

~~SENSITIVE BUT UNCLASSIFIED~~

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

Report of Inspection

Limited-Scope Inspection of Embassy Cotonou, Benin

Report Number ISP-I-08-28, June 2008

~~IMPORTANT NOTICE~~

~~This report is intended solely for the official use of the Department of State or the Broadcasting Board of Governors, or any agency or organization receiving a copy directly from the Office of Inspector General. No secondary distribution may be made, in whole or in part, outside the Department of State or the Broadcasting Board of Governors, by them or by other agencies or organizations, without prior authorization by the Inspector General. Public availability of the document will be determined by the Inspector General under the U.S. Code, 5 U.S.C. 552. Improper disclosure of this report may result in criminal, civil, or administrative penalties.~~

~~SENSITIVE BUT UNCLASSIFIED~~

PURPOSE, SCOPE AND METHODOLOGY OF THE INSPECTION

This inspection was conducted in accordance with the Quality Standards for Inspections, as issued by the President's Council on Integrity and Efficiency, and the Inspector's Handbook, as issued by the Office of Inspector General for the U.S. Department of State (Department) and the Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG).

PURPOSE

The Office of Inspections provides the Secretary of State, the Chairman of the BBG, and Congress with systematic and independent evaluations of the operations of the Department and the BBG. Inspections cover three broad areas, consistent with Section 209 of the Foreign Service Act of 1980:

- * **Policy Implementation:** whether policy goals and objectives are being effectively achieved; whether U.S. interests are being accurately and effectively represented; and whether all elements of an office or mission are being adequately coordinated.
- * **Resource Management:** whether resources are being used and managed with maximum efficiency, effectiveness, and economy and whether financial transactions and accounts are properly conducted, maintained, and reported.
- * **Management Controls:** whether the administration of activities and operations meets the requirements of applicable laws and regulations; whether internal management controls have been instituted to ensure quality of performance and reduce the likelihood of mismanagement; whether instance of fraud, waste, or abuse exist: and whether adequate steps for detection, correction, and prevention have been taken.

METHODOLOGY

In conducting this inspection, the inspectors: reviewed pertinent records; as appropriate, circulated, reviewed, and compiled the results of survey instruments; conducted on-site interviews; and reviewed the substance of the report and its findings and recommendations with offices, individuals, organizations, and activities affected by this review.



United States Department of State
and the Broadcasting Board of Governors

Office of Inspector General

PREFACE

This report was prepared by the Office of Inspector General (OIG) pursuant to the Inspector General Act of 1978, as amended, Section 209 of the Foreign Service Act of 1980, the Arms Control and Disarmament Amendments Act of 1987, and the Department of State and Related Agencies Appropriations Act, FY 1996. It is one of a series of audit, inspection, investigative, and special reports prepared by OIG periodically as part of its oversight responsibility with respect to the Department of State and the Broadcasting Board of Governors to identify and prevent fraud, waste, abuse, and mismanagement.

This report is the result of an assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of the office, post, or function under review. It is based on interviews with employees and officials of relevant agencies and institutions, direct observation, and a review of applicable documents.

The recommendations therein have been developed on the basis of the best knowledge available to the OIG, and have been discussed in draft with those responsible for implementation. It is my hope that these recommendations will result in more effective, efficient, and/or economical operations.

I express my appreciation to all of those who contributed to the preparation of this report.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Bill Todd", written in a cursive style.

William E. Todd
Acting Inspector General

TABLE OF CONTENTS

KEY JUDGMENTS	1
CONTEXT	3
EXECUTIVE DIRECTION	5
Security	6
Morale	7
Equal Employment Opportunity and Civil Rights	8
POLICY AND PROGRAM IMPLEMENTATION	9
Assistance	9
Trade Promotion	10
Reporting and Analysis	11
Public Diplomacy	13
Consular Affairs	14
RESOURCE MANAGEMENT	19
Management Operations	19
New Embassy Compound	20
QUALITY OF LIFE	25
Community Liaison Office	25
Health Unit	26
FORMAL RECOMMENDATION	27
INFORMAL RECOMMENDATIONS	29
PRINCIPAL OFFICIALS	31
ABBREVIATIONS	33

KEY JUDGMENTS

- the Ambassador is energetically promoting key U.S. interests in Benin, and assertively trying to upgrade the tools of engagement necessary to promote U.S. interests.
- The Ambassador's overall coordination of mission resources is excellent. Command and control mechanisms are robust, perhaps even overly so.
- Given the comparatively limited U.S. engagement with Benin, apart from the various aid channels, the Ambassador and the deputy chief of mission (DCM) have appropriately made assistance the centerpiece of their attention.
- Embassy Cotonou is performing very well in promoting U.S. business, which sold approximately \$200 million in goods to Benin in 2007, double the previous year. This result is all the more impressive given the small size of Benin's economy.
- General services operations have overcome resistance to implementing rules and have, at the same time, upgraded workspaces and created attractive open areas for community activities.

..... This limited-scope inspection took place in Washington, DC, between January 7 and 25, 2008, and in Cotonou, Benin, between February 19 and 26, 2008.

..... It was part of a pilot project to determine whether a limited-scope inspection performed by a small team visiting small posts for a short time could adequately evaluate their performance in policy implementation and resource management. The inspection did not include a full review of security or information technology programs. This report sets forth the team's observations, informed impressions, findings, and recommendations.

CONTEXT



With 8.2 million people living in its 43,000 square miles, Benin is about the size and population of Virginia or Tennessee. Nestled between Nigeria and Togo, this francophone former French colony played a large and significant role in historical times as the seat of a great medieval kingdom called Dahomey – the official name of Benin until 1975.

During the French colonial era and after independence in 1960, Benin was known for its large intel-

lectual class and for having too many qualified white-collar workers who wanted to be politically active. The country experienced nine changes of government, including five coups d'état and five new constitutions during its first 12 years of independence. For three decades thereafter, a military leader, Kerekou, led Benin through a series of changes: 14 years of Marxist-Leninist government followed by a move toward a parliamentary capitalist system; and in 1991, he became the first West African president to step down after an election but resurfaced as president when he was elected in 1996. In 2006, Kerekou again ceded power, this time in accordance with constitutional term and age limits – a departure from the “president for life” tradition achieved in many developing countries through modifying constitutions.

With President Yayi elected in 2006, Benin is widely considered a model democracy in Africa. As such, it is a major recipient of U.S. assistance – besides traditional U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) projects and a robust Peace Corps program, the country has a \$307 million Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) grant. Outside assistance notwithstanding, Benin remains a poor country whose trade, dominated by exports and imports to and from China, centers on cotton – the source of 40 percent of the country’s foreign exchange earnings. While Benin’s economy has been expanding, high population growth has largely balanced these gains. In what hopefully presages a deepening U.S.-Beninese business relationship, Benin recently signed the country’s largest foreign investment project to date, a \$67 million power plant to be supplied by an American firm.

As a hotbed of political activism, Benin was, for decades, politically influential throughout West Africa, playing a somewhat larger role than its economy, size, or nonstrategic location would normally command. Today, Benin is also a model of democratic transformation, albeit a fragile one that requires bolstering by the United States and others. President Yayi merits applause for his progressive agenda, which prompted an invitation to the White House in 2006, and a reciprocal visit by President Bush in February 2008. However, intrinsic U.S. strategic and economic interests in Benin are, and will likely remain, modest.

EXECUTIVE DIRECTION

Operating from a run-down embassy complex in downtown Cotonou, the Ambassador is energetically promoting key U.S. interests in Benin and assertively trying to upgrade the tools of engagement necessary to promote U.S. interests. The Ambassador's leadership and management style is engaged and detail oriented. The Ambassador has direct contact with individual staff and officers at the embassy, and in Washington. The Ambassador also reviews all outgoing political, economic, and commercial messages.

The Ambassador's activism is by and large effective in Benin. It took direct pressure and intervention with Benin's president to end the quest to acquire land for a proposed new embassy compound. Appropriately, this effort was accelerated during preparations for the first ever visit to Benin by a U.S. president. Ambassadorial involvement in lesser matters may not always be necessary. Direct involvement in working-level political, commercial, and economic issues may be warranted at present, because no one else at the embassy has significant experience in these areas. Some Washington elements, however, would prefer a recalibration of ambassadorial involvement, reserving it for urgent, higher priority subjects.

The Ambassador, who is well-versed in strong assistance, political, and economic affairs, and the DCM, who has a management background, are a balanced team. Soon after assuming duties at Embassy Cotonou, the DCM ably stood in as charge d'affaires for a month. Both enjoy highly productive relations with the three other U.S. agencies present in Benin. These agency directors have ready access to the Ambassador. All credit the Ambassador for strong, knowledgeable involvement and support for their programs without being unduly intrusive. Appropriately, the Ambassador insists on outbriefings by temporary duty officers working on the major assistance programs that anchor the U.S.-Beninese relationship. On one occasion, the Ambassador effectively intervened at the highest levels in Washington to restore cuts for a USAID program. USAID in Washington particularly appreciates the Ambassador's active participation in their congressional budget justification process. Peace Corps volunteers view the Ambassador as effective on grass roots involvement with Benin's people.

The Ambassador's overall coordination of mission resources is excellent. Command and control mechanisms are robust, perhaps even overly so. In addition to a weekly country team meeting that includes all section and agency chiefs, the Amba-

sador has individual weekly sessions to share information. There are monthly cluster meetings devoted to specific themes including morale, health and environment, education, management, and political/economic issues. Further, there is a daily staff meeting for the front office and the political/economic section, which includes one officer and several locally employed staff. The Ambassador meets monthly with the first- and second-tour officers. Finally, there is a special, highly useful meeting each week with the Millennium Challenge Account's national coordinator, a Benin official who is a key link between the Ambassador, the MCC's resident director, and the president of Benin.

Embassy Cotonou has only one entry-level officer. A specialist, who came to the position with a full array of skills, requires little job-related mentoring, but could benefit from additional attention from the DCM to plan for the future.

Mission Strategic Plan

Embassy Cotonou's Mission Strategic Plan accurately reflects U.S. priorities and presents a credible template for how best to achieve key goals. These include strengthening a vibrant, yet still fragile democracy; improving economic growth, trade, and investment; reducing poverty; overcoming corruption; and improving the availability and quality of public services, above all in education and health. By design, mission goals mirror both real needs and the government of Benin's stated developmental goals thus maximizing the potential impact of the mission's efforts. Moreover, the plan is compatible with other major donor efforts on anticorruption and other programs. All agencies at post, as well as military cooperation and training programs administered by the Defense attachés at Embassy Accra, cooperate towards these goals. A mid-term embassy review confirmed that the goals remain appropriate and that there is measurable progress in meeting objectives. Feedback from the Department, other than from the Benin desk officer, has been limited. The country directorate regards the Mission Strategic Plan as both comprehensive and achievable.

SECURITY

Embassy Cotonou includes two separate compounds where chancery and administrative buildings are adjacent to nondiplomatic premises and residential streets. These physical limitations challenge mission management and a skilled regional security officer. Whatever these constraints, the Office of Inspector General (OIG)

team views executive direction for security as forceful. The Ambassador and DCM assiduously foster a culture of security at post, and attempt to assure that the mission does all it can to meet the Bureau of Diplomatic Security's standards. The heavily burdened security officer has ample latitude to run his programs. The Ambassador also intervened with Washington to accelerate approval for a set-back waiver that had delayed the Peace Corps' move into improved quarters.

MORALE

Overall embassy morale is reasonably good, especially among locally employed staff, who work under challenging circumstances, which include dilapidated embassy facilities, lengthy staffing gaps, and weak infrastructure that plunges Cotonou into darkness all too often. To address mission-wide concerns, the Ambassador has staged a series of town hall meetings and got directly involved in addressing residual employee unhappiness related to a section chief who has now departed Embassy Cotonou.

Locally employed staff, in particular, credit the Ambassador for listening and attending to their concerns. The OIG team commends the Ambassador for the decision to meet at least quarterly with local staff and for hosting a monthly lunch for 18 local employees. Local staff remain concerned about the significant grade differences in the miscellaneous benefits allowance. They were also surprised about changes in the insurance plan that were not discussed with them, especially the increase in their responsibility from 10 percent to 20 percent for health-related visits and prescriptions.

The OIG team arrived just as the embassy had successfully handled Benin's first ever visit by a U.S. president. Although this effort pulled together the mission as a team, it also occasioned stress and some imbalances. The lengthy all-hands preparation for the visit included a daily regimen of planning meetings that pulled officers, some whose relevance to the planning sessions was limited, away from other duties. The result was a somewhat out of kilter work-life balance. With embassy management aware of this concern and the presidential visit finished, the OIG team expects that mission management will recalibrate the workload to ensure that it is reasonable.

EQUAL EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITY AND CIVIL RIGHTS

Embassy Cotonou has named the Equal Employment Opportunity counselor, the Federal Women's Program coordinator, and a local staff liaison. The Federal Women's Program coordinator has not been trained and does not have materials to support the role. The OIG team left an informal recommendation regarding the need for training.

The local staff liaison is the senior person in the human resources office. Given the confidentiality required of both roles, and after discussion with the local staff, the OIG team informally recommended that Embassy Cotonou designate a local staff liaison who is not associated with human resources issues.

Required Equal Employment Opportunity information is properly posted on bulletin boards throughout the embassy compound and annexes.

POLICY AND PROGRAM IMPLEMENTATION

The Ambassador anchors Embassy Cotonou's policy and programmatic activities, by dint of sheer activism, access to President Yayi, and great attention to detail. The Ambassador has appropriately imparted a tough message to Benin regarding the prudent use of assistance. Given the comparatively limited U.S. engagement with Benin, apart from the various assistance channels, the Ambassador and DCM have appropriately made assistance the centerpiece of their attention. Following President Bush's stopover in February 2008, the mission could usefully engage in a dialogue with Washington regarding the best strategy to gain other objectives. Besides a memorandum of understanding regarding a potential new embassy complex and promotion of American business interests, Washington and the embassy could meet with senior Beninese officials to discuss corruption and possible narcotics connections among select high levels of the Benin government. In this regard, they could usefully allude to the possibility of follow-on MCC grants.

ASSISTANCE

The United States supports Benin via a broad range of programs including those managed by the MCC, USAID, the Peace Corps, and the U.S. Department of Defense. Assistance centers on the 5-year \$307 million Millennium Challenge grant, overseen by two contractors. Upgrading Cotonou's port is expected to use \$169 million from the account. To date, \$7 million has been expended from this account. While Benin's performance regarding corruption improved between 2006 and 2007, it remains below MCC's norms. Tellingly, the culture of corruption remains such that the MCC gets few if any bids for its contracts, because bidders, following local style, loathe to submit proposals without an envelope of money to ensure that their bids will win. Once the Millennium Challenge Account made clear there would be no insider deals, businessmen walked away from this unfamiliar environment.

USAID's Benin program runs with admirable smoothness in part because of its highly experienced director, backstopped by the Ambassador who has USAID work experience. Activity in the health sector increased in 2008 as Benin became a beneficiary country for the President's Malaria Initiative which represents about half of USAID's \$28.4 million budget for FY 2008. Because this malaria initiative is ground-

breaking, the embassy is periodically stressing the need for this money to be used in a transparent, accountable way, and for related Benin administrative decisions to be made expeditiously. Overall, official appreciation of U.S. assistance has been exceptional, and President Yayi has even established an annual U.S. appreciation day.

Military assistance, projected to be in the \$6.5 million range for 2008, is generous for a country at peace and in a peaceful neighborhood. However, \$3.8 million alone comes via the Africa Contingency Operations Training Assistance program, which trains Beninese soldiers for peacekeeping missions in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Cote d'Ivoire, and elsewhere. The International Military Education and Training account received \$143,000 and supported an international legal studies seminar for senior Beninese military and civilians, which concentrated on the legal aspects of combating terrorism.

Other assistance contributes to the sense that the United States cares about Benin at the grassroots level. The Peace Corps' annual \$2.4 million budget funds direct-hire staff and 92 volunteers engaged in health, small enterprise development, and educational programs. Low-budget Department endeavors such as the Ambassador's self-help and refugee fund programs, the Democracy and Human Rights Fund, and the Humanitarian Assistance Program have been skillfully deployed by Embassy Cotonou to focus Beninese government attention on neglected sectors of society.

TRADE PROMOTION

Notwithstanding warm bilateral relations, Benin offers only limited scope for U.S. business, whether via trade opportunities or direct investment: Benin is a great distance from the United States; its Gross Domestic Product is less than that of the smallest U.S. state; its export economy is centered on cotton production; and efforts by U.S. firms to locate significant oil have been unsuccessful. Also constraining agricultural investment is the absence of clear titles, which discourages industrial farming. A more general problem affecting the entire economy and U.S. business is excessive regulatory requirements.

Despite these limitations, Embassy Cotonou is performing very well in promoting U.S. business, which sold approximately \$200 million in goods to Benin in 2007, double the previous year. Effective advocacy by the Ambassador at the highest levels of the Benin government helped a U.S. firm land a \$67 million power plant construction project. Prominent among other U.S. exports are used cars from America, sales of which benefit from the falling value of the U.S. dollar.

At the working level, Embassy Cotonou's sole political/economic/commercial officer keeps abreast of commercial opportunities, responds to commercial inquiries within 24 hours, and has used the Business Facilitation Initiative Fund to conduct a Doing Business in America seminar. This officer would benefit from commercial training and more active support from the regional Foreign Commercial Service officer located at Embassy Dakar. He does, however, already collaborate with Embassy Dakar on the Gold Key Program, the International Buyer Program, and on international market research.

REPORTING AND ANALYSIS

The first-time political officer, supported by locally employed political and economic assistants as well as a local military cooperation specialist and a self-help coordinator, has done an admirable job fulfilling both burdensome mandatory reporting requirements, and drafting ample messages on Benin politics and economics. In addition, the officer collaborates with the MCC and USAID country directors on corruption issues. Further, the officer has facilitated a host of security cooperation issues with the regional security officer. This talented officer reinvigorated a section that hitherto saw little continuity: in 2007 there was a gap of eight months between officers; in previous years, political officers did one-year tours as part of rotational assignments.

The OIG team's review of reporting and analysis confirms Washington end-user praise for Embassy Cotonou's work. Reporting, done primarily by the political officer and Ambassador, is clear, concise, and well written. In particular, there has been good reporting on external influences such as those of China, France, and Nigeria. Washington readers believe they would benefit from a cable on succession scenarios. Also, as the anticorruption campaign is a centerpiece of the Benin president's agenda and a focus of U.S. government concern, additional messages on corruption are desirable.

The OIG team notes that while the centralized translation system has improved, Benin, like many francophone posts, still receives numerous demarches and diplomatic notes from the Department that require translation, preparation, delivery, and reporting. These routinely lack a Department-prepared translation. Department cables assigning demarches indicate that a French translation is available on the website when they are not. Typically, a day or two of follow-up is required to get the promised text.

The Burden of Required Reporting

Since the abolition of the special embassy program, small missions devote disproportionate time to all-embassy assignments, which pose much less of a burden for major U.S. embassies. Above all, small embassies like Embassy Cotonou stagger under the load of annual reports, including at least 11 mandated by Congress, on subjects ranging from human rights to religious freedom, trafficking in persons, and investment disputes, among others. Each is based on a separate statute with different reporting schedules and standards, some in conflict. Many of the mandated reports carry the possibility of sanctions. Thus, dialogue with host governments can be prickly and beyond the skill or experience of the relatively junior officers at small embassies who typically craft these reports.

Above all, the OIG team favors a simplification of the different deadlines, guidelines, and timelines for these many reports, especially for those not mandated by Congress. Ideally, small missions like Embassy Cotonou would prepare an omnibus report covering these required topics at one time, once a year. Embassy Cotonou could then draw upon individual sections needed for reports due later in the year, as none of these reports relies heavily on timely information, given the lengthy processing procedures in Washington.

At a minimum, the Department might amalgamate mandated reports into logical subgroups. For example, an omnibus economic report could address the investment disputes, intellectual property, and national trade estimate reports. A homeland security report could cluster the counterterrorism, money laundering, and narcotics reports. A human rights and democracy report could embrace the human rights, religious freedom, trafficking-in-persons, advancing freedom and democracy, and labor reports.

Further, the OIG team believes that the Department could discuss how to simplify certain, more complex reports such as the lengthy Country Operating Plan required by USAID and the Office of the Director of U.S. Foreign Assistance. In so doing, small embassies and those missions with little likelihood of receiving significant assistance would prepare an Internal Revenue Service 1040-A style “short form.”

Overall, the OIG team finds that the current mandated annual reports system invites duplication of effort and undercuts the effectiveness of individual reports. For one thing, the time spent researching and writing these reports is time not spent addressing the serious, global, underlying issues they reflect. The goal of these reports, after all, is not just to publicize the issues under scrutiny, it is to provide a platform for action.

PUBLIC DIPLOMACY

With a vibrant free press as well as an accountable democracy and a market economy, Benin offers a welcoming environment for Embassy Cotonou's public diplomacy activities. These are prominently featured in Embassy Cotonou's Mission Strategic Plan. In the absence of a public diplomacy officer, the DCM supervises the embassy's ten public diplomacy and Information Resource Center staff. These functions are housed in the American Cultural Center, a short distance from the chancery.

The John F. Kennedy-Martin Luther King, Jr. Information Resource Center has 5,000 volumes, half in English and half in French. It is the second largest library in Cotonou. Through a wide range of information programs, training sessions, and book distributions, the Information Resource Center serves the needs of target groups including university professors, English and American studies students, young leaders in the Muslim community, government officials, and business personalities.

The Information Resource Center conducts frequent outreach activities, including events commemorating Dr. Martin Luther King's birthday and Black History Month. The resource center also conducts workshops to heighten health awareness and to counter violence against women. The Information Resource Center's book and equipment donations support four American Corners that were established between 2002 and 2006. These corners are located at the University of Abomey-Calavi, the University of Parakou, the legislative capital of Porto-Novo, and Grand-Popo. Looking ahead, the Information Resource Center plans to offer academic advising services through the American Corners, as well. Other ongoing public affairs activities include the International Visitors Program, the Fulbright and Humphrey educational exchange programs, and periodic visiting speakers.

Embassy Cotonou's ongoing academic advising is highly effective. Services include day-long Internet-based examinations on behalf of the New Jersey-based Educational Testing Service. These examinations are designed to test the English language capabilities of prospective students intending to study at U.S. universities. The Information Resource Center currently has five Educational Testing Service-funded direct lines for conducting examinations. On examination days, the library is closed to other visitors. Testing is conducted an average of twice each month.

The existing demand suggests the number of dedicated lines could be doubled or the testing could be done on weekends to preclude the need to close the library to other visitors. This would increase the number of students who could be tested at one time and decrease the number of days when the library would be closed. There

is sufficient computer equipment and mission expertise to enlarge the testing capability. The Educational Testing Service, however, would need to fund the installation of additional dedicated testing lines.

Recommendation 1: Embassy Cotonou, in coordination with the Bureau of African Affairs, should request that the Educational Testing Service add five dedicated testing lines at the Information Resource Center. (Action: Embassy Cotonou, in coordination with AF)

The activist media affairs unit in the public affairs section relays Washington Daily Files in English and French to five television stations, 28 radio stations, and 20 newspapers throughout Benin. The section also successfully obtains prominent placement for its submissions. These daily reviews of local media and media reactions enjoy wide readership in the embassy and in Washington. The section also coordinates media releases for USAID, Peace Corps, and the MCC activities. Its skilled photographer records mission events.

Working with the consular section, the public diplomacy section implemented a media campaign that clarified misunderstandings about the diversity visa lottery. In addition, the media unit maintains Embassy Cotonou's website. During the inspection, only the English language entries were being updated.

Although Embassy Cotonou did not have a public affairs officer when President Bush visited Benin, the mission skillfully handled the manifold needs of the White House and U.S. media. The officer slated for temporary duty in Cotonou did not arrive because of Washington's failure to process paperwork.

CONSULAR AFFAIRS

Since August 2007, Embassy Cotonou's consular section was led by a mid-level officer who replaced a series of entry-level officers routinely rotated from the consular to political-economic sections. This position upgrade should enhance continuity and expertise, and ensure that good management practices are followed. However, because the officer was on family leave during the OIG team's visit, the inspection was conducted with the Bureau of Consular Affairs' temporary duty officer.

Two other embassy officers have backup consular commissions that enable them to handle emergencies; two locally employed staff members complete the section's staffing. The consular section's working and public areas do not meet line-of-sight supervision needs, a limitation not likely to change until a new embassy is constructed. In the meantime, video cameras that project onto a monitor in the consul's office provide limited oversight. The close proximity of the three consular windows, often in use simultaneously, frustrates the effective use of microphones.

Signage

There is a lack of signage at the chancery and consular entrances. Consequently, there is no public notice regarding consular services, open hours, telephone numbers, or instructions for accessing Embassy Cotonou's website. The OIG team notes that adequate informational and directional signage would reduce the need for local guards to provide this information and would be useful when the offices are closed. Several guards were terminated for charging fees for free information and places in line. Embassy Cotonou's consular website would benefit from information in French that mirrors the information available in English. This added information would promote transparency and reduce time spent responding to frequently asked questions.

In addition, the public approaches to the consular section were untidy, with piles of dirt and occasional rocks limiting safe pedestrian access. The OIG team left informal recommendations to correct deficiencies and hazards that detract from the mission's overall public image.

American Citizens Services

Embassy Cotonou's American citizens services workload is light. According to its Report of Potential Evacuees (F-77), being updated during the course of the OIG inspection, an estimated 350 unofficial Americans reside in or visit Benin at any one time. Most are missionaries and dual nationals. The section handled less than 40 passport and citizenship cases, one arrest, and no deaths in 2007. The section also assisted several Americans who had been lured to Benin by advance fee scam practitioners and left destitute. The mission contacted relatives or helped with other sources of financial assistance. American citizen registrations and warden lists were also being updated during the course of the OIG visit.

Visas

Nonimmigrant visa applications, while not a significant element of Embassy Cotonou's consular workload, rose from 1,500 in 2005 to nearly 2,500 in 2007. During the same period, the refusal rate increased from 28 percent to almost 40 percent. Most of the refusals were based on fraudulent claims and unsophisticated documentation purporting strong economic ties to Benin, particularly from third country nationals. Visa referrals were infrequent and handled according to Department regulations; the most recent mission visa referral policy was distributed in February 2007. The DCM reviews nonimmigrant visa issuances and refusals, and discusses trends and potential vulnerabilities with the consular officer.

During the inspection, the OIG team observed that 17 boxes of retired visa files destined for permanent storage in the United States had not been mailed. Despite the requirement to treat visa records confidentially, these were left in an unsecured hallway outside the mailroom. The OIG team left an informal recommendation that the files be appropriately packaged and dispatched.

Inefficient procedures require successful nonimmigrant visa applicants to visit the consular section on three separate days. The first visit is to request an appointment and to submit applications for data entry; the second is to take fingerprints, pay fees, and be interviewed; and the third is to pick up the visa. The OIG team left an informal recommendation that visa applicants schedule appointments using the Bureau of Consular Affairs' web-based appointment system. This process will reduce the need for the first visit and enhance the mission's public profile.

Immigrant and diversity visa processing is a small but growing component of the consular workload. These applications are often accompanied by false documentation and fraudulent relationship claims intended to establish eligibility. There were 289 applications in 2007, double the number in 2005, with a refusal rate of over 25 percent. Misleading information about the diversity visa lottery prevails among Beninese who seek better educational and economic opportunities abroad despite a largely stable political situation at home. As noted earlier, the consular section initiated cooperation with the public diplomacy section and used local media facilities to lessen misconceptions about diversity visa eligibility requirements.

Consular and mission management praised the regular telephone and e-mail support that the Frankfurt-based regional consular officer provides. The regional officer visited in December 2007 and left detailed practical suggestions for optimal operation of the section, including the need to observe required management controls.

These had been only partially implemented before the assigned consular officer departed on leave, but mission management indicated its intention to ensure that those suggestions will be fully implemented after his return.

RESOURCE MANAGEMENT

Agency	Direct-Hires and Eligible Family MembersLocally	Locally Employed Staff	Funding FY 2008
State – program and consular	9	11	\$366,200
State – ICASS	4	80	\$1,656,947
State – Diplomatic Security	2	2	*\$41,372
USAID	2	25	**
State-Public Diplomacy	Vacant	10	\$230,200
Peace Corps	2	2	**
MCC	2	2	**
Totals	21	132	not additive

* FY 2007 budget. Does not include local guard contract costs

** These budgets were not available

MANAGEMENT OPERATIONS

Despite a difficult physical environment, responses to the OIG's questionnaires were very favorable. Even the problems with intermittent power and occasional generator failures did not dampen enthusiasm for management operations. The administrative annexes have been greatly improved. The general services section has succeeded in removing obstacles, creating new work spaces, and providing lockers and tools, as appropriate. Green space has been created by moving antennas. A picnic area is now available, and there are plans for more changes that will allow community activities to flourish. Workshops are now appropriate and under roof to protect workers and equipment from torrential rain. A make-shift but professional auto repair pit has been constructed, and new motor cycles with new helmets and

tool boxes will replace old and unusable equipment. The section and its general services officer deserve special recognition. The financial section is also praiseworthy. Despite being under-graded compared to neighboring embassies' staff in the same positions, the budget and fiscal staff is hardworking and productive.

The management section is addressing position description anomalies that may lead to unintended consequences, including terminating good employees contrary to local labor law; having two people in one position; or not implementing a bona fide upgrade. The section has also recognized the need to reorganize to gain efficiencies and effectiveness. A decision to fill a community liaison office (CLO) position instead of employing an eligible family member as a general services project manager had negative effects on housing and maintenance. The embassy could have hired a local citizen to work in the community liaison office. This deficiency is being corrected and the current coordinator will become the project manager and a local citizen has been hired to perform some of the CLO coordinator duties. Regional support from neighboring embassies has been adequate. However, even with human resources support, position descriptions were not necessarily appropriate.

NEW EMBASSY COMPOUND

Embassy Cotonou is scheduled for the construction of a new embassy compound in 2012, as noted in the Department's Capital Security Construction Program (State 167739 and [Reftel State 136139], dated 17 December 2007). Given the availability of land, the mission is hopeful that its date will be moved up and plans to convince the Bureau of African Affairs and the Bureau of Overseas Buildings Operations that its place on the Top 80 list should be advanced. The criteria for placement on the Top 80 list include security, local market conditions, bureau priorities, and correlation of funding to project cost.

The climax to an extended search for an adequate property on which to locate a new embassy compound was reached on February 14, 2008, when the Ambassador and the Minister of Urbanism, Housing, Land Reform and the Fight Against Coastal Erosion signed a memorandum of understanding for relocation of the American Embassy in Cotonou. The memorandum stipulates the boundaries of the property and the total price of \$8 million. It indicates that concluding the transaction by December 31, 2008, is subject to success in obtaining all necessary documents and permits for building on the site. The memorandum also states that, "At any time prior to closing, or upon notice from the United States that it is prepared to close, the Government of Benin will initiate and complete the demolition and removal of any

improvements or debris from the site...In this regard, the United States may advance 5% of the purchase price.” Embassy staff understands that \$400,000, five percent of the agreed purchase price, is available through the Bureau of Overseas Buildings Operations, not Embassy Cotonou.

The embassy also wishes to purchase the lot where the American Cultural Center is located. It is contiguous with the lot discussed above. It is now under a short-term lease that expires in October 2008. The annual lease cost is about \$18,000.

Human Resource Management

Two capable local staff manage the human resources section. The senior local staff is fully trained in the computer-assisted job evaluation application and understands the functions of her position very well. Recruitment for a third staff member is underway. Assistance from Embassy Accra’s human resources officer is defined in a December 2007 memorandum of understanding. The memorandum specifically outlines the shared responsibilities and sets quarterly visits as the goal. On-call assistance is stipulated, and Embassy Cotonou’s management officer is expected to provide written input to Embassy Accra’s management officer regarding the service provided. This input will be used for the human resources officer’s performance evaluation.

The management section has undertaken a review of a number of position descriptions. Some combined disparate elements that affected productivity and effectiveness. For example, the management section secretary also does travel authorizations, makes travel arrangements, gets visas for other countries, performs all time and attendance reporting, and assists the work order clerk. The OIG team discussed the possibility that travelers could fill out their authorizations themselves. This could alleviate a large portion of the clerical duties related to travel and make redefining the position more appropriate.

The embassy can point with pride to a draft local employee handbook that replaces one that was ten years old. The handbook now includes sections that were not addressed in the old handbook. At the same time, in looking at the local compensation plan, the embassy and the OIG team could not find the logic in the vast differences between the miscellaneous benefits allowance for local staff in grades 1-5 (\$656), grades 6-9 (\$733) and grades 10-12 (\$3,393).

Financial Management

This section is more than ably managed by the financial management officer. The staff is fully trained and highly competent. The fact that the positions are graded somewhat lower than similar positions in neighboring embassies is a problem. Even more troubling is that they are graded lower than those at Embassy Libreville where the financial management officer provides oversight.

Given the Department's recruitment policy, appropriately redefining those positions may result in creating new positions. That outcome requires advertising even if the position is currently encumbered. Losing experienced staff would have negative consequences on the section and embassy operations.

General Services Operations

The sole general services officer has commendably and energetically managed a huge section that was previously less efficient. Impediments to cleaning up, and building workshops and proper workspace were overcome by dedication and purpose. Saved materials were put to use in other venues so that old roofing now covers areas formerly subject to torrential rain. Each of the general services officer's responsibilities has been addressed and improved. For example, an additional procurement clerk is expected to perform micro-purchasing, and the maintenance supervisor quickly attends to work order requests that can be completed in a short time using equipment and supplies already on hand. The addition of a project manager will be a major asset in getting work accomplished in a timely manner.

The warehouses are neat and clean. Excessive property is sold, as necessary. Offices in the chancery and the consular need to pay attention to boxes and other items that should either be thrown away or archived. The OIG team noted that a fix-up campaign with paint and waste disposal could be a useful community activity.

Motor Vehicle Operations

While the OIG team heard complaints about motor vehicle operations, they seem to be unfounded. In fact, the motor vehicle policy reflects Foreign Affairs Manual (14 FAM 418) requirements. Considering that the policy does not provide for shopping trips or restaurant visits for temporary duty staff, the embassy researched the possibilities of using local auto providers, and compiled a useful list of tariffs and locations. The OIG team observes that this is another forward-looking product of the general services office.

In 2007, USAID and the embassy consolidated several functions including motor vehicle operations. USAID, however, continues to use a vehicle exclusively, that belongs to the International Cooperative Administrative Support Services (ICASS) motor pool. The driver is also being used exclusively to support USAID and for pay period 03, worked 45.30 hours of overtime. This excessive overtime is inappropriate and does not meet safe driving requirements as defined by the Department of State Motor Vehicle Safety Management Program. The OIG team left an informal recommendation in regard to USAID's continuing exclusive use of a motor pool vehicle.

Housing and Facilities Management

The number of houses in the housing pool, all short-term lease properties, has increased to 20 from about 11 or 12 just a few years ago. A preventative maintenance program has been implemented and landlords are also responsible for repairs. Embassy Lome's facilities manager has regional responsibilities for Embassy Cotonou. The facilities manager's recent fire and safety visit was very successful. The facilities manager recognized that first aid kits and other safety items such as eye-wash stations were in short supply. The OIG team was assured that this equipment has been ordered.

Complaints about a few residential generators have been remedied. The \$368,000 elevator recently installed at the Ambassador's residence, however, has not been used as intended. Given erratic power and intermittent generator failures, there have been questions about the wisdom of installing this elevator in Cotonou and in a short-term leased property.

Concerns about inadequate electrical grounding have also been addressed. All housing has been checked for grounding problems and the problems have been fixed. The general services section has established a weekly preventative maintenance schedule of office and residential generators. This includes inspecting, cleaning, and testing the generators. Engine oil and filters are replaced after 300 hours of use. Water, coolant, and fuel are added as needed.

QUALITY OF LIFE

Although Benin's limited amenities, weak infrastructure, high crime rate, hot climate, and lack of U.S. accredited schooling offer significant challenges to the Foreign Service personnel and families assigned to Embassy Cotonou, the OIG team found morale to be surprisingly high. In the workplace, an inclusive mission management boosted morale and bridged gaps between American and local employees through an activist CLO coordinator. Embassy Cotonou's health unit also plays a hands-on, positive role in safeguarding the physical and emotional health of the official community. Although there is no longer an American employees' association, the embassy maintains a well equipped and nicely maintained fitness center at the administrative annex under joint CLO and health unit supervision. Although a contractor-operated snack bar offers food and drinks throughout the workday, a number of employees complained about the quality and prices of foods offered.

COMMUNITY LIAISON OFFICE

The CLO coordinator attends all country team meetings and meets regularly with mission management to discuss morale. To help address the limited local educational opportunities for the 12 children currently at post, Embassy Cotonou established a multipurpose room where dependent children can take accredited online supplementary education courses under the auspices of an adult proctor. The CLO coordinator has overseen this project and another that will provide English language and computer skills training to locally employed staff. In recent months, the CLO coordinator has significantly enhanced the contents of welcome packets for new arrivals and distributed over 600 copies to temporary duty personnel involved in the February 2008 U.S. presidential visit. The CLO coordinator has also begun recruiting sponsors for new staff arriving in summer 2008.

Working through an advisory committee that includes representatives of all mission agencies and local staff, the CLO coordinator has scheduled numerous American holiday events and outings to nearby scenic and cultural attractions. The OIG team commends the CLO coordinator and Embassy Cotonou's management for their attention and strong support for enhancing community morale and quality of life.

HEALTH UNIT

A full-time contract physician and locally employed U.S.-trained nurse staff Embassy Cotonou's health unit. The facility is located at the administrative annex, and the equipment is spotless. Medications and patient records are properly safeguarded and outdated items disposed of properly. The physician processes incoming and outgoing medical channel telegrams directly. The physician and the nurse have access to the Office of Medical Services patient database via a stand-alone computer terminal. The health unit tests residential and office water purifiers regularly, does monthly testing of the embassy's snack bar, and conducts periodic health awareness workshops for American and local employees, snack bar staff, and household domestic employees. Intending users of Embassy Cotonou's fitness center must first be certified by the health unit to receive unsupervised access.

Embassy Abuja's regional medical officer, based at Consulate General Lagos, makes semiannual visits, and Embassy Accra's regional psychiatrist makes annual visits. There were six medical evacuations to Europe or South Africa in 2007 for various ailments that could not be treated locally.

During its inspection, the OIG team noted that embassy staff was using an outdoor fireplace to burn old records. The device, without adequate screening, fails to prevent ash and cinders from drifting to nearby work areas, including the health unit. The OIG team left an informal recommendation that paper records be destroyed by different means or in a location further removed from the workplace.

FORMAL RECOMMENDATION

Recommendation 1: Embassy Cotonou, in coordination with the Bureau of African Affairs, should request that the Educational Testing Service add five dedicated testing lines at the Information Resource Center. (Action: Embassy Cotonou, in coordination with the AF)

INFORMAL RECOMMENDATIONS

Informal recommendations cover operational matters not requiring action by organizations outside the inspected unit and/or the parent regional bureau. Informal recommendations will 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.

The Federal Women's Program coordinator has not had relevant training.

Informal Recommendation 1: Embassy Cotonou should provide the Federal Women's Program coordinator with appropriate training.

The designated local staff Equal Employment Opportunity liaison is the senior human resources employee whose role puts in question confidentiality when supervisors and employees have problems.

Informal Recommendation 2: Embassy Cotonou should designate a local employee who is not in the human resources section to serve as the local staff liaison for Equal Employment Opportunity issues.

There is no directional or informational signage to advise the public of consular services, hours, telephone numbers, and the address of Embassy Cotonou's website.

Informal Recommendation 3: Embassy Cotonou should install appropriate signage at public entrances to the chancery and consular section.

There is only rudimentary information in English on Embassy Cotonou's website regarding frequently asked questions about visa application requirements and procedures.

Informal Recommendation 4: Embassy Cotonou should develop expanded consular information in French and include it on Embassy Cotonou's website.

The public approaches to the consular section are untidy with piles of dirt and rocks that form obstacles to safe pedestrian access.

Informal Recommendation 5: Embassy Cotonou should remove unsightly and unsafe obstacles from the pedestrian approaches to the consular section.

There were 17 boxes of retired visa files sitting in an unsecured area, contrary to the requirement that visa records be handled confidentially.

Informal Recommendation 6: Embassy Cotonou should package visa records appropriately and pouch them to the U.S. for appropriate retention.

Visa applicants are required to visit the consular section to schedule appointments, but using the Bureau of Consular Affairs' web-based appointment system would save time and eliminate some public inconvenience.

Informal Recommendation 7: Embassy Cotonou should implement the Bureau of Consular Affairs' web-based appointment system for visa applicants.

USAID continues to have exclusive use of a vehicle that belongs to the ICASS motor pool.

Informal Recommendation 8: Embassy Cotonou should discontinue allowing the U.S. Agency for International Development to use an International Cooperative Administrative Support Services vehicle for its exclusive use and put that vehicle in the motor pool for general use.

Despite having consolidated motor vehicle operations with Embassy Cotonou, USAID continues to use an ICASS vehicle driver, with excessive overtime, exclusively.

Informal Recommendation 9: Embassy Cotonou should eliminate excessive overtime hours for the motor vehicle driver now driving exclusively for the U.S. Agency for International Development.

An unshielded outdoor fireplace used to burn old records allows ashes and cinders to drift in the direction of nearby buildings, causing potential health and safety hazards.

Informal Recommendation 10: Embassy Cotonou should dispose of unclassified records, either by shredding or burning, and in a location removed from the workplace.

PRINCIPAL OFFICIALS

		Arrival date
Ambassador	Gayleatha B. Brown	September 2006
Deputy Chief of Mission	Martina Boustani	September 2007
Management Officer	Lyngrid Rawlings	September 2007
Political/Economic	Jason Hahn	November 2007
Consular Officer	Christopher Derrick	August 2007
Regional Security Officer	Keith Harris	July 2007
Other agencies:		
U.S. Agency for International Development	Rudolph Thomas	May 2004
Peace Corps	Sheryl Cowan	November 2006
Millennium Challenge Corporation	Lee Roussel	January 2008

ABBREVIATIONS

DCM	Deputy chief of mission
CLO	Community liaison office
ICASS	International Cooperative Administrative Support Services
MCC	Millennium Challenge Corporation
OIG	Office of Inspector General
USAID	U.S. Agency for International Development

FRAUD, WASTE, ABUSE OR MISMANAGEMENT
of Federal programs
and resources hurts everyone.

Call the Office of Inspector General
HOTLINE
202/647-3320
or 1-800-409-9926
or e-mail oighotline@state.gov
to report illegal or wasteful activities.

You may also write to
Office of Inspector General
U.S. Department of State
Post Office Box 9778
Arlington, VA 22219
Please visit our website at oig.state.gov

Cables to the Inspector General
should be slugged "OIG Channel"
to ensure confidentiality.