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**United States Department of State
and the Broadcasting Board of Governors
Office of Inspector General**

Report of Inspection

Embassy Minsk, Belarus

Report Number ISP-I-07-13A, March 2007

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | |
|---|----|
| KEY JUDGMENTS | 1 |
| CONTEXT | 3 |
| EXECUTIVE DIRECTION | 5 |
| Security | 5 |
| Mission Performance Plan | 6 |
| The Chancery | 6 |
| Morale | 7 |
| Entry-level Officers | 7 |
| Avian Influenza | 7 |
| POLICY AND PROGRAM IMPLEMENTATION | 9 |
| Political/Economic Section | 9 |
| Consular Operations | 11 |
| Public Diplomacy | 15 |
| RESOURCE MANAGEMENT | 21 |
| Overview | 21 |
| The Chancery | 22 |
| Rightsizing | 23 |
| Management Operations | 23 |
| Financial Management | 27 |
| General Services Operations | 28 |
| Information Management and Information Systems Security | 32 |
| QUALITY OF LIFE | 35 |
| Community Liaison Office | 35 |
| Medical Unit | 35 |
| Minsk International School | 36 |
| FORMAL RECOMMENDATIONS | 39 |
| INFORMAL RECOMMENDATIONS | 41 |
| PRINCIPAL OFFICIALS | 47 |
| ABBREVIATIONS | 49 |

CONTEXT



Belarus, a territory that has been contested by Russia, Poland, and Lithuania for centuries, became a sovereign nation for the first time after the breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991. Control by Russia and Poland deeply influenced Belarusian culture, language, and religion; the period of Soviet domination nearly wiped out Belarusian political and linguistic identity as well as Belarusian ties to the West.

The ten million citizens of Belarus live on the main transit and trade corridor between Russia and Eastern Europe. The economy is heavily agri-

cultural, although its refineries, which process Russian crude oil for European markets, provide a major source of hard currency. There is minimal foreign investment. Belarus has been a major exporter of conventional arms to Iran, Sudan, Syria, and Saddam Hussein's Iraq.

After an initial stage of parliamentary democracy and nationalism that lasted for several years, the relatively unknown Aleksandr Lukashenko was elected president of Belarus in 1994. He has remained in power ever since through a series of rigged referendums and systematically flawed elections, the most recent of which was held in March 2006. Although he signed an agreement with Russia in 1996 to establish a union state, nothing has been done to realize that goal, and his relationship with Russia is an uneasy one. At the same time, Lukashenko's repressive policies have alienated Belarus from most of the cooperative programs of the European Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. Relations with most Western nations remain chilly.

Belarus under Lukashenko is notable for its monopoly control of the media and its repression of independent political parties, trade unions, and nongovernmental organizations. It has jailed, and in some cases arranged the disappearances of, prominent political figures. One of Lukashenko's two main opponents in the March 2006 election has since been sentenced to a five-year jail term on charges of "malicious hooliganism." Belarusian intelligence services maintain active surveillance of diplomats, foreigners, and potential opponents, and discourage citizen contact, travel, and even study abroad. In recent months, one Lithuanian and one Polish diplomat died under mysterious circumstances, and the home of a Latvian diplomat was broken into by government security forces and media.

Embassy Minsk has 196 employees, 35 of them direct-hire Americans. The mission includes representatives of the Department of Defense and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). Except for the PAS, which is located in a separate facility, mission personnel work in the centrally located chancery and in two annexes on the chancery grounds.

EXECUTIVE DIRECTION

A newly arrived Ambassador and DCM are exercising firm, clear direction at Embassy Minsk. While emphasizing the preliminary nature of their observations and judgments, Americans at the embassy scored both officials highly on OIG questionnaires. In interviews during the inspection, American staff praised the officials for their openness and willingness to engage deeply in the details of all embassy policies and operations. This does not imply criticism of the previous management team, which was also held in high regard by staff.

At the time of the inspection, the Ambassador and DCM were continuing on a trial basis to use the meeting structure of their predecessors to coordinate embassy policy. This includes a country team meeting; several issue-oriented meetings that group a number of embassy sections; separate meetings with the full American staffs of the P/E, consular, and management sections; and a meeting with American and LE staff of USAID. Mission officers appreciate that many of these meetings take place in the offices of the section or agency concerned, rather than in the front office. The Ambassador and DCM were weighing several changes in this meeting structure and agreed to consider the OIG team's suggestions.

SECURITY

The newly arrived Ambassador promotes security as an essential function of overall operations. She is fully cognizant of her responsibility for the safety of all employees and the mission, as set forth in State 168672 (10/06/06) and her President's Letter of Instruction. The Ambassador is attuned to the most significant threats against the mission and provides the regional security officer (RSO) with the support and resources necessary to counter the threats. The RSO has unlimited access to both the Ambassador and the DCM.

The Ambassador defers day-to-day security operations to the RSO, but assumes an active role in decisions that could significantly affect the safety and security of the mission. The DCM and the RSO have a good working relationship. Weekly and ad hoc meetings between the RSO and DCM help keep senior management apprised of

post-specific security matters. Overall, representatives of functional offices within the embassy said coordination and support from the RSO and the Ambassador were good and rated the performance of the RSO's office as high.

MISSION PERFORMANCE PLAN

The Mission Performance Plan (MPP) notes that this embassy is in the forefront of transformational democracy and must pursue its principal democracy and human rights goals in the face of active host government hostility. It has done this, pursuing a vigorous outreach program to civil society, opposition parties, and the population at large. The MPP is a well-drafted exposition of U.S. policy goals for Belarus and lays out a number of concrete performance indicators. The MPP was drafted by a relatively small number of authors with little active participation by other mission elements and, once drafted, was not subjected to further discussion or review at Embassy Minsk. The Ambassador and DCM accepted OIG's suggestion that the next MPP be developed with much broader embassy participation and that it be used as the basis of regular, preferably quarterly, in-house discussions of progress and setbacks.

THE CHANCERY

Embassy Minsk's employees work either in a main chancery building or in several annexes, two of which are on the chancery compound. The annexes are attractive, well maintained, and large enough for their staffs. The chancery sits on a small plot of land immediately adjacent to the Russian Embassy and had been used for decades by the Soviet military. OIG's 1994 and 2002 inspection reports noted several problems with the chancery, including overcrowding, possible structural risks, and various technical issues. The Bureau of Overseas Buildings Operations (OBO) and European and Eurasian Affairs do not question the need for a chancery renovation, and work was first scheduled for FY 2003. The renovation has not yet occurred, and an initiation date for the project slips quite regularly. Meanwhile, the chancery remains an unsuitable venue for conducting U.S. business. According to OBO, the renovation project is now listed in its Long Range Building Plan but will not be initiated earlier than FY 2008.

Recommendation 1: The Bureau of Overseas Buildings Operations should adhere to its plan to fully fund the Embassy Minsk renovation and expansion project in FY 2008, as stated in the Bureau's Long-Range Building Plan. (Action: OBO)

MORALE

The embassy's American and LE staff rated their morale high on OIG questionnaires. In discussions with the inspection team, most employees said the embassy is an excellent and collegial place to work. Americans respect and value their LE staff, and the two groups appear to work together harmoniously. This positive state of affairs stands in marked contrast to the conditions cited in OIG's 2002 report. Management can contribute to continued high morale through greater attention to LE staff career development and training and by more regular contact with the LE staff committee.

ENTRY-LEVEL OFFICERS

At Embassy Minsk, the DCM has continued his predecessor's monthly brown bag lunches with entry-level officers (ELO) and specialists. He has also begun doing one-on-one counseling with them. The ELOs appreciate the DCM's efforts and volunteered that, to date, their own roles may have been overly passive. They are interested in learning more about the work of other embassy sections and would view occasional assignments outside of their own area of responsibility as a learning opportunity. The Ambassador and DCM were receptive to a menu of OIG suggestions designed to expand the mentoring function; for instance, by using the monthly sessions to introduce ELOs to the work of each country team unit, encouraging them to accept public speaking opportunities, and assigning them such control and reporting officer responsibilities as their regular duties allow.

AVIAN INFLUENZA

The embassy has taken all of the requisite steps to prepare for an outbreak of avian influenza in Belarus. The consular section has disseminated several informational messages on the issue to the resident American community. The DCM

chaired the initial meeting to discuss embassy preparations, and in January 2006 the emergency action committee approved a series of trip wires that are based in part on the trip wires established at Embassy Moscow. In May 2006 the embassy held a town hall meeting for Americans, during which the visiting regional medical officer talked about the disease. Embassy officers met with local Ministry of Health officials to learn of the Belarusian government's plans and continue to monitor local developments. The government of Belarus has published plans in the local newspapers, tests birds in and around poultry farms, and is planning to purchase vaccines from Lithuania. The mission has a stock of Tamiflu.

POLICY AND PROGRAM IMPLEMENTATION

POLITICAL/ECONOMIC SECTION

Staffing and Workspace

The previous OIG inspection report noted that many of the officers in the P/E section were young, inexperienced, first-tour officers with inadequate language skills. The section is now staffed by four officers and a Boren Fellow, all of whom have the requisite level of Russian language skill. Boren Fellows are not being replaced by new fellows but in some cases by first-tour officers. The section may thus lose a reporting officer in a year or so, when the current fellow's term ends. Officers in the section note that the work comes in waves, with occasional lulls and surges; therefore, the section is adequately staffed.

The two LE staff in the P/E section, who work in the consular annex on the compound, are physically distant from the section. The senior LE staff member has been with the embassy since it was established and has good contacts in the business world. Both employees speak excellent English. Their writing skills should improve with the increased training and practice the section head is working to provide. At one time, LE staff accompanied their American colleagues on field trips, but they no longer do so because of the negative publicity given to Americans' activities. This allows the LE staff to avoid the attention of the security forces and the media, which portray American activities unfavorably.

The section chief holds a weekly staff meeting that includes the two LE staff, a new practice in the section. The section head, who is new to this management position, is trying to sharpen reporting and to upgrade the responsibilities of the LE staff and incorporate them more into the work of the section.

The section's work area is problematic, with three officers and the Boren Fellow crammed into a small room. Privacy is minimal. When more than one employee receives a telephone call at one time, it is hard to hear conversations or be understood.

Although the officers in the shared room can retire to a nearby conference room to read or reflect, and one or more officers are often away at meetings or elsewhere in the mission, the work area remains problematic.

At present, the DCM's office management specialist handles some of the section's administrative needs. Although some such assistance is needed, it is doubtful whether the section requires a full-time office management specialist position. Employing an eligible family member (EFM) part-time would be a possible solution.

Reporting and Advocacy

Overall, P/E reporting is good, given the embassy's inability to have any significant engagement with the host government, particularly at higher levels. Good embassy contacts allow the political opposition to be covered in some detail, although the coverage may exaggerate the significance and influence of the opposition, given the opposition's factions and internal disagreements. The mission's annual reports on human rights, trafficking in persons, and religious freedom are drafted by one of the section's more junior officers. The reports read well, are appropriately illustrated with concrete details, and do not spare the Belarusian authorities. The P/E section writes a weekly report of short paragraphs on items that are too incidental to rate separate cables.

Although there is some economic reporting, more could be done. New topics will merit analysis as higher energy costs cut into government profits derived from refining and reselling discounted oil from Russia to Western Europe. The welfare-and-command economy, though ensuring full employment, continues to produce unmarketable goods and will need new investments and better marketing to make it competitive. At the same time, the creeping consumerism visible on the streets of Minsk underlines an increasing division of society by wealth, especially between urban and rural areas. There may be a growing conflict of interest between those who derive their living from holding state positions or staffing its security apparatus and those, especially in the small but growing private sector, who produce, import, or retail goods or provide services.

Members of the P/E staff try to speak at universities and American Corners, in talks coordinated with PAS. Invitations have, however, become rarer since the presidential elections in March 2006. When embassy staff members visit the provinces, they are often shadowed by police and given extensive media coverage that is then broadcast with an extremely negative spin. Meetings with opposition leaders are portrayed as meetings with "terrorists." Nonetheless, section members continue to make frequent visits out of Minsk.

CONSULAR OPERATIONS

The Ambassador, DCM, and consular section chief, all of whom arrived at post only a few months or less prior to the inspection, have already developed a collaborative working relationship on consular operations. In the context of strained bilateral operations, the government of Belarus sees many consular issues as political issues. It is therefore especially important for the embassy front office to be involved in consular matters, and the consular section receives tangible front office support whenever bilateral consular issues must be raised with the government of Belarus. Issues such as child abduction, adoption, and prompt access to American citizens, are on the front office's agenda whenever the Ambassador and DCM meet with an appropriate official.

The DCM (sometimes with the Ambassador) meets with the consular section chief in her office weekly, although issues can easily be raised at any time. The DCM reviews the consular chief's visa decisions and supports a by-the-book visa referral policy that is reviewed annually. Newly arrived officers must attend a visa-referral class before participating in the referral program, although only about 20 referrals are made annually and consular officers say there is never any undue pressure on them to issue inappropriate visas. Consular operations are in good hands and receive all of the necessary support and oversight from the front office.

Consular Staffing and Facilities

The consular section is headed by a mid-level consular officer, the first mid-level officer in that position. (Previously, consular operations were divided between two ELOs.) Two officers are usually sufficient for the section, and there are no trends indicating a need for more officers or LE staff in the foreseeable future. During March to June, however, the busiest time of the nonimmigrant visa (NIV) season, the section may need some temporary duty assistance. This may be particularly justifiable in 2007, so that the section can continue to make progress on some of the important projects that the section chief and OIG team identified as priorities.

There is a collegial relationship between the officers and LE staff. Three of the four LE staff have more than seven years' experience, and the EFM consular associate has worked in other consular sections. There is complete cross-training throughout the section. Although all but the newest LE staff member have received extensive training both at the Foreign Service Institute and at workshops and seminars in Europe, the section is hoping to send an LE staff member to the basic American

citizens services (ACS) course at the Institute. The OIG team supports this because complex cases are infrequent, so LE staff do not have the opportunity to gain adequate experience. In addition, due to the often-minimal cooperation from local authorities, each case can be a challenge and take an unusually long period to resolve.

The consular facility was renovated in 2005. The work area is spacious and well designed with a good line of sight for the officers. The public waiting room is adequate, since the appointment system controls the number of people in the room each hour. The consular waiting room has a large television set that is showing cable television programs but could be providing consular and other embassy information.

Consular Management

The section has few standard operating procedures, although it is developing them for fraud referral and fee collection. Other SOPs would also be appropriate. Many consular files have been retired to the Kentucky Consular Center, but the section chief is aware that more files need to be retired.

The section currently allows public phone inquiries only in the afternoon and has a telephone answering tree. The section chief is now looking into the possibility of tying into the Moscow-based call-center system. The section collects all machine-readable visa fees, handles NIV appointments, and passes back visaed passports at a consular service window. At present local banks are not judged reliable or efficient enough to do fee collection and appointments. The section chief agreed that, at least annually, the section should investigate the feasibility of establishing offsite services. The chief also intends to look into the possibility of a courier pass-back system for returning visaed passports. The regional consular officer based in Frankfurt visits about once a year, and the officers said he provides solid support even between visits.

Visas

In FY 2006 the section handled almost 12,500 NIV applications with an adjusted refusal rate of close to 28 percent. This was a slight rise from the FY 2005 figures but still notably lower than FY 2004's total of almost 15,000. Although there has been a slight upward trend in business and tourist visa applications, the number of student and exchange applicants varies widely, depending on the Belarusian government's level of discouragement. During the March-June peak season, the waiting time for an appointment has been at most 23 days, and the officers interview about 100 applicants on the busiest days. In the off season, the waiting time is only about five days.

The Bureau of Consular Affairs deadline of November 1, 2006, for all NIV applicants to use the electronic visa application form (EVAF) is not causing any consternation in the consular section. Since the section already requires EVAFs for students and exchange visitors, they do not anticipate difficulties. The section chief hopes that the mandatory use of the EVAF and a public diplomacy campaign to better educate applicants about visa requirements will together reduce the wait time for an appointment in the busy season. The visa information sheet is available to the public and advises applicants to bring in documents demonstrating their ties to Belarus, adding that letters of invitation can be submitted. None of these documents is considered reliable. The interview should be the basis of a decision, and the OIG team informally recommended that the section's information for applicants eliminate all references to documents that are not required by regulation.

Consular Public Diplomacy Activities

The section has a good record of using the embassy's public diplomacy resources to disseminate messages to the public. In the past, the officers have given numerous talks at educational institutions about study and summer work programs in the United States. Although the section does not have a formal outreach plan developed with the PAS, it is always thinking about the next outreach opportunity.

Consular Contacts

Most contact with Belarusian officials must at least initially be made through the nation's Ministry of Foreign Affairs. This is a burden when an urgent meeting is needed, and it also gives the Belarusian government control over types of contact that are routine in other countries. As a result, the consular section has few official contacts and lacks important information. The section has one reliable contact at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs who is helpful on American citizen cases, and the fraud prevention LE staff member has unofficial law enforcement contacts who provide criminal background information on visa applicants when requested. Officers and the fraud prevention LE staff member would benefit by having more out-of-office time to develop contacts and expand their knowledge in such areas as disaster planning and fraud trends. Although developing close contacts in Belarus can be a difficult and delicate matter, other embassy sections have had some success. OIG informally recommended that the embassy identify Belarusian officials responsible for subjects that interest the section and more actively try to establish working relationships with those contacts. This effort should include some travel and contacts outside the Minsk area. OIG encouraged the consular officers to follow up on their March 2006 initial meeting with consular officers from other embassies to discuss

fraud prevention. OIG also suggested the section expand these inter-embassy discussions to include disaster planning, children's issues, and other consular matters.

Fraud Prevention

The fraud prevention LE staff member is quite experienced and conducts the bulk of the post's antifraud work, with oversight from the ELO fraud prevention manager. The fraud prevention employees have done a validation study annually on all exchange visa recipients and plan soon to do validation studies on visa referral cases and business/tourist visa travelers. As noted, contacts with the nation's law enforcement community are unofficial and limited. The section, for example, does not have regular contact with local immigration officials or border guards. However, in cooperation with the RSO and at the request of the Belarusian government, the section did train these officials regarding U.S. identity documents. The officers involved said there is good sharing of any local counterterrorism trend information within the embassy. However, the fraud prevention LE staff member and the officers have not spent much time on learning or reporting on the "big picture" regarding fraud, corruption, the reliability of official documents, and other matters related to the section's border security responsibilities. The section chief agreed to have the fraud prevention manager and fraud prevention LE staff member focus more on this. At the request of the Department of Homeland Security's Moscow office, the fraud prevention LE staff member performs about 40 background checks annually on Belarusians seeking asylum in the United States. The consular section has responsibility for the asylum portfolio, which gives the officers an opportunity to do reporting that is not strictly consular.

American Citizens Services

With only about 200 American citizens resident in Belarus and few U.S. tourists, the ACS caseload is low. There are 12 wardens to help disseminate emergency messages and send e-mail to registered Americans. The section has held a warden meeting and two town hall meetings for all resident Americans within the past 12 months. An unknown number of dual citizens, some of whom are not English speakers, live in Belarus and need access to emergency messages.

In January 2005 the Belarusian government placed a moratorium on all foreign adoptions. The government is also seldom cooperative on other children's issues such as child abduction. The embassy, for its part, works closely with the Bureau of Consular Affairs on these issues and keeps them in the forefront of bilateral discussions.

The embassy is revising its emergency action plan. In the past, the consular section has not played an active role in the emergency action committee. Both the section chief and the DCM are aware of the importance of consular involvement in all aspects of emergency planning. However, the consular section has not prepared a disaster assistance plan based on local circumstances, and OIG provided guidance on planning that describes local government plans and capabilities.

PUBLIC DIPLOMACY

Faced with exceptional challenges, PAS counters as much as possible, where it can, the disinformation about the United States disseminated by the government-controlled media. PAS exploits even small operational openings to widen knowledge and contacts between the citizens of the two nations and, through a robust program of grants to local organizations, helps them to develop the tools that will be necessary for a fully democratic Belarus. Although the government of Belarus is not a cooperative partner in encouraging bilateral cooperation, there are many Belarusians who are anxious for contact and willing to take very real personal risks to obtain it. In some ways, given the chilly state of U.S.-Belarus relations and the authoritarian nature of the current regime, it is surprising how many PAS initiatives are working and working well.

The PAS is on several levels of a rebuilt building in central Minsk, about a mile from the chancery. The work area is appropriate and adequate. The two-level information resource center on one of the lower levels has limited natural light and problematic air circulation but is otherwise well designed and welcoming. The public affairs officer (PAO) has an assistant PAO and a staff of 18 LE staff, virtually all of whom have exceptional English language skills. The PAO has periodic meetings with the DCM and the P/E officers to coordinate activities and ensure that PAS programs address mission priorities. Mission leadership and personnel alike participate whenever possible in PAS outreach activities.

There are some evident and immediate dividends but, given the constraints under which PAS works, public diplomacy activities in Belarus are in most cases longer term investments in the future. The strong points include the American Corners program and a grant effort that aims to foster and strengthen the institutions of civic society. Both efforts reach the Belarusian population directly and aid the many Belarusians who look to the West for models, information, and support.

Information and Media

It is hard to overstate the hostile information environment in which PAS works. The government of Belarus directly or indirectly controls the majority of media outlets and therefore the tenor and content of information for most Belarusians. The government television channel reaches all of the country and is the primary source of information for most Belarusians, while radio is a secondary source. The major government-controlled daily newspaper, *Sovetskaya Belarusa* (Soviet Belarus), has a circulation of over 500,000, and several other national dailies faithfully follow (and occasionally even outdo in their rhetorical ferocity) the newspaper's views. All of these official and auxiliary media outlets are consistently and stridently anti-American in tone and content.

In most other countries, occasional media misinformation about the United States and its policies can be at least partly countered by directed responses, including corrective letters to the editor, interviews, and op-ed pieces. These tools have not worked in Belarus. The sheer volume of objectionable reporting in the government-influenced media precludes taking issue with every inflammatory article. The few media interviews with embassy personnel have been selectively edited and turned into active disinformation. Taking a page from the Cold War-era, media features on the interaction of U.S. officials with Belarusians typically call the situation “provocative,” and meetings with opposition figures are portrayed as “meetings with terrorists.” Attempts to place letters to the editor or columns on U.S. policy in the media outlets that released the disinformation have been fruitless. Individual reporters and editors, whatever their personal views, do not deviate from the government line. There is little of the steady, cooperative interaction between the PAS information section and reporters that one sees in most other countries. There is also little point in trying to cultivate such relationships with most government media representatives. The sole exception to the negative coverage has been reports on mission-sponsored cultural activities, which are usually at least neutral – and some are even positive.

Because many traditional information section activities are precluded, PAS focuses on reaching the Belarusian audiences through direct contact and via the Internet, effectively leap-frogging these constraints. The PAS-maintained web site provides current information about U.S. policies and mission activities (including visa processing and outreach efforts) in Russian, Belarusian, and English. PAS sponsors cultural events, including performances of American artists, to varieties of audiences. Most importantly PAS works, through its grant program as outlined below, to assist the

small and beleaguered community of independent media. It has also provided assistance through a television co-op program, which brings media crews to the United States to work on programs created there for broadcast to small regional television outlets.

Cultural and Educational Exchanges

Due to funding cuts, the volume of International Visitor Leadership Program exchanges has diminished in recent years, and PAS uses its allocated slots mostly for single-country and regional, Russian-language programs. The program emphasizes professional development (e.g., librarians and agricultural managers), international social problems (e.g., trafficking in persons), and to some degree civic skills (local government officials). Fulbright and other educational programs attract American scholars working in institutions in Belarus who are often willing to supplement their research and teaching with speaking engagements at American Corners, multiplying the value of their presence. There was once a large and successful Future Leaders Exchange Program that brought Belarusian secondary school students to the United States for a full year of study. Because of Belarusian government roadblocks that inhibited publicity and dissuaded students from participating, the program has been scaled back to shorter summer-only exchanges.

English Language Enrichment

The strong interest in English-language instruction throughout Belarus is striking. Equally so is the gratitude with which teachers receive any teaching materials that supplement the limited and expensive materials available locally. In many schools throughout Belarus, including those in small villages, children begin learning English in the second grade. Their teachers receive a remarkably solid education at the Linguistics University in Minsk or at one of the regional universities. However, generally neither teachers nor students have the opportunity to converse with native English speakers or have access to anything other than standard program materials. Even the smallest schools in Belarus offer opportunities to study other foreign languages, such as German and Polish, but the overwhelming number of pupils choose to study English, as it is viewed as the world language.

PAS efforts to bring English-language enrichment materials - from dictionaries to grammar books, children's books, videos, and Forum magazine - match naturally with the section's objective of disseminating information about the United States.

Donations of materials to schools, done regularly, always include maps and reference materials that teach English but also give basic information about U.S. society. At five rural schools in the Grodno region, the OIG team saw first hand the success of this outreach in building bridges to Belarusians who generally receive only negative government propaganda about the United States. Work in this area is limited only by the Department resources available.

American Corners

Given the Belarusian government's hostility to most bilateral engagement, it is somewhat surprising that the American Corners program has proven so successful. Embassy Minsk is set to open the 12th American Corner in Belarus and would have partners for more. Not only are the current Corners open for business, evidence indicates that they are being used, and used well, by increasing numbers of patrons, from students to professionals. The 11 American Corners had 24,491 patron visits in 2005. Most American Corners are in regional public libraries, not in educational institutions, and they are typically headed by trained librarians. Their directors are committed to providing information about the United States from the books, periodicals, and media available and to using the Corners to launch outreach programs.

During the inspection, an OIG inspector visited the largest American Corner, at the Pushkin regional library in Minsk, and a smaller one in the west Belarusian city of Grodno. The former is located in the foreign language division of the library and includes facilities for watching English-language television and viewing the Corner's collection of DVD and VCR recordings of classic American films and historical and other cultural programs. The Corner's reference collection is supplemented by a sizable and heavily used lending collection of American fiction that had once been part of the information resource center's collection. During the visit, several students were using books and current periodicals, watching videos, and checking out American fiction. Patrons have asked the director to consider establishing a club to discuss American film, literature, and other cultural topics, and she is working to make that happen. This American Corner is eager to absorb additional materials and to feature American speakers and others for dialogues on U.S.-related topics.

The American Corner at the regional library in Grodno has a more modest collection and simpler facilities but also was in use by several students on the weekday afternoon visit. The Corner uses a small adjacent room to show American films and to hold English-language classes. Shortly after the OIG inspector left the Corner, the Corner's director was contacted by a Belarusian intelligence officer who wanted

an explanation of the PAS visit and book donation. Such harassment is common but is a price at least several of the American Corners directors are willing to pay to receive and maintain the collections.

Democracy Commission Grants

The mission's significant grant program, made possible through Freedom Support Act funds, focuses on the development of civic skills and is administered by the assistant PAO and a staff of three. Both American officers have grants warrants, and the section keeps appropriate files for each grant, including periodic and final reports on the disbursement of funds.

The projects funded include those on youth, human rights, and education, but almost half of the total program is focused on supporting and sustaining the independent media, particularly newspapers. While not forbidden by the current government, the independent press faces a gauntlet of obstacles. Government kiosks will not sell any but government-supported (and supporting) papers. The post office will not distribute them, and publishers and writers have consistently faced legal charges for what they write or publish. Grants have been made for everything from buying newsprint, printing newspapers outside of Belarus and transporting them into the country, and setting up online newspapers as alternatives to paying the lawyers' fees for accused journalists. All of these grants are targeted towards developing civic institutions and skills and thus accord well with the 2004 Belarus Democracy Act, in which Congress expressed its support for democracy and human rights as the main U.S. foreign policy priorities in Belarus.

RESOURCE MANAGEMENT

| Agency | U.S. Direct-Hire Staff | U.S. Local-hire Staff | Foreign National Staff | Total Staff | Total FY 2006 Funding |
|------------------------------------|------------------------|-----------------------|------------------------|-------------|-----------------------|
| State Department | 16 | | 7 | 23 | \$ 824,500 |
| --Diplomatic and Consular Programs | | | | | |
| --ICASS | 5 | 6 | 75 | 86 | 2,080,800 |
| --Public Diplomacy | 3 | | 16 | 19 | 610,700 |
| --Diplomatic Security | 1 | 1 | 39 | 41 | 546,580 |
| --Marine Security | 6 | | 4 | 10 | 118,112 |
| --Representation | | | | | 29,900 |
| --Overseas Buildings Operations | 1 | | | 1 | 951,358 |
| Freedom Support Act | | | 3 | 3 | 1,197,790 |
| Machine-readable Visa Program | | 1 | 2 | 3 | 44,000 |
| USAID | 1 | | 5 | 6 | 325,800 |
| Defense attaché | 2 | | 2 | 4 | 148,885 |
| Totals | 35* | 8 | 153 | 196 | \$ 6,878,454 |

*Does not include two Pacific Architecture and Engineering employees who are working on contract

OVERVIEW

Embassy Minsk is a small, well-run mission that now attracts a sufficient number of qualified Foreign Service bidders. Operating in a hostile political environment, the embassy is a 25-percent hardship differential post. Current Department funding and staffing levels appear appropriate. The LE staff in management operations are, for the most part, well trained and performing at a high level. Their American supervisors, with the exception of the financial management officer, are new or relatively new to their positions. Together, they are doing a good job running post management operations. Delivery of International Cooperative Administrative Support Services (ICASS) services received high scores from the community in the ICASS customer services survey. The mission community also highly rated most services on OIG's Workplace and Quality of Life Questionnaires. The LE staff compensation

package, a concern of the last OIG inspection report, has been drastically improved and is now appropriate. The much-needed renovation of the chancery building, cited in the last report, has not been done and remains a chief concern of the mission. A chancery renovation and expansion project, which will address its structural problems, is now scheduled for FY 2008.

THE CHANCERY

Post management considers the chancery renovation and expansion project, which has been postponed successively since FY 2003, to be the single most important project on its list. The basement and first floor of the chancery were reinforced in 2000, which appears to have arrested the threat of collapse, and the large vertical crack on the second floor appears to have stabilized although a more permanent solution is needed. Completion of the renovation and expansion project, which is estimated to cost \$16.8 million and is in OBO's Long-Range Overseas Buildings Plan for full funding in FY 2008, would serve that purpose. It would also resolve the building's longstanding and well-documented problems of severe overcrowding and structural decay and resolve security issues regarding the chancery building (see this report's classified annex for details).

There appears to be universal agreement that this project is important and should be completed as soon as possible. OBO made an assessment in March 2005 that "the building's integrity was unchanged and should be unaffected by the project's deferment to FY 2007." OBO now says the project is a top "7911" (Facilities Rehabilitation and Support Systems Replacement Program) priority and "is ranked first among all planned major rehabs in [Europe]." The Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs' executive office said the embassy's "single most important management need is completion of the anticipated chancery renovation/addition." Finally, post staff members at all levels emphasized the negative effects that the deteriorating chancery building and cramped conditions have had on morale and productivity.

Given this consensus and the urgency of the project, the OIG team recommended that the project be funded and completed as currently planned. Because the project has been dormant for so long, the FY 2003 architectural and engineering drawings may no longer match the embassy's current and projected staffing.

Recommendation 2: Embassy Minsk should review the FY 2003 architectural and engineering drawings for the proposed chancery renovation and ensure that the drawings accord with its projected staffing and space needs. (Action: Embassy Minsk)

RIGHTSIZING

The mission has not yet undergone a rightsizing review by the Office of Rightsizing of the U.S. Government's Overseas Presence and has not been advised when a rightsizing review will be done. Because it is a relatively small post with only two other colocated agencies, most management support functions, such as warehousing, housing, and some human resources functions are already consolidated. USAID and the Defense attaché office each employ a driver, primarily for reasons of service and response time.

In terms of regional support, the embassy provides some transit pouch services for Embassy Kiev, but this is intended as a temporary arrangement, pending resolution of a Vienna Convention issue related to diplomatic pouch searches conducted by Ukraine.

The post receives human resources, general services, and financial management services from the Regional Service Center in Frankfurt, and these are uniformly satisfactory. Although the services are free, the mission is unsure of the overall cost-effectiveness of some of the additional proposed services, such as voucher examination and nonexpendable property management. The cost of labor in Minsk is considerably lower than in Frankfurt, the presumed location of the service provider, and moving these services could also incur travel and per diem costs, particularly for any property inventory personnel.

The mission gained one position via the Global Repositioning Initiative (Position 60888176, public diplomacy officer), but this was offset by the loss of a position that was established previously by the Diplomatic Readiness Initiative (Position 01900800, assistant public affairs officer). The Boren Fellow in the P/E section may or may not be replaced by a Foreign Service officer upon his departure.

MANAGEMENT OPERATIONS

Embassy Minsk's management operations are largely well run and only minimally affected by host country conditions. The inspection did, however, identify several areas for improvement. Management operations are led by a seasoned officer who is in his first tour as a management officer. The organization, staffing, and budget of the management section appear appropriate. The general services officer (GSO) arrived in October 2006 and is the newest member of the management team. The information management officer and the information management specialist also

arrived in 2006. The American officers' proficiency in the local language is at best marginally sufficient. The LE staff are now well positioned to provide management operations with operational continuity during the transition from one set of American officers to the next.

Among the MPP priorities are expanding and rehabilitating the chancery, upgrading residential housing, replacing the chief of mission residence, and hiring a Foreign Service health practitioner. For the most part, management practices and procedures are conducted effectively and efficiently, although minor changes are needed. For example, increasing the management officer's communication with all management sections would benefit embassy operations. The initiation of weekly meetings and individual face-to-face meetings would enable the staff to provide project status reports and discuss pending problems more regularly. Prior to the inspection, the management officer was not conducting weekly staff meetings. The section, as a whole, did meet weekly with the Ambassador and DCM, but this was no substitute for a weekly management section meeting. At the OIG team's suggestion, a weekly management staff meeting will be held.

ICASS is working well but could be improved in some areas. The ICASS council now conducts most of its business through e-mails and meets only twice yearly; more frequent meetings, such as quarterly ones, would be preferable. In addition to adding transparency to the process, the meetings would serve as a training ground for officers new to the council. In addition, each of the three ICASS members has its own motor pool. Both the Department of Defense and USAID wish to maintain their own vehicles and drivers for operational reasons. Consolidation of the three motor pools should nonetheless be an ICASS goal. There are service standards for each of the services, although the standards are not being measured.

Recommendation 3: Embassy Minsk should design and implement a plan for the International Cooperative Administrative Support Services council to improve communications and to measure services. (Action: Embassy Minsk)

The mission does not adequately monitor and enforce its cell phone policy to reduce personal calls placed on mission-provided cell phones. Cell phones are issued to all American employees and EFMs and to most LE staff. The current cell phone policy clearly states that the phones are intended for official business use and that the cost of all personal calls is the responsibility of the employee. Cell phone calls are apparently being paid for, as required, but a voucher examiner and the Class B cashier devote an inordinate amount of time to collecting for the personal calls.

LE staff have no trouble acquiring personal cell phones and, therefore, should be discouraged from using official cell phones for personal calls in other than emergencies. American employees can obtain cell phones only after an exhaustive process, and few, if any, choose to do so. For the August 2006 billing cycle, 41 LE staff reimbursed the mission \$720 for personal calls made on mission cell phones. For the same billing cycle, 17 Americans paid \$864 for personal cell phone calls. OIG made an informal recommendation addressing this issue.

Human Resources

The human resource office (HR) provides high-quality personnel services to American and LE staff. The financial management/human resource officer (HRO) is serving for the first time as an HRO. He has a capable staff of two, plus the help of the regional HR adviser from the Regional Support Center in Frankfurt. The Office of Overseas Employment has been responsive to post needs. The mission's LE staff now have an equitable local compensation plan that includes a Foreign Service national Defined Contributions Retirement Plan. The vendor providing off-the-shelf compensation survey data for the embassy does not provide the post with pay percentile data for the local labor market. This may or may not disadvantage the post, but the percentile certainly is a key piece of missing information since the Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs limits its posts to the 75th pay percentile. The post is not experiencing recruitment or retention problems, however.

The OIG team found that several work requirements statements were not completed for American personnel for the current rating period. Although the HR office may not be directly responsible for the problems, the HRO needs to work with the management officer and the GSO to correct these anomalies. Similarly, an effort to maximize EFM employment informally projected who might be a good fit for upcoming vacancies, and this practice could create an appearance of preselection on the part of the HRO. OIG provided informal recommendations on these issues.

The LE staff formed an association in 2001 and elected executive committee members. The association's current executive committee was elected in 2003. The association has no written constitution, but a written constitution would provide some assurances for the future that the institution is an officially recognized body that represents the interests of LE staff to mission management. The association has a positive working relationship with the management office, Ambassador, and the DCM, who has informed the association that he would like to meet with it quarterly. An active association is in the best interest of the mission because it could allow the LE staff to express their views regarding their welfare, working conditions, rights and privileges, and grievances.

Recommendation 4: Embassy Minsk should assist the locally employed staff association to draft written bylaws and should institute regularly scheduled meetings with the association. (Action: Embassy Minsk)

The LE staff said they believe that training opportunities are not evenly administered, and the awards program is not equitable. A review of historical LE staff training and awards indicates that the embassy has provided numerous training opportunities to LE staff and has an active awards program. By requiring individual development plans for each LE staff member, the post could facilitate training-related decisionmaking. Post management is already aware of the perceived inequities in the awards program and plans to provide more discipline for the program, including encouraging supervisors to submit valid nominations.

Post Language Program

Embassy Minsk has a robust language program for American and LE staff. There are two full-time Russian language instructors and one Belarusian/Russian language instructor on staff. Most instruction is individualized, involving one-on-one sessions. The language program's efficacy was among the highest-rated services on the OIG questionnaires. The DCM's office management specialist is the post language officer. English-language instruction is available for the LE staff. The language services are provided through a contract.

Equal Employment Opportunity, Civil Rights, and the Federal Women's Program

The Ambassador and DCM are newly arrived, and it is premature to judge their commitment to Equal Employment Opportunity, civil rights, or the Federal Women's Program. The Equal Employment Opportunity counselor has been in that job for approximately one year and has received the required training and program material. At the request of the mission, the Regional Support Center in Frankfurt provided two HR specialists to present classes on sexual harassment awareness. The classes were mandatory for all American and LE staff. The program's manager has been in that position for just a few months and lacks program materials. She is the post's first Federal Women's Program manager as the post has just reached the level of U.S.-citizen female employees that requires the creation of the position.

A review of prior-year unliquidated obligations revealed that approximately \$85,000 in secure purchases made in FY 2002 and FY 2003 are still on the books. The financial management office is aware of this but has been stymied in researching the validity of the obligations and de-obligating those charges that are no longer valid. The financial management officer has been unable to retrieve supporting cables that ordered office furniture and equipment.

Recommendation 5: Embassy Minsk should request the assistance of the Office of Logistics Management in determining the status of secure orders placed by Embassy Minsk in fiscal years 2002 and 2003. (Action: Embassy Minsk, in coordination with A)

The PAO and the assistant PAO have current certificates of appointment as grants officers. The financial management office makes payments according to grant requirements and maintains grant payment status information. That office is not tasked with nor involved in the auditing of grantees' financial submissions for completeness or correctness.

GENERAL SERVICES OPERATIONS

The GSO arrived during the inspection, ending a one-month gap that was filled by an able facilities manager. The gap was not a detriment because it provided the LE staff with the opportunity to demonstrate high technical expertise in their areas of responsibility and their effective use of that expertise. The succession of relatively inexperienced officers in the GSO position underscores the importance of having talented LE staff to conduct day-to-day business and provide first-echelon leadership and management. In this regard, the GSO section performs well, and records, observation, and 360-degree feedback show that it has moved quickly up the learning and mission-execution curves relatively quickly.

One notable project initiated by the previous GSO pertains to quality management and is an essential precursor to continuous improvement and establishing and maintaining high customer service levels. The LE GSO assistant has developed detailed process maps for each of the GSO sections. If the post decides to move forward with this project, the maps can become an integral component in a quality management system, such as International Standards Organization 9000:2001, that ties resources and action to strategic planning and goals. The system can provide

a means of measurement to gauge performance and perform gap analyses. This would synchronize well with the President's Management Agenda and its emphasis on performance and results.

Procurement

The senior LE purchasing agent has been with the embassy for over three years and in his current position for only one month, yet he has a high level of knowledge and effectiveness. He displays an excellent command of procurement regulations, and the section's records appear complete and accurate. He enjoys the confidence of his peers, and the acting GSO praised him for his efforts, particularly in support of infrastructure projects that markedly improved the work environment; for example, the recently completed consular annex.

The procurement section appears to be well staffed, and its duties are fairly distributed among its employees. There are three warranted contracting officers at post: the GSO, management officer, and facilities manager. The section's records were well organized and complete, and most blanket purchase agreements were properly competed. (The one that was incomplete had a justification on file.) Purchase order files also were orderly, neat, and closed out properly, and included memorandums to the financial management office, reflecting when the order was completed. The staff members were knowledgeable and carried out their duties efficiently and effectively. The section's operations are largely automated by a Microsoft Access-based application that was developed at post, not the Department's web-enabled Post Administrative Software Suite (PASS) procurement application. PASS has capabilities that exceed the post's needs, but some features, such as a web interface with the financial management section for funds availability and electronic approval by the contracting officer, could provide efficiencies and savings. OIG informally recommended that the mission install the Web PASS procurement application and assess it against its locally developed application. If PASS provides more functionality and increases efficiency and effectiveness, the embassy should convert to it.

Motor Pool

The motor pool supervisor/dispatcher has a good command of the operational and managerial aspects of his job, resulting in a high level of customer service. He runs a very organized operation, which is reflected in the drivers' adherence to policies and procedures, the condition of his fleet, and the meticulousness of his records. The post recently published an updated motor vehicle policy that addressed authorized use, charges for other-than-authorized use, and request procedures. A

spot check of daily vehicle usage reports showed that the drivers use them properly to document time, mileage, refueling, destinations, and passengers. The motor pool supervisor conscientiously gathers and synthesizes the data from his drivers, and from the Marine security guard and local guard force drivers, in a timely manner. Drivers refuel at local service stations, using a cashless electronic system that provides an accurate accounting of vehicle identification and the date and amount of purchase. The motor pool supervisor receives the consolidated invoice monthly and extracts pertinent data for various reports. On his own initiative, the supervisor developed a Microsoft Access-based application to track fuel consumption/efficiency, mileage, and maintenance, as well as to generate management reports for his and his supervisor's use. He was unaware of the Web PASS application, Vehicle Registration and Maintenance.

The drivers have an adequate "down room" close to the embassy parking area. However, there is no OpenNet Plus connectivity or workstations in the down room, and drivers do not have accounts on the system. Since the motor pool supervisor/dispatcher is located in a different part of the compound, connectivity could be used to disseminate information electronically. In addition, individual accounts could let the drivers access information and online instruction that could help with career mobility and professional development.

Property

The property section has made significant strides since the last OIG inspection. Its system of accountability has improved, and its recent annual inventory results were within acceptable limits. Its warehouse facility, which was acquired since the last inspection, has adequate space and segregated areas for USAID and the Defense attaché office. The warehouse, however, has inadequacies. For example, the basement storage area is accessible by two means: a steep stairwell that is difficult to negotiate under any circumstances, much less while handling any materials, and an antiquated freight elevator that can be operated only by a person who is not an embassy employee and who works from 9 a.m. to 6 p.m., Monday through Friday. The same basement area has experienced flooding, so the post installed a sump pump and now stores items on pallets. The general condition of the warehouse, along with the shortcomings described above, prompted the previous GSO to initiate an ongoing search for a more suitable warehouse. On an operational level, the section supervisor and his colleagues are well versed in receiving and issue-and-disposal processes, and a spot check of their records substantiated this.

Another less-than-optimal aspect of the property section is its lack of a proper receiving area. The most recent Chief of Mission Certification (Minsk 000717) said

the receiving area “is part of a larger room used by several members of [the] GSO property staff” and a “separate, lockable receiving area would provide additional control in our management of personal property.” This situation was verified by the OIG team, which discussed it with the acting GSO and the management officer. There are several options available and the resources to resolve the issue exist or are reasonably available. In the meantime, the LE property section chief and the receiving clerk are coping with this situation.

Real Property and Facilities Maintenance

Most employees are housed in apartments, which comprise the vast majority of residential units that are relatively close to the chancery. The common and entry areas of the apartments may be less than desirable, but the units themselves appear to meet space standards and are well maintained and in excellent condition. The facilities manager said that his staff normally responds within 24 hours to requests for routine maintenance, which is well within acceptable standards. The management assistant who handles short-term leases has an excellent rapport with landlords, resulting in timely execution of the work for which landlords are responsible. The interagency housing board meets regularly, maintains minutes of the meetings, and approves housing assignments and appeals. Surveys, interviews, and other feedback indicate that, with few exceptions, employees are satisfied with their housing.

However, the embassy’s demographics are changing, and more families are arriving at post, warranting a reexamination of the housing pool. The mission must establish a housing profile, per 15 FAM 222b. (It was formerly exempt from that requirement due to its Special Embassy Program status.) The profile will provide the basis for deciding the type and size of units to include in the pool. Once the profile is approved by OBO, the mission can begin bringing the housing pool into closer alignment with projected needs.

Recommendation 6: Embassy Minsk should develop and implement a housing profile that will more closely align the embassy’s projected needs with its changing employee demographics. (Action: Embassy Minsk)

Travel

Travel is coordinated by a GSO employee who works with airlines directly and with a local travel agency that is affiliated with the General Services Administration's Travel Management Center contractor. However, the embassy does not have a contract with that contractor. In addition, the embassy uses the Government Travel Request form (SF1169) to procure airline tickets, a practice that is increasingly rare in the Department. About 30 of these forms are used per year. The financial management officer controls the travel request forms, issuing them as needed. It is unclear why the current system is used. The inspection team informally recommended that the embassy consider an alternative method, such as a centrally billed account that could streamline the process. A contract with the local Travel Management Center could also improve efficiency and/or effectiveness.

INFORMATION MANAGEMENT AND INFORMATION SYSTEMS SECURITY

Embassy Minsk's information technology (IT) staff operates a satisfactory information management and information systems security program, although several areas require attention. The IT staff consists of four full-time American employees, a full-time LE staff member who handles the embassy's systems operation, and one full-time and five part-time LE staff who handle mailroom and telephone functions. A part-time EFM assists with systems administration and other duties, and a Regional Information Management Center technician based in Minsk supports telephone operations for this and other neighboring posts. The IT staff supports over 120 unclassified users in the chancery and PAS annex building.

A first-tour information program officer and second-tour information systems officer competently handled all IT operations during a prolonged staffing gap in the information management officer (IMO) position in early 2006. The current IMO has been at post for several months and has identified areas for improvement. The IT staff has made substantial progress in creating and updating required IT systems documentation and standard operating procedures. An inventory reconciliation has also been performed and completed. IT operations could benefit from enhanced IMO management and oversight of IT staff initiatives and from increased communication between the management officer and IT staff. Additional areas for improvement include better help desk services, training in specialized functions for American and LE staff, and an improved Intranet site. Improvement is needed also in other areas that are discussed in the classified annex to this report.

Help Desk Services

The information service center's (ISC) help desk is not organized or managed to provide adequate customer service. It lacks designated help desk staff and has no tracking database to annotate and resolve issues. Without a designated help desk staff and a tracking database, the ISC cannot resolve service calls in a timely manner. The help desk staff misplaces service requests and does not give priority to issues requiring immediate action. IT management is unable to monitor the time spent resolving pending issues or to determine whether an issue was addressed at all. The result has been customer complaints and low customer-service scores on OIG's questionnaires.

Help desk procedures do not designate specific ISC staff as having responsibility for maintaining the help desk or identify the preferred method, i.e., e-mail or phone, for reporting service calls. The ISC also has not defined timeframes and priorities for resolving service calls. Embassy senior management must continuously emphasize the importance of having embassy staff members follow help desk procedures, to ensure that adequate customer service is provided.

Recommendation 7: Embassy Minsk should establish help desk procedures that include designating the information service center staff and the preferred method for reporting and resolving service requests and should set timeframes for resolution of support requests. (Action: Embassy Minsk)

The OIG team discussed with ISC the Department's Universal Trouble Ticket tool and how it might serve as a potential solution for tracking help desk service requests. Universal Trouble Ticket is a web-enabled and centralized tracking system available to any organization having authorized access to the Department's unclassified network. Universal Trouble Ticket is being used by over 100 bureaus, embassies, and consulates as a help desk tracking database. Using Universal Trouble Ticket would allow the ISC to open and track service calls, create reports, track the service provided to embassy staff, and make necessary changes. The ISC has begun preliminary discussions with the Department and plans to use the tracking system.

Training

The IMO does not have individual development training plans for American or LE staff. According to 5 FAM 121.1 b.3d, the IMO is responsible for developing individual development training plans for staff, which helps ensure that these employees have the skills to support mission programs and to encourage their own pro-

professional growth. Without individual development training plans, IT management is unaware of areas where training may be required to ensure sufficient customer service.

A review of training records shows that only one IT staff member is trained on consular applications. Without a trained backup employee, the consular section cannot be certain of access to IT support. With the consular section processing as many as 500 visas and requests for services per week, IT staff must be adequately trained to support this important function.

Recommendation 8: Embassy Minsk should develop an individual development training plan based on assigned job responsibilities, mission needs, and professional development for each American and locally employed information technology employee. (Action: Embassy Minsk)

Recommendation 9: Embassy Minsk should train the information technology section's American employees and appropriate locally employed staff on consular applications. (Action: Embassy Minsk)

Web Site Content Management

The content management and organization of Embassy Minsk's Intranet site needs improvement. Embassy staff members' responses to the OIG questionnaires indicate that the web site contains outdated information and is difficult to navigate. At present, each section of the embassy is responsible for providing the IT section with new material for the site, and IT staff updates the web site as soon as the material is received. However, insufficient coordination and inattention by some embassy sections has resulted in outdated information remaining on the web site. In accordance with 5 FAH-8 H-211.2 and 5 FAH-8 H-611, a program manager must be assigned to manage each web site. Senior embassy management recognizes that content management of the web site is an issue and had begun discussions to address it.

Recommendation 10: Embassy Minsk should assign one employee to regularly coordinate and gather from embassy sections updated information for the embassy Intranet site and provide it to the information technology staff. (Action: Embassy Minsk)

QUALITY OF LIFE

COMMUNITY LIAISON OFFICE

The current community liaison office (CLO) coordinator is widely lauded for her service in virtually every one of her eight areas of responsibility, particularly for her work in welcoming and orientation. This is her first stint as a CLO coordinator, but she is extremely comfortable in her role and exhibits a great awareness of the post's mood due to her communication skills. She is conversant on clients' issues, which range from housing to food safety, and can address issues from various perspectives. Her working relationship with the management officer appears to be excellent.

Although a CLO coordinator normally reports directly to the management officer or management counselor, the mission instead has elected to diverge from this guidance. At the time of the inspection, the DCM supervised the coordinator. OIG informally recommended that the supervision of the coordinator be realigned in accordance with Family Liaison Office guidance, so that the coordinator reports to the management officer.

MEDICAL UNIT

The medical unit is staffed by a part-time EFM who was trained as a nurse in Ukraine and a part-time LE physician who was trained as a pediatrician and whose command of English allows adequate communication with embassy employees. They provide direct medical care during office hours in the medical unit and are on call 24 hours a day, seven days a week. They also act as liaison and interpreters for employees who are treated by local medical care providers, virtually all of whom do not speak English. In fact, the dearth of adequate local care and the language barrier dictate that the nurse and doctor spend much of their time accompanying patients to consultations and treatments, which detracts from the time available for them to perform administrative and medical tasks in the medical unit. Moreover, the post's ICASS medical service and standards are not well defined. As a result, service providers are not certain of the parameters within which to operate, and customers' expectations are left to broad interpretation. That leads to suboptimal use of limited

resources, diminished customer service, and elevated but unfulfilled patient expectations. The mission could address these issues by defining the services and standards via standard ICASS procedures, providing commensurate resources, disseminating the information to customers, and enforcing the system. The OIG team informally recommended that the management officer act as soon as possible to address the issues of service definition and standards, which should improve service and manage customer expectations.

Another component of a comprehensive solution would be assignment of a Foreign Service health practitioner, as the post requested in its MPP. The regional medical officer in Moscow and the regional health manager in Brussels support this request, particularly because the post may not be as fortunate in the future in finding another EFM as qualified as the current incumbent.

The medical unit and the regional medical officer have previously worked with the cafeteria's licensee regarding sanitation, hygiene, and food preparation practices. In addition, the licensee is obligated to provide the results of its employees' health examinations to the regional medical officer and to observe specific sanitation practices. However, a more formal and structured program is warranted, particularly as there were reported but unconfirmed cases of food poisoning occurring in the cafeteria. While progress has been made in improving cafeteria operations, the embassy should develop and implement a plan to coordinate the actions of its medical unit, regional medical officer, and the licensee to ensure standards are upheld. OIG made an informal recommendation to address this issue.

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(b) (6)(b) (6)(b) (6) is an independent, coeducational school for grades prekindergarten through 12. The Office of Overseas Schools considers the school's curricula and programs to be adequate for up to grade eight. (b) (6)
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The modest facility includes four classrooms, a library, and a computer laboratory. The mission enjoys good relations with the school's director, and the DCM is on the school's advisory board. Other than this and the handling of official school mail, the mission is not providing other assistance to the school.

The Office of Overseas Schools has provided grants to the (b) (6)(b) (6) (b) (6) since FY 1994. In FY 2005 it provided \$7,000 to support salaries and another \$4,600 to assist the school's upgrade of security. In FY 2006 it provided \$7,000 to support salaries and \$3,000 to purchase U.S. educational materials, supplies, and equipment. Grant expenditures were used in accordance with the grant agreements.

FORMAL RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation 1: The Bureau of Overseas Buildings Operations should adhere to its plan to fully fund the Embassy Minsk renovation and expansion project in FY 2008, as stated in the Bureau's Long-Range Building Plan. (Action: OBO)

Recommendation 2: Embassy Minsk should review the FY 2003 architectural and engineering drawings for the proposed chancery renovation and ensure that the drawings accord with its projected staffing and space needs. (Action: Embassy Minsk)

Recommendation 3: Embassy Minsk should design and implement a plan for the International Cooperative Administrative Support Services council to improve communications and to measure services. (Action: Embassy Minsk)

Recommendation 4: Embassy Minsk should assist the locally employed staff association to draft written bylaws and should institute regularly scheduled meetings with the association. (Action: Embassy Minsk)

Recommendation 5: Embassy Minsk should request the assistance of the Office of Logistics Management in determining the status of secure orders placed by Embassy Minsk in fiscal years 2002 and 2003. (Action: Embassy Minsk, in coordination with A)

Recommendation 6: Embassy Minsk should develop and implement a housing profile that will more closely align the embassy's projected needs with its changing employee demographics. (Action: Embassy Minsk)

Recommendation 7: Embassy Minsk should establish help desk procedures that include designating the information service center staff and the preferred method for reporting and resolving service requests and should set timeframes for resolution of support requests. (Action: Embassy Minsk)

Recommendation 8: Embassy Minsk should develop an individual development training plan based on assigned job responsibilities, mission needs, and professional development for each American and locally employed information technology employee. (Action: Embassy Minsk)

Recommendation 9: Embassy Minsk should train the information technology section's American employees and appropriate locally employed staff on consular applications. (Action: Embassy Minsk)

Recommendation 10: Embassy Minsk should assign one employee to regularly coordinate and gather from embassy sections updated information for the embassy Intranet site and provide it to the information technology staff. (Action: Embassy Minsk)

INFORMAL RECOMMENDATIONS

Informal recommendations cover operation matters not requiring action by organizations outside of the inspected unit and/or the parent regional bureau and are not be subject to the OIG compliance process. However, any subsequent OIG inspection or on-site compliance review will assess the mission's progress in implementing the informal recommendations.

Consular Operations

Consular distance learning courses provide a foundation of knowledge for LE staff. None of the current LE staff in the consular section has taken any of the available courses.

Informal Recommendation 1: Embassy Minsk should require that all locally employed staff in the consular section complete the Overseas Citizens Services, Immigration Law and Visa Operations, and Nationality Law/Consular Procedures consular correspondence courses.

Complex ACS cases are rare but, given minimal cooperation from local authorities, each case can be a challenge and take an unusually long time to resolve. No LE staff has been trained to handle such cases.

Informal Recommendation 2: Embassy Minsk should require that at least one locally employed staff member attend the American Citizens Services course at the Foreign Service Institute.

The consular section has few written standard operating procedures, although it is developing them for fraud referral and fee collection.

Informal Recommendation 3: Embassy Minsk should prepare standard operating procedures reflecting local conditions for all aspects of consular work.

The consular waiting room has a large television set that is currently being used to show regular cable TV shows.

Informal Recommendation 4: Embassy Minsk should have the consular and public affairs sections prepare a tape recording of consular and other embassy information for use in the consular section's public waiting room.

The visa information sheet available to the public says applicants should bring in documents demonstrating their ties to Belarus and that letters of invitation can be submitted. None of these documents is considered reliable.

Informal Recommendation 5: Embassy Minsk should amend the visa information sheet to eliminate all reference to documents that visa applicants should bring to the interview, other than those required by regulation.

Close contacts with government officials responsible for consular-related matters are important and can, in emergencies, be vital. Developing close contacts with local officials in Belarus can be a difficult and delicate matter.

Informal Recommendation 6: Embassy Minsk should make every effort to develop working relationships with Belarusian officials in the national and local governments who have responsibility for consular-related matters.

A number of Americans, mostly dual citizens, reside in Belarus but have not registered with the embassy and therefore are without access to the warden system. At present there is no method for contacting this audience in an emergency.

Informal Recommendation 7: Embassy Minsk should attempt to establish an agreement with a local radio station to disseminate emergency messages to American citizens when necessary.

The consular section has no disaster assistance plan based on local circumstances and abilities.

Informal Recommendation 8: Embassy Minsk should develop a disaster assistance plan that emphasizes airplane accidents and considers local government plans and capabilities.

Public Diplomacy

The American Corners program is very successful and is expanding into programming as well as the provision of basic information about the United States. Although several elements of the PAS contribute to the program, overall management of the program rests with a part-time LE staff member.

Informal Recommendation 9: Embassy Minsk should consider the assignment of a full-time locally employed staff member to provide overall coordination and supervision of support for the American Corners program.

PAS purchases significant numbers of books and other materials for donation to the American Corners and to language teachers in Belarus and to support its American speakers outreach programming. At present, all procurement is done through the general services office and its regular procurement process.

Informal Recommendation 10: Embassy Minsk should acquire a purchase card for the public affairs section that, with proper oversight, would allow the section to order materials online.

Management Operations

Both American and LE staff use cell phones for personal use. The repayment process for personal calls consumes an inordinate amount of time for the voucher examiner.

Informal Recommendation 11: Embassy Minsk should rewrite and enforce its policy on personal use of cell phones to minimize the resources needed to administer it.

Human Resources

The HR office has on one occasion “penciled in” the names of EFMs for jobs prior to the announcement of those vacancies.

Informal Recommendation 12: Embassy Minsk should ensure that its eligible family-member hiring program is fair and transparent.

Embassy Minsk does not require individual development plans for its LE staff. There is some concern that training dollars are not being used wisely and that some employees may be deprived of core training while others attend the same course repeatedly.

Informal Recommendation 13: Embassy Minsk should require all supervisors to create core training standards for the positions they supervise and, based on those standards, create individual development plans for all of their locally employed staff.

General Services

The procurement section is using an Access-based application to automate some functions, but it does not provide a web interface with the contracting officer, financial management office, or other stakeholders, as does the Department's Web PASS procurement application.

Informal Recommendation 14: Embassy Minsk should install the Web Post Administrative Software Suite procurement application, assess its functionality and value against the locally developed application, and, if it is found more effective, convert to the web application.

Mission drivers have a down room that has no computers. Drivers therefore have no access to OpenNet connectivity for automation and training.

Informal Recommendation 15: Embassy Minsk should install a workstation in the drivers' down room.

The embassy uses Government Travel Requests, rather than the more usual practice, a centrally billed account in travel procurement. The embassy also procures travel from a Federal Travel Management Center contractor in Minsk but does not have a contract with that provider.

Informal Recommendation 16: Embassy Minsk should determine whether local conditions allow for a centrally billed account for travel services and whether having a contract with the local affiliate of the Travel Management Center contractor would be more advantageous in terms of cost, efficiency, and/or effectiveness.

Community Liaison Office

Until recently, the management officer supervised the CLO coordinator, in accordance with what was then Family Liaison Office guidance. Now, the DCM supervises the CLO coordinator.

Informal Recommendation 17: Embassy Minsk should realign the supervision of the community liaison office coordinator in accordance with Department guidance, so that the incumbent reports to and is supervised by the management officer.

Medical Unit

The medical unit is staffed by two highly qualified employees, but their respective duties and responsibilities are not clearly defined. Mission employees lack adequate information on the unit's priorities and procedures, and on such issues as nonemergency services and medical translations.

Informal Recommendation 18: Embassy Minsk should coordinate with the ICASS council to review the medical unit's procedures and responsibilities, clarify each employee's duties, and provide all mission employees with correct and adequate information about the medical unit's operations and the medical support services available at post.

Although the vendor licensing agreement contains requirements regarding sanitation and health, there is no formal program to ensure that the cafeteria meets appropriate health and food handling standards.

Informal Recommendation 19: Embassy Minsk should develop and implement a plan to ensure that the embassy cafeteria adheres to applicable sanitation and health standards.



| Title | Name | Date |
|--|----------------|-------------|
| Ambassador | Karen Stewart | 09/06 |
| Deputy Chief of Mission | Jonathan Moore | 07/06 |
| Chiefs of Sections: | | |
| Administrative | Kirby Nelson | 09/05 |
| Consular | Sara Michael | 07/06 |
| Political/Economic | Dereck Hogan | 08/05 |
| Public Affairs | James Land | 07/05 |
| Regional Security | Bernard Nixon | 09/04 |
| Other Agencies: | | |
| Department of Defense | Keith Detwiler | 07/05 |
| U.S. Agency for International Development | Chuck Howell | 09/05 |

ABBREVIATIONS

| | |
|-------|---|
| ACS | American citizens services |
| CLO | Community liaison office |
| DCM | Deputy chief of mission |
| EFM | Eligible family member |
| ELO | Entry-level officer |
| EVAF | Electronic visa application form |
| GSO | General services officer |
| HR | Human resources |
| HRO | Human resources officer |
| ICASS | International Cooperative Administrative Support Services |
| IMO | Information management officer |
| ISC | Information service center |
| IT | Information technology |
| LE | Locally employed |
| MPP | Mission Performance Plan |
| NIV | Nonimmigrant visa |
| OBO | Bureau of Overseas Buildings Operations |
| OIG | Office of Inspector General |
| PAO | Public affairs officer |
| PAS | Public affairs section |
| PASS | Post Administrative Software Suite |
| P/E | Political/economic |
| RSO | Regional security officer |
| USAID | U.S. Agency for International Development |

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