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President
The American Foreign Service Association (AFSA)
Testimony on the FY 2021 Budget Request
Prepared for
The Subcommittee on State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs (SFOPS)
Committee on Appropriations
United States House of Representatives

State Department:

The American Foreign Service Association (AFSA) is extremely grateful that Congress voted to increase the Fiscal Year (FY) 2020 funding for the account that deploys diplomats overseas with a small increase to the overall International Affairs Budget. In FY21, AFSA would like to build on the momentum of 2020's increase in funding, with the goal of shifting State Department Foreign Service officers (FSOs) back out to the field, where they do the most good for the American people. **In the FY21 SFOPS bill, AFSA is seeking an increase above the FY20 enacted level to "Overseas Programs" funding under "Diplomatic Programs" for the Department of State, as well as the following report language that specifies the restoration of 100 mid-level FSO positions from Washington to posts overseas:**

"The Committee recommendation includes funds for the purpose of creating and filling 100 mid-level Foreign Service officer positions (grades FS-03, FS-02, and FS-01) at overseas posts."

AFSA has made the case that maintaining robust diplomatic capability is vital to preserving America's global leadership role. This leadership was built on a foundation of military might, economic primacy, good governance, tremendous cultural appeal--and the diplomatic prowess to channel all that power, hard and soft, into global leadership that has kept us safe and prosperous at home. A 2019 Chicago Council on Global Affairs survey found that seven in ten Americans support an active U.S. role in the world, a record high of the past five decades.

We would like to partner with our congressional supporters to ensure that today, and years from now, full teams of U.S. diplomats are in the field, deployed around the world protecting and promoting U.S. interests. For a tiny percentage of the overall budget, the Foreign Service builds the relationships that get America's business done around the world and helps keep threats at bay. If the United States retreats, we leave a vacuum that will be filled by others. In the face of rapidly rising competition from other great powers, the cost of leaving American embassies short staffed is rapidly rising. We erode our nation's diplomatic power at our own grave peril.

AFSA was thankful to see a State Department staffing floor for the Foreign Service established in the FY20 SFOPS explanatory statement:

"The agreement includes funding for not less than 12,870 permanent Civil Service staff and 13,031 permanent Foreign Service Officers, consistent with the number of staff funded in the Department's fiscal year 2019 operational plan under Diplomatic Engagement and on-board staffing levels in fiscal year 2016, restoring State Department personnel to pre-hiring freeze levels."

However, the Foreign Service staffing total was 13,846 in December 2016, or pre-hiring freeze. This staff number is far above the floor of 13,031 mandated in the FY20 explanatory statement. While the Foreign Service staffing total was 13,592 in December 2019 and hiring has resumed, this number is still hundreds below the December 2016 staffing level. There also must be adequate staffing and resources to fill positions overseas.

State's Overseas Staffing Board concluded in its recent review that America has too few diplomats in the field. The Overseas Staffing Model showed a deficit of almost 200 overseas positions in "core diplomacy," the term used for political, economic, and front office (ambassador and deputy chief of mission) positions.

AFSA regularly receives reports that American diplomats are outnumbered by at least five to one by Chinese diplomats doing economic and commercial work in Africa and elsewhere. The documented deficit in overseas core diplomacy positions needs to be addressed as soon as possible if we are to avoid losing further commercial, economic, and even political ground to rising great power competitors.

The 2017 National Security Strategy (NSS) clearly recognizes the challenge to our national security and prosperity from rising great power competition. It is also crystal clear on the vital role of diplomats: *"Our diplomats must be able to build and sustain relationships where U.S. interests are at stake. Relationships, developed over time, create trust and shared understanding that the United States calls upon when confronting security threats, responding to crises, and encouraging others to share the burden for tackling the world's challenges."* The NSS goes on to conclude that the United States *"must upgrade our diplomatic capabilities to compete in the current environment."*

Despite this recognition of the need for upgraded diplomatic capability to prevail in the current, highly competitive environment, the 2021 President's Budget requests cuts to the State Department of nearly 22 percent and cuts to "Overseas Programs" by \$340 million from the FY20 enacted level. Such a drastic cut would amount to a voluntary retreat from the world stage and a diminution of American global influence. It would cede the U.S. leadership role to our competitors.

However, AFSA knows Congress takes seriously the threat of rising competition. Congress voted to increase "Overseas Programs" by \$84 million from FY18 to FY19 and again in FY20 by another \$502 million. We hope to see an increase again in FY21, which would signal that Congress continues to view our diplomatic presence abroad as a priority.

Additionally, the House SFOPS Subcommittee included the following language in its FY20 report:

"The Committee directs the Department of State to create and put an emphasis on filling mid-level Foreign Service officer positions (grades FS-03, FS-02, and FS-01) at overseas posts."

The Senate SFOPS Subcommittee also included the following language in its FY20 report:

"The Committee encourages the Department of State to assess whether to shift additional

mid-level Foreign Service Officer [FSO] positions to overseas posts.”

In FY21, AFSA is asking specifically to restore and fill 100 overseas positions and finally address the deficit made clear in the Overseas Staffing Model. Our nation needs a full team of diplomats and development professionals in the field keeping threats at bay and expanding our prosperity – combating the conditions that enable terrorism to take root, protecting against pandemics, and promoting the rule of law and open systems that allow our companies to compete and thrive.

AFSA is grateful for support from members of Congress, and we urge both chambers to once again reject deep cuts, provide an increase for “Overseas Programs” funding above the FY20 enacted level, and, finally, direct the movement of 100 FSOs into positions abroad so that America has a full Foreign Service team in the field. With all the threats facing our country, now is not the time to abandon the field and forfeit the game to our adversaries.

USAID:

AFSA also greatly appreciates congressional bipartisan support for foreign assistance as a critical component of America’s national security. To advance its capacity, USAID is undertaking its most significant reorganization in decades, under the aegis of an institutional “Transformation.” Unfortunately, the effort fails to address – or openly acknowledge – long-standing, chronic yet basic staffing and operational challenges, including hiring of career FSOs, thus jeopardizing the implementation, impact and sustainability of the initiative.

AFSA would like to partner with our congressional supporters to ensure that USAID takes full advantage of the reorganization initiative to advance the career Foreign Service and put in place the basic, transparent, modern workforce planning and accountability measures.

Per a September 2019 GAO report on USAID Transformation, “... while USAID is developing a strategic workforce plan, it has yet to develop the tools needed to identify and meet staffing needs arising from the reforms in order to fully assess its workforce.” USAID’s March *Interim Strategic Workforce Plan* does not address the GAO’s findings.

USAID is undertaking Transformation without the strategic vision, transparent data and analysis, Human Resources tools or professional staff necessary to effectively support such a massive change-management effort. USAID will make new requests for contractors, Foreign Service Limited (FSL) appointments, and other non-career staff to cope with the change. Many of these non-career hires are not competed through USAJobs.gov, raising questions of transparency and propriety. The numbers suggest a USAID headquarters comprised primarily of short-term contractors and limited appointees, with career FSOs and their field-informed perspectives crowded out and Civil Service personnel dwindling in percentage. After some delay, the Agency is slowly moving towards recruiting of congressionally recommended career Foreign Service and Civil Service staff, but this effort is slowed by the diversion of management resources to hire non-career, short-term personnel.

In the FY 2021 SFOPS bill, AFSA is seeking clear prioritization of career Foreign Service and Civil Service hiring, accompanied by a pause of FSL appointments, as the Agency begins a process of strategic workforce planning. AFSA also requests a pause of the authority for four-year extensions on existing FSL staff to allow the Agency to focus on meeting the congressional target of 1,850 career Foreign Service officers and 1,650 Civil Service staff.

USAID regularly uses both Operating Expense (OE) funds and Program funds for staffing costs, but there is little transparency, open discussion, or acknowledgement of the high levels of Program funds that go to short-term staffing. While great progress has been made to date in publicizing and providing the public data related to some Program Funding (www.foreignassistance.gov or Foreign Aid Explorer), the OE budget and related processes remains opaque and not accessible to the public or stakeholders. AFSA wants to partner with all congressional stakeholders on **enhanced public reporting on the intersection of USAID staff, Operating Expense (OE) funds and Programmatic funds**. This would require reporting historical, current and future data on OE and Program funding streams as they relate to staffing by mechanism, location, function, duration, rank and Bureau/Mission/Office.

Finally, regarding the **Strategic Workforce Plan** itself, **AFSA would like to build on the FY2020 House SFOPS report and seek an updated comprehensive strategic workforce plan** prepared by an external party in close consultation with the USAID Chief Operating Officer and leadership. An updated comprehensive strategic workforce plan must take an Agency-wide approach to workforce planning through a process framework that allows management to plan for staffing decisions based on organizational mission, strategic direction and objectives, budgetary resources, and a set of desired workforce skills and competencies based on data and evidence.

Thank you.