



United States Department of State
and the Broadcasting Board of Governors

Office of Inspector General

MEMORANDUM

TO: BBG Executive Director – Jeffrey Trimble

FROM: OIG – Harold W. Geisel, Deputy Inspector General 

SUBJECT: Memorandum Report, Broadcasting Board of Governors Operations in Seoul, South Korea

The Office of Inspector General (OIG) conducted a limited review of Voice of America (VOA) and Radio Free Asia (RFA) operations in Seoul, South Korea, and visited the news bureaus in Seoul in May 2011. The inspection team also conducted interviews with VOA and RFA Washington staff members prior to departure and reviewed materials these offices submitted to OIG.

The Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG) operates three news bureaus in Seoul: a VOA news bureau, a VOA Korean Service news bureau, and an RFA bureau.

Voice of America News Bureau

The VOA news bureau produces news items on Korea and Japan for the worldwide VOA service in English. The office is colocated with the VOA Korean Service in a media complex in downtown Seoul. The office is staffed by an American bureau chief and three part-time assistants. VOA news editors in Washington told the inspection team that they were very pleased with the bureau's work.

The bureau chief expressed satisfaction with Washington support but noted that he operated without petty cash. At the time of the inspection, he was forced to use his own funds to pay routine expenses and then wait for reimbursement. He told the inspection team that reimbursement typically took 1 month, so that at any given time he was out of pocket approximately \$1,000. While this situation is far from ideal, he said that he expected to receive a purchase card that would greatly reduce the need for him to advance personal funds for VOA needs.

When asked about the VOA News Web site, the bureau chief suggested that some improvements could be made, especially in the timing of updates. Broadcasting Board of Governors' Office of New Media is working with all of VOA to address similar problems.

The inspection team notes that the bureau chief maintains a Twitter account and has almost 18,000 followers.

Voice of America Korean News Bureau

The VOA Korean Service began broadcasting in 1942, and the current news bureau in Seoul opened in 2007. The bureau is managed by a Foreign Service national and has four stringers or correspondents, an office manager, and an intern. VOA Korean Service broadcasts 5 hours per day.

North Koreans are the target audience for VOA Korean Service, and North Korea attempts to jam the broadcasts. There is, however, substantial evidence that North Koreans receive the signal and listen to the service regularly. For example, a Western aid worker who had lived in North Korea wrote to the VOA Korea Service about its importance:

Now more than ever, the North Korean people desperately need VOA's help and encouragement. According to my friend who is still based in Pyongyang, you are not only the Voice of America but also the voice of the victims of the North Korean dictatorship. Every morning when I was in Pyongyang I listened to VOA news – and my North Korean counterparts were sitting beside me. You were their main source of information about the outside world!

The inspection team found no issues between VOA Korean Service staff in Washington and VOA Korean Service staff in Seoul: Washington is pleased with the bureau's work, and the bureau chief said Washington was "very supportive." The bureau chief has received her purchase card and is able to use it regularly. (She still has to pay one bill with cash, but that is an out-of-pocket expense of less than \$100 per month.)

Radio Free Asia Seoul Bureau

While VOA Korean Service provides news about the United States and the world to North Koreans, RFA Korea provides news about North Korea to North Koreans. The bureau's mission is sensitive and difficult; double-sourcing a story from North Korea presents challenges unknown to reporters with easy, safe access to sources. RFA Korean broadcasts 5 hours per day. Thirty minutes per day are dedicated to news; the rest consists of feature stories relevant to life in North Korea.

The bureau has a bureau chief and three full-time reporters (all Foreign Service nationals), three contractors, and ten stringers with strong ties to North Korea. One of the part-time employees is able to update the RFA Web site when major stories break, and she does so two or three times per week.

North Korea jams RFA frequencies, but there is evidence that RFA is listened to regularly by a significant portion of the North Korean population.

The bureau chief and the staff members expressed complete satisfaction with support from Washington.

In sum, the inspection team found three well-managed news bureaus in Seoul, producing materials that are highly valued by both news editors in Washington and target audiences in the Korean peninsula.

I would be happy to meet with you to discuss this matter further, or your staff may contact (b) (6) by email at (b) (6) or by telephone on (b) (6).