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PEACE CORPS

Observations on Volunteer Safety and Security

Statement of Jess T. Ford
Director, International Affairs and Trade

June 22, 2004

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Observations on Volunteer Safety and Security

Highlights of GAO-04-903T, testimony before the Subcommittee on Western Hemisphere, Peace Corps, and Narcotics Affairs, Committee on Foreign Relations, U.S. Senate

Why GAO Did This Study

About 7,500 Peace Corps volunteers currently serve in 70 countries. The administration intends to increase this number to about 14,000. Volunteers often live in areas with limited access to reliable communications, police, or medical services. As Americans, they may be viewed as relatively wealthy and, hence, good targets for crime. In this testimony, GAO summarizes findings from its 2002 report *Peace Corps: Initiatives for Addressing Safety and Security Challenges Hold Promise, but Progress Should be Assessed*, GAO-02-818, on (1) trends in crime against volunteers and Peace Corps' system for generating information, (2) the agency's field implementation of its safety and security framework, and (3) the underlying factors contributing to the quality of these practices.

What GAO Recommends

In 2002, to ensure that Peace Corps initiatives to improve safety and security performance would have their intended effect, GAO recommended that the agency (1) develop indictors to assess the effectiveness of these initiatives and (2) develop a strategy to address staff turnover.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-04-903T.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Jess T. Ford at (202) 512-4268 or fordj@gao.gov.

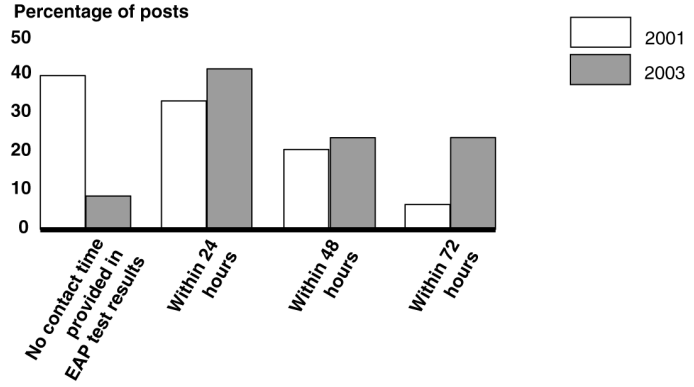
What GAO Found

The full extent of crime against Peace Corps volunteers is unclear due to significant under-reporting. However, Peace Corps' reported rates for most types of assaults have increased since the agency began collecting data in 1990. The agency's data analysis has produced useful insights, but additional analyses could help improve anti-crime strategies. Peace Corps has hired an analyst to enhance data collection and analysis to help the agency develop better-informed intervention and prevention strategies.

In 2002, we reported that Peace Corps had developed safety and security policies but that efforts to implement these policies in the field had produced varying results. Some posts complied, but others fell short. Volunteers were generally satisfied with training. However, some housing did not meet standards and, while all posts had prepared and tested emergency action plans, many plans had shortcomings. Evidence suggests that agency initiatives have not yet eliminated this unevenness. The inspector general continues to find shortcomings at some posts. However, recent emergency action plan tests show an improved ability to contact volunteers in a timely manner (see figure).

In 2002, we found that uneven supervision and oversight, staff turnover, and unclear guidance hindered efforts to ensure quality practices. The agency has taken action to address these problems. To strengthen supervision and oversight, it established an office of safety and security, supported by three senior staff at headquarters, nine field-based safety and security officers, and a compliance officer. In response to our recommendations, Peace Corps was granted authority to exempt 23 safety and security positions from the "5-year rule"—a statutory restriction on tenure. It also adopted a framework for monitoring post compliance and quantifiable performance indicators. However, the agency is still clarifying guidance, revising indicators, and establishing a performance baseline.

Post Reports of Volunteer Contact Time in EAP Tests in 2001 and 2003



Time it took the post to contact at least 90 percent of its volunteers

Source: GAO analysis of Peace Corps Data.

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee:

I am pleased to be here to discuss Peace Corps' efforts to ensure the safety and security of its volunteers. My testimony is based on our July 2002 report, information we obtained from the Peace Corps to update our analysis, and recent testimony before the House of Representatives.[1]

About 7,500 Peace Corps volunteers currently serve in 70 "posts" (country missions) around the world. The administration intends to increase this number to about 14,000 over the next few years, and Congress has increased appropriations for the Peace Corps to support this expansion. Volunteers often live in areas with limited access to reliable communications, police, or medical services. As Americans, they may be viewed as relatively wealthy and, hence, good targets for criminal activity. In many countries, female volunteers face special challenges; more than a third of female volunteers report experiencing sexual harassment on at least a monthly basis.[2]

My testimony today will summarize and update, where possible, key findings from our 2002 report related to (1) trends in crime against volunteers and the agency's system for generating such information, (2) the agency's field implementation of its safety and security framework, and (3) the underlying factors that contributed to Peace Corps' performance in the field. I will also discuss actions that Peace Corps has taken to improve the safety and security of its volunteers since we issued our report.

We conducted fieldwork at Peace Corps' headquarters and visited five countries with Peace Corps programs to prepare our report. To develop our analysis, we

[1]U.S. General Accounting Office, GAO-02-818, *Peace Corps: Initiatives for Addressing Safety and Security Challenges Hold Promise, but Progress Should be Assessed* (Washington, D.C.: July 25, 2002); and GAO-04-600T, *Peace Corps: Status of Initiatives to Improve Volunteer Safety and Security* (Washington, D.C.: Mar. 24, 2004). We reported separately on events surrounding one specific security incident—the disappearance of a volunteer in Bolivia in early 2001. See *The Peace Corps Failed to Properly Supervise Missing Volunteer and Lost Track of Him*, GAO-O1-970R (Washington, D.C.: July 20, 2001).

[2]Most recent available data, from *Peace Corps Volunteer Survey Global Report 2002*, Peace Corps (August 2003).

- analyzed Peace Corps' crime data;
- reviewed agencywide safety and security policies, guidelines, training materials, volunteer satisfaction surveys, and Inspector General reports;
- interviewed key staff and more than 150 volunteers; and
- examined practices for selecting volunteer sites, developing emergency action plans, and performing other tasks.

We conducted our work from July 2001 through May 2002 and from February 2004 through March 2004, in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards.

In summary, we found the following:

Peace Corps' reported incidence rates of crimes committed against volunteers have remained essentially unchanged since we last reported.[3] Reported rates for most types of assaults have increased since Peace Corps began collecting data in 1990, but reported rates have stabilized in recent years. For example, the reported incidence rate for major physical assaults nearly doubled from an average of about 9 per 1,000 volunteer years in 1991-1993 to an average of about 17 per 1,000 volunteer years[4] in 1998-2000. Data for 2001 and 2002 show that this rate has not changed. The full extent of crime against Peace Corps volunteers is unknown because there is significant underreporting of crime by volunteers. We reported that Peace Corps had initiated efforts to encourage reporting and collect additional data but that there were also other unrealized opportunities for additional examination of data. For example, our analysis showed that newer volunteers may be more likely to become victims of crime than their more experienced colleagues. In response to our findings, in April 2003, Peace Corps hired an analyst to enhance its capacity for gathering and analyzing crime data. The analyst has focused on upgrading the crime data system and shifting the responsibility for data collection and analysis from the medical office to the newly created safety and security office, to place the responsibility for crime data in an office dedicated to safety and

[3]The Peace Corps crime data system records and tracks data by criminal "event" rather than by volunteer; those charged with filing reports are instructed to count events involving more than one volunteer only once.

[4]One volunteer year is equivalent to 1 full year of service by a volunteer or trainee.

security. According to the analyst, additional crime analyses have not yet been conducted, as the focus has been on upgrading the process for collecting and reporting data.

We reported that Peace Corps' headquarters had developed a safety and security framework but that the field's implementation of the framework had produced varying results. While volunteers were generally satisfied with the agency's training programs, there was mixed performance in key elements of the framework such as in developing safe and secure housing sites, monitoring volunteers, and planning for emergencies. For example, at each of the five posts we visited, we found instances of volunteers who began their service in housing that had not been inspected and had not met Peace Corps' guidelines. We also found that the frequency of staff contact with volunteers and the quality and comprehensiveness of emergency action plans varied. Recent tests of the emergency action plans indicate that the agency has made improvements in the length of time needed to contact volunteers. To improve safety and security practices in the field, in 2002, the agency increased the number of field-based safety and security officers charged with reviewing post practices and assisting them in making improvements, and created a safety and security position at each post. Peace Corps hired a compliance officer charged with independently assessing each post's compliance with the framework. However, recent Inspector General reports indicate that safety and security shortcomings in the field are still occurring.

We reported that a number of factors, including staff turnover, informal supervision and oversight mechanisms, and unclear guidance hampered Peace Corps' efforts to ensure high-quality performance for the agency as a whole. For example, Peace Corps reported that high staff turnover, caused in part by the agency's statutorily imposed 5-year limit on employment for U.S. direct hire staff, had resulted in a lack of institutional memory, producing a situation in which agency staff are continually "reinventing the wheel." We made a recommendation that Peace Corps develop a strategy to address staff turnover, including an assessment of the "5-year rule"—a statutory restriction on the tenure of U.S. direct hire employees.[5] In response to our recommendation on staff turnover and the difficulties it created, Peace Corps was granted authority to exempt safety

[5]See U.S.C. 2506(a)(5), (6) and Public Law 108-7, the Consolidated Appropriations Act for Fiscal Year 2003, as well as Public Law 108-199, the Consolidated Appropriations Act for Fiscal Year 2004. This and other issues are addressed in H.R. 4060, passed June 1, 2004. The bill has not been passed by the Senate as of June 22, 2004.

and security staff from the 5-year rule. The agency has exempted 23 staff positions from the 5-year rule and plans to conduct a study to determine whether there are additional positions that should be exempted. To strengthen supervision and oversight, Peace Corps created an office of safety and security that centralizes safety and security functions under an associate directorship. The office is supported by a staff member in each of the three regional bureaus, a compliance officer, an analyst, and nine field-based security officers. We also recommended that Peace Corps develop performance indicators and report on its safety and security initiatives. The agency is still clarifying its guidance on how to apply its revised framework, revising its indicators of progress, and establishing a base line for judging performance in all areas of safety and security.

In conclusion, since we issued our report in July 2002, it is clear that the agency has taken a number of steps designed to improve the safety and security of its volunteers. However, Peace Corps is still in the process of implementing many of these actions and their full effect has yet to be demonstrated.

Background

Created in 1961, Peace Corps is mandated by statute to help meet developing countries' needs for trained manpower while promoting mutual understanding between Americans and other peoples. Volunteers commit to 2-year assignments in host communities, where they work on projects such as teaching English, strengthening farmer cooperatives, or building sanitation systems. By developing relationships with members of the communities in which they live and work, volunteers contribute to greater intercultural understanding between Americans and host country nationals. Volunteers are expected to maintain a standard of living similar to that of their host community colleagues and co-workers. They are provided with stipends that are based on local living costs and housing similar to their hosts. Volunteers are not supplied with vehicles. Although the Peace Corps accepts older volunteers and has made a conscious effort to recruit minorities, the current volunteer population has a median age of 25 years and is 85 percent white. More than 60 percent of the volunteers are women.

Volunteer health, safety, and security is Peace Corps' highest priority, according to the agency. To address this commitment, the agency has

adopted policies for monitoring and disseminating information on the security environments in which the agency operates, training volunteers, developing safe and secure volunteer housing and work sites, monitoring volunteers, and planning for emergencies such as evacuations. Headquarters is responsible for providing guidance, supervision, and oversight to ensure that agency policies are implemented effectively. Peace Corps relies heavily on country directors—the heads of agency posts in foreign capitals—to develop and implement practices that are appropriate for specific countries. Country directors, in turn, rely on program managers to develop and oversee volunteer programs. Volunteers are expected to follow agency policies and exercise some responsibility for their own safety and security. Peace Corps emphasizes community acceptance as the key to maintaining volunteer safety and security. The agency has found that volunteer safety is best ensured when volunteers are well integrated into their host communities and treated as extended family and contributors to development.

Reported Crime Incidents Have Increased, but Full Extent of Crime against Volunteers Remains Unknown

Reported incidence rates of crime against volunteers have remained essentially unchanged since we completed our report in 2002.[6] Reported incidence rates for most types of assaults have increased since Peace Corps began collecting data in 1990, but have stabilized in recent years. The reported incidence rate for major physical assaults has nearly doubled, averaging about 9 assaults per 1,000 volunteer years in 1991-1993 and averaging about 17 assaults in 1998-2000. Reported incidence rates for major assaults remained unchanged over the next 2 years. Reported incidence rates of major sexual assaults have decreased slightly, averaging about 10 per 1,000 female volunteer years in 1991-1993 and about 8 per 1,000 female volunteer years in 1998-2000. Reported incidence rates for major sexual assaults averaged about 9 per 1,000 female volunteer years in 2001-2002.

Peace Corps' system for gathering and analyzing data on crime against volunteers has produced useful insights, but we reported in 2002 that steps could be taken to enhance the system. Peace Corps officials agreed that reported increases are difficult to interpret; the data could reflect actual increases in assaults, better efforts to ensure that agency staff report all

[6]Crime data are available through 2002. Based on our assessment of crime data that we performed in preparing our 2002 report and subsequent discussions with agency officials, we concluded that the data we obtained to update the rates and trends in crime against volunteers were sufficiently reliable for the purposes of this statement.

assaults, and/or an increased willingness among volunteers to report incidents. The full extent of crime against volunteers, however, is unknown because of significant underreporting. Through its volunteer satisfaction surveys, Peace Corps is aware that a significant number of volunteers do not report incidents, thus reducing the agency's ability to state crime rates with certainty. For example, according to the agency's 1998 survey, volunteers did not report 60 percent of rapes and 20 percent of nonrape sexual assaults. Reasons cited for not reporting include embarrassment, fear of repercussions, confidentiality concerns, and a belief that Peace Corps could not help.

In 2002, we observed that opportunities for additional analyses existed that could help Peace Corps develop better-informed intervention and prevention strategies. For example, our analysis showed that about a third of reported assaults after 1993 occurred from the fourth to the eighth month of service—shortly after volunteers completed training, arrived at sites, and began their jobs. We observed that this finding could be explored further and used to develop additional training.

Efforts to Improve Data Collection and Analysis Are in Process

Since we issued our report, Peace Corps has taken steps to strengthen its efforts for gathering and analyzing crime data. The agency has hired an analyst responsible for maintaining the agency's crime data collection system, analyzing the information collected, and publishing the results for the purpose of influencing volunteer safety and security policies. Since joining the agency a year ago, the analyst has focused on redesigning the agency's incident reporting form to provide better information on victims, assailants, and incidents and preparing a new data management system that will ease access to and analysis of crime information. However, these new systems have not yet been put into operation. The analyst stated that the reporting protocol and data management system are to be introduced this summer, and responsibility for crime data collection and analysis will be transferred from the medical office to the safety and security office. According to the analyst, she has not yet performed any new data analyses because her focus to date has been on upgrading the system.

Safety and Security Framework Unevenly Implemented in the Field

We reported that Peace Corps' headquarters had developed a safety and security framework but that the field's implementation of this framework was uneven. The agency has taken steps to improve the field's compliance with the framework, but recent Inspector General reports indicate that this has not been uniformly achieved. We previously reported that volunteers were generally satisfied with the agency's training programs. However, some volunteers had housing that did not meet the agency's standards, there was great variation in the frequency of staff contact with volunteers, and posts had emergency action plans with shortcomings. To increase the field's compliance with the framework, in 2002, the agency hired a compliance officer at headquarters, increased the number of field-based safety and security officer positions, and created a safety and security position at each post. However, recent Inspector General reports continued to find significant shortcomings at some posts, including difficulties in developing safe and secure sites and preparing adequate emergency action plans.

Volunteers Are Generally Satisfied with Training

In 2002, we found that volunteers were generally satisfied with the safety training that the agency provided, but we found a number of instances of uneven performance in developing safe and secure housing. Posts have considerable latitude in the design of their safety training programs, but all provide volunteers with 3 months of preservice training that includes information on safety and security. Posts also provide periodic in-service training sessions that cover technical issues. Many of the volunteers we interviewed said that the safety training they received before they began service was useful and cited testimonials by current volunteers as one of the more valuable instructional methods. In both the 1998 and 1999 volunteer satisfaction surveys, over 90 percent of volunteers rated safety and security training as adequate or better; only about 5 percent said that the training was not effective. Some regional safety and security officer reports have found that improvements were needed in post training practices. The Inspector General has reported that volunteers at some posts said cross-cultural training and presentations by the U.S. embassy's security officer did not prepare them adequately for safety-related challenges they faced during service. Some volunteers stated that Peace Corps did not fully prepare them for the racial and sexual harassment they experienced during their service. Some female volunteers at posts we visited stated that they would like to receive self-protection training.

Mixed Performance in Housing, Monitoring Volunteers, and Emergency Action Plans

Peace Corps' policies call for posts to ensure that housing is inspected and meets post safety and security criteria before the volunteers arrive to take up residence. Nonetheless, at each of the five posts we visited, we found instances of volunteers who began their service in housing that had not been inspected and had various shortcomings. For example, one volunteer spent her first 3 weeks at her site living in her counterpart's office. She later found her own house; however, post staff had not inspected this house, even though she had lived in it for several months. Poorly defined work assignments and unsupportive counterparts may also increase volunteers' risk by limiting their ability to build a support network in their host communities. At the posts we visited, we met volunteers whose counterparts had no plans for the volunteers when they arrived at their sites, and only after several months and much frustration did the volunteers find productive activities.

We found variations in the frequency of staff contact with volunteers, although many of the volunteers at the posts we visited said they were satisfied with the frequency of staff visits to their sites, and a 1998 volunteer satisfaction survey reported that about two-thirds of volunteers said the frequency of visits was adequate or better. However, volunteers had mixed views about Peace Corps' responsiveness to safety and security concerns and criminal incidents. The few volunteers we spoke with who said they were victims of assault expressed satisfaction with staff response when they reported the incidents. However, at four of the five posts we visited, some volunteers described instances in which staff were unsupportive when the volunteers reported safety concerns. For example, one volunteer said she informed Peace Corps several times that she needed a new housing arrangement because her doorman repeatedly locked her in or out of her dormitory. The volunteer said staff were unresponsive, and she had to find new housing without the Peace Corps' assistance.

In 2002, we reported that, while all posts had tested their emergency action plan, many of the plans had shortcomings, and tests of the plans varied in quality and comprehensiveness. Posts must be well prepared in case an evacuation becomes necessary. In fact, evacuating volunteers from posts is not an uncommon event. In the last two years Peace Corps has conducted six country evacuations involving nearly 600 volunteers. We also reported that many posts did not include all expected elements of a plan, such as maps demarcating volunteer assembly points and alternate transportation plans. In fact, none of the plans contained all of the dimensions listed in the agency's Emergency Action Plan checklist, and

many lacked key information. In addition, we found that in 2002 Peace Corps had not defined the criteria for a successful test of a post plan.

Actions Taken to Improve Field Compliance, but Implementation Still Uneven

Peace Corps has initiated a number of efforts to improve the field's implementation of its safety and security framework, but Inspector General reports continued to find significant shortcomings at some posts. However, there has been improvement in post communications with volunteers during emergency action plan tests. We reviewed 10 Inspector General reports conducted during 2002 and 2003. Some of these reports were generally positive—one congratulated a post for operating an "excellent" program and maintaining high volunteer morale. However, a variety of weaknesses were also identified. For example, the Inspector General found multiple safety and security weaknesses at one post, including incoherent project plans and a failure to regularly monitor volunteer housing. The Inspector General also reported that several posts employed inadequate site development procedures; some volunteers did not have meaningful work assignments, and their counterparts were not prepared for their arrival at site. In response to a recommendation from a prior Inspector General report, one post had prepared a plan to provide staff with rape response training and identify a local lawyer to advise the post of legal procedures in case a volunteer was raped. However, the post had not implemented these plans and was unprepared when a rape actually occurred.

Our review of recent Inspector General reports identified emergency action planning weaknesses at some posts. For example, the Inspector General found that at one post over half of first year volunteers did not know the location of their emergency assembly points. However, we analyzed the results of the most recent tests of post emergency action plans and found improvement since our last report. About 40 percent of posts reported contacting almost all volunteers within 24 hours, compared with 33 percent in 2001. Also, our analysis showed improvement in the quality of information forwarded to headquarters. Less than 10 percent of the emergency action plans did not contain information on the time it took to contact volunteers, compared with 40 percent in 2001.

Underlying Factors Contributed to Uneven Field Implementation, but Agency Has Taken Steps to Improve Performance

In our 2002 report, we identified a number of factors that hampered Peace Corps efforts to ensure that this framework produced high-quality performance for the agency as a whole. These included high staff turnover, uneven application of supervision and oversight mechanisms, and unclear guidance. We also noted that Peace Corps had identified a number of initiatives that could, if effectively implemented, help to address these factors. The agency has made some progress but has not completed implementation of these initiatives.

High staff turnover hindered high quality performance for the agency. According to a June 2001 Peace Corps workforce analysis, turnover among U.S. direct hires was extremely high, ranging from 25 percent to 37 percent in recent years. This report found that the average tenure of these employees was 2 years, that the agency spent an inordinate amount of time selecting and orienting new employees, and that frequent turnover produced a situation in which agency staff are continually "reinventing the wheel." Much of the problem was attributed to the 5-year employment rule, which statutorily restricts the tenure of U.S. direct hires, including regional directors, country desk officers, country directors and assistant country directors, and Inspector General and safety and security staff. Several Peace Corps officials stated that turnover affected the agency's ability to maintain continuity in oversight of post operations.

In 2002, we also found that informal supervisory mechanisms and a limited number of staff hampered Peace Corps efforts to ensure even application of supervision and oversight. The agency had some formal mechanisms for documenting and assessing post practices, including the annual evaluation and testing of post emergency action plans and regional safety and security officer reports on post practices. Nonetheless, regional directors and country directors relied primarily on informal supervisory mechanisms, such as staff meetings, conversations with volunteers, and e-mail to ensure that staff were doing an adequate job of implementing the safety and security framework. One country director observed that it was difficult to oversee program managers' site development or monitoring activities because the post did not have a formal system for performing these tasks. We also reported that Peace Corps' capacity to monitor and provide feedback to posts on their safety and security performance was limited by the small number of staff available to perform relevant tasks. We noted that the agency had hired three field-based safety and security specialists to examine and help improve post practices, and that the Inspector General also played an important role in helping posts implement the agency's safety and security framework. However, we reported that between October 2000 and May 2002 the safety and security

specialists had been able to provide input to only about one-third of Peace Corps' posts while the Inspector General had issued findings on safety and security practices at only 12 posts over 2 years. In addition, we noted that Peace Corps had no system for tracking post compliance with Inspector General recommendations.

We reported that the agency's guidance was not always clear. The agency's safety and security framework outlines requirements that posts are expected to comply with but did not often specify required activities, documentation, or criteria for judging actual practices—making it difficult for staff to understand what was expected of them. Many posts had not developed clear reporting and response procedures for incidents, such as responding to sexual harassment. The agency's coordinator for volunteer safety and security stated that unclear procedures made it difficult for senior staff, including regional directors, to establish a basis for judging the quality of post practices. The coordinator also observed that, at some posts, field-based safety and security officers had found that staff members did not understand what had to be done to ensure compliance with agency policies.

Peace Corps Taking Steps to Address These Factors

The agency has taken steps to reduce staff turnover, improve supervision and oversight mechanisms, and clarify its guidance. In February 2003, Congress passed a law to allow U.S. direct hires whose assignments involve the safety of Peace Corps volunteers to serve for more than 5 years. The Peace Corps Director has employed his authority under this law to designate 23 positions as exempt from the 5-year rule. These positions include nine field-based safety and security officers, the three regional safety and security desk officers working at agency headquarters, as well as the crime data analyst and other staff in the headquarters office of safety and security. They do not include the associate director for safety and security, the compliance officer, or staff from the office of the Inspector General. Peace Corps officials stated that they are about to hire a consultant who will conduct a study to provide recommendations about adding additional positions to the current list.

To strengthen supervision and oversight, Peace Corps has increased the number of staff tasked with safety and security responsibilities and created the office of safety and security that centralizes all security-related activities under the direction of a newly created associate directorate for safety and security. The agency's new crime data analyst is a part of this directorate. In addition, Peace Corps has

- appointed six additional field-based safety and security officers, bringing the number of such individuals on duty to nine (with three more positions to be added by the end of 2004);

- authorized each post to appoint a safety and security coordinator to provide a point of contact for the field-based safety and security officers and to assist country directors in ensuring their post's compliance with agency policies, including policies pertaining to monitoring volunteers and responding to their safety and security concerns (all but one post have filled this position);

- appointed safety and security desk officers in each of Peace Corps' three regional directorates in Washington, D.C., to monitor post compliance in conjunction with each region's country desk officers; and

- appointed a compliance officer, reporting to the Peace Corps Director, to independently examine post practices and to follow up on Inspector General recommendations on safety and security.

In response to our recommendation that the Peace Corps Director develop indicators to assess the effectiveness of the new initiatives and include these in the agency's annual Government Performance and Results Act reports, Peace Corps has expanded its reports to include 10 quantifiable indicators of safety and security performance.

To clarify agency guidance, Peace Corps has

- created a "compliance tool" or checklist that provides a fairly detailed and explicit framework for headquarters staff to employ in monitoring post efforts to put Peace Corps' safety and security guidance into practice in their countries,

- strengthened guidance on volunteer site selection and development,

- developed standard operating procedures for post emergency action plans, and

- concluded a protocol clarifying that the Inspector General's staff has responsibility for coordinating the agency's response to crimes against volunteers.

These efforts have enhanced Peace Corps' ability to improve safety and security practices in the field. The threefold expansion in the field-based safety and security officer staff has increased the agency's capacity to

support posts in developing and applying effective safety and security policies. Regional safety and security officers at headquarters and the agency's compliance officer monitor the quality of post practices. All posts were required to certify that they were in compliance with agency expectations by the end of June 2003. Since that time, a quarterly reporting system has gone into effect wherein posts communicate with regional headquarters regarding the status of their safety and security systems and practices.

The country desks and the regional safety and security officers, along with the compliance officer, have been reviewing the emergency action plans of the posts and providing them with feedback and suggestions for improvement. The compliance officer has created and is applying a matrix to track post performance in addressing issues deriving from a variety of sources, including application of the agency's safety and security compliance tool and Inspector General reports. The compliance officer and staff from one regional office described their efforts, along with field-based safety and security staff and program experts from headquarters, to ensure an adequate response from one post where the Inspector General had found multiple safety and security weaknesses.

However, efforts to put the new system in place are incomplete. As already noted, the agency has developed, but not yet introduced, an improved system for collecting and analyzing crime data. The new associate director of safety and security observes that the agency's field-based safety and security officers come from diverse backgrounds and that some have been in their positions for only a few months. All have received training via the State Department's bureau of diplomatic security. However, they are still employing different approaches to their work. Peace Corps is preparing guidance for these officers that would provide them with a uniform approach to conducting their work and reporting the results of their analyses, but the guidance is still in draft form. The Compliance Officer has completed detailed guidance for crafting emergency action plans, but this guidance was distributed to the field only at the beginning of this month. Moreover, following up on our 2002 recommendation, the agency's Deputy Director is heading up an initiative to revise and strengthen the indicators that the agency uses to judge the quality of all aspects of its operations, including ensuring volunteer safety and security, under the Government Performance and Results Act.

Mr. Chairman, this concludes my prepared statement. I would be happy to respond to any questions you or other Members of the Committee may have at this time.

Contact and Staff Acknowledgments

For further information regarding this statement, please contact Phyllis Anderson, Assistant Director, International Affairs and Trade, at (202) 512-7364 or andersonp@gao.gov. Individuals making key contributions to this statement were Michael McAtee, Suzanne Dove, Christina Werth, Richard Riskie, Bruce Kutnick, Lynn Cothern, and Martin de Alteriis.

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