. Lauderdale, to assess whether RIMC Ft. Lauderdale staffing levels and training were adequate to support posts, and to determine RIMC Ft. Lauderdale's role in supporting the Department's antiterrorism initiatives.

To meet its review objectives, OIG reviewed documentation from various sources that provided background information about RIMC Ft. Lauderdale and its role in providing telecommunications support to posts. OIG also solicited all posts supported by RIMC Ft. Lauderdale for feedback on the level of support received. On site, OIG met with officials at RIMC Ft. Lauderdale to learn about its operations and to obtain information supporting the review objectives.

The Office of Inspector General's Information Technology Office performed this inspection including work in Washington, D.C. between June 14-July 9, 2004, and at the Regional Information Management Center in Ft. Lauderdale, Florida between July 12-22, 2004. The major contributors to the report were Lynn Allen, Mary S. Heard, Matthew J. Ragnetti, and Eric Chavera.