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Diplomatic outposts face security hurdle

Terrorism threats impede Rice plan

By Jeremy Kahn, Globe Correspondent | September 5, 2006

WASHINGTON -- Seven months after Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice announced plans to create more than a dozen new one-person diplomatic outposts in hot spots around the world as part of her efforts to transform US diplomacy, no new one-person posts have been created and none is budgeted for this year.

State Department officials and outside specialists say that the difficulty and cost of safeguarding a single foreign service officer in a large city has become a major stumbling block to opening more of these offices, known as "American presence posts."

"It's tricky because you have to look for places where the security issue allows you to [put people]," said a State Department official close to Rice who was made available to discuss this topic on the condition that his name not be published. "Protecting our people is a top priority."

The official said some security concerns had been anticipated but working out specific arrangements was proving more complicated than the State Department had envisioned.

The one-person posts are a key aspect of Rice's signature program to reshape the State Department for what she calls "transformational diplomacy."

As part of this program, which Rice announced in January, the State Department plans a major shift of diplomats from posts in Washington and Europe to more dangerous assignments in the Middle East and Asia.

Rice also wants diplomats to take a more active role in fostering democracy and economic development around the globe.

The State Department currently operates eight American presence posts, which were opened between 1999 and 2005. But only two of these are in the sort of hot spots that Rice increasingly wants the department to focus on. One is in Alexandria, Egypt. The second is in the Indonesian city of Medan.

Brenda Greenberg, a State Department public affairs officer, said the department hopes to create 17 additional one-person posts outside Europe. But she said there was no timetable and the sites have not been announced.

The official close to Rice refused to say whether the Department will ask Congress for money to fund any additional one-person posts in its fiscal year 2008 budget request, which will be made early next year.

In talking about "transformational diplomacy," Rice has emphasized the importance of eventually having an American presence in 200 cities in the world with populations of more than 1 million people where the United States currently has no diplomatic representation.

J. Anthony Holmes, president of the American Foreign Service Association, which represents foreign service officers, explained that positioning individual diplomats in many of the 200 cities entails increased risks.

“Getting security right is something that is of great concern,” Holmes said. While the foreign service is supportive of Rice’s new emphasis, he said, the department has to find ways to adequately protect individual diplomats in cities in countries such as China and Indonesia, without the security infrastructure that comes with an embassy or consulate.

Security problems are also hampering other aspects of Rice’s transformational diplomacy program, current and former State Department officials said.

Rice wants to expand efforts to stabilize foreign countries, such as Sudan and Afghanistan, that are embroiled in violent conflicts.

But Rice’s plan has been slowed because not enough diplomatic security officers can be found to protect the new stabilization teams, said State Department officials familiar with the situation.

One diplomat complained that the department’s own Bureau of Diplomatic Security, which is charged with protecting diplomats abroad, had been reluctant to work with the new post-conflict teams. Despite requests, the department did not make anyone from diplomatic security available to comment.

Filling jobs in hardship posts has also not been easy. The State Department earlier this month revamped the way foreign service officers bid for new assignments in order to better fill posts in dangerous places such as Iraq, Afghanistan, and the Middle East. A Government Accountability Office report released this month stated that the State Department has continued to have trouble filling all of its hardship posts, which now account for about two-thirds of its assignments worldwide.

Some officers are reluctant to take hardship posts because of the danger or because the assignments are unaccompanied, meaning they can’t take their families along. But strict security rules can also make working in hardship posts less fulfilling, according to foreign service officers.

American diplomats frequently are forced to conduct business under tighter security than those governing diplomats from other nations. To some degree, the guidelines reflect the fact that Americans have become particularly attractive targets for terrorists. But some officers complain that the restrictive security keeps them from interacting with the local population and doing exactly the sort of “transformational” work that Rice envisions.

“It’s not that we are unwilling to get out from behind our desks,” said one US diplomat. “It’s because people don’t want to be stuck doing nothing in those places because of security.”

Aware that security concerns may be hampering its efforts, the State Department has established “virtual presence posts” in some cities.

The posts allow diplomats based in an embassy or consulate to interact with local people through interactive technology, such as chat rooms and digital video conferencing. ■