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PEACE CORPS

Meeting the Challenges of the 1990s

Statement of
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Subcommittee on Legislation and National Security

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PEACE CORPS: MEETING THE CHALLENGES OF THE 1990s
SUMMARY OF STATEMENT BY
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As the Peace Corps approaches its fourth decade, it faces many challenges adapting to the evolving needs of the countries of the developing world. Today's Peace Corps has over 6,300 volunteers in 66 countries and faces a bright future, with the potential for adding as many as 9 to 10 countries and hundreds of volunteers each year over the next 5 years. The report released today presents our assessment of the agency's current operations and discusses opportunities for better positioning itself to meet the challenges of the 1990s.

Attainment of a statutory 10,000 volunteer goal may be a difficult objective for the Peace Corps to achieve by the agency's current 1995 target date. To do so, the Peace Corps budget will have to grow more rapidly than it has in recent years. Also, developing countries are increasingly requesting volunteers with special skills and qualifications. The Peace Corps will need to improve its efforts to meet these needs by strengthening its recruitment efforts and development of assignments for volunteers and, at the same time, strengthening attainment of its intercultural goals.

The Peace Corps can improve attainment of its first goal of providing trained manpower to developing countries by strengthening its recruitment strategies to attract volunteers with scarce skills. The agency met nearly 100 percent of its requests for generalists in fiscal years 1986 to 1988. However, it filled only about 84 percent of the requests for scarce skill volunteers, and 24 percent of these requests were filled with "almost match" volunteers who did not fully meet the Peace Corps' own criteria for these positions. The agency did not fully implement mechanisms, such as its University Collaboration program or its Associate Volunteer program, to attract volunteers with skills that are in short supply. Instead, the Peace Corps loosened its process for matching volunteers to assignments. The agency also needs to strengthen procedures in its recruitment offices for locating scarce skill volunteers. Peace Corps recruiters have had difficulty recruiting scarce skill volunteers largely because their recruitment approach has focused on generalists, rather than the specialists in demand by beneficiary countries. However, even as it recruits more scarce skill volunteers, we believe the Corps also needs to be watchful to maintain a balanced generalist/specialist force to continue its grass-roots level programs.

The Peace Corps must also strengthen the manner in which it develops assignments for volunteers. We found that the Peace Corps has been unable to consistently develop adequate assignments for volunteers, largely because the Peace Corps has only recently installed an agency-wide policy for planning, monitoring, and evaluating programs. Although we observed worthwhile assignments

in the seven overseas Peace Corps posts we visited, we met with many volunteers who were in assignments that had no specific tasks, objectives, or responsibilities. Volunteers sometimes spent 6- to 12-months of their two year tour developing their own assignments. We also met volunteers who lacked adequate language skills to conduct their assignments or did not have local counterparts to carry on once they left. We also found volunteers who were "slot filling;" that is, taking positions that could be held by local nationals. Others were assisting wealthy people, rather than the poor who are suppose to be the beneficiaries of Peace Corps efforts.

The Peace Corps has been generally successful in achieving its second goal of promoting a better understanding of the American people among the peoples served, by working directly on a people-to-people basis in the small towns, villages, and rural areas of the countries served. However, the Peace Corps can improve achievement of this goal by strengthening programs aimed at attracting minorities to become Peace Corps volunteers. The Peace Corps needs to redouble its efforts in this area not only to give all Americans an equal opportunity to serve, but also to demonstrate to the people of beneficiary countries the diversity of the American culture. As of January 1989, only 7 percent of Peace Corps volunteers were from minority backgrounds. Peace Corps officials recently informed us that they met their 10 percent minority recruiting goal for their spring and summer 1990 programs, but we have not evaluated these statistics.

The Peace Corps can improve achievement of its third goal of promoting a better understanding of other peoples on the part of the American people by implementing programs to enhance the efforts of returned Peace Corps volunteers to teach the American people about the cultures of beneficiary countries. The Peace Corps operates a number of programs which seek to give returned Peace Corps volunteers the opportunity to teach Americans about foreign cultures. Its new World Wise School Program appears to be an excellent opportunity to involve a number of active volunteers schools. However, the Peace Corps has not devoted a consistent effort or much resources to its third statutory goal.

Our report makes several recommendations aimed at assisting the Peace Corps strengthen its program development and recruiting for both scarce skill and minority volunteers. Peace Corps officials informed us that they are making progress in these areas, and they cited a variety of actions they are taking to effect further improvements.

Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee:

It is a pleasure to be here today to discuss our work regarding the programs and activities of the Peace Corps.

As the Peace Corps approaches its fourth decade, it faces many challenges adapting to the evolving needs of the countries of the developing world. The report released today presents our assessment of the agency's current operations and makes recommendations to strengthen its ability to attain its statutory goals and, thus, better position itself to meet the challenges of the 1990s.

BACKGROUND

The Peace Corps is devoted to development and intercultural understanding between the American people and those of other countries. In accordance with its enabling legislation, the Peace Corps seeks to promote world peace and friendship through the attainment of three goals:

- to help the peoples of beneficiary countries meet their needs for trained manpower, particularly the basic needs of those living in the poorest areas of such countries,
- to help promote a better understanding of the American people on the part of the peoples served, and

-- to promote a better understanding of other peoples on the part of the American people.

During its early years, the Peace Corps focused largely on increasing the number of volunteers and on the intercultural aspects of its volunteer service. During this period, the agency experienced tremendous budgetary and volunteer growth. For instance, the agency's budget grew from \$30 million in fiscal year 1962 to a high of \$114 million in fiscal year 1966, with the number of volunteers expanding from 2,816 to 15,556 during that period. This growth was followed by a period of retrenchment during the 1970s, when the agency experienced a substantial decline in budget and number of volunteers.

During the 1980s, Peace Corps headquarters began to take a more active role in developing multi-country programs, such as the Africa Food System Initiative and the Small Business Assistance Program. The Corps' budget grew modestly during the period, although in constant dollars it remained well below mid - to late - 1960s levels. The Corps' volunteer numbers also grew somewhat, in response to a 1985 congressionally mandated 10,000 volunteer goal. But, the Corps has been unable to achieve this goal. The numbers of volunteer applications fell significantly during the 1980s, but Peace Corps officials do not believe this has hampered

recruiting. As the decade closed, the Agency had about 6,300 volunteers in 66 countries throughout the world.

THE 10,000 VOLUNTEER OBJECTIVE

The Peace Corps will have difficulty achieving its 10,000 volunteer objective by the current 1995 target date. To achieve this objective, the agency's budget will have to grow more rapidly than it has grown over the past few years, and also more rapidly than the Peace Corps itself believes likely. Although the Peace Corps has targeted 1995 as the year it hopes to have 10,000 volunteers, its fiscal year 1991 funding request is based on projections that do not contemplate achieving the goal until 1997. At this point, it is difficult to determine what it will cost for the Peace Corps to grow to 10,000 volunteers. The cost will depend upon inflation, the foreign exchange rates of the dollar, and whether the Peace Corps increases the number of volunteers at existing posts or opens new posts.

Also, developing countries have begun to request more volunteers with special skills and qualifications; requests the Peace Corps has had difficulty filling. At the same time, not all Peace Corps volunteers have been placed in well-planned meaningful assignments. The Peace Corps should improve its abilities to meet current needs in both recruitment and volunteer assignments, providing the necessary framework for significant expansion, before dramatically

increasing the size of its volunteer force. In addition, while attempting to meet increasing requests for skilled volunteers, the Peace Corps needs to maintain a balanced specialist and generalist volunteer force to continue its grass-roots level involvement.

RECRUITMENT AND ASSIGNMENTS

The Peace Corps can improve its efforts to provide trained manpower to beneficiary countries by strengthening its recruitment strategies and programs designed to attract volunteers with scarce skills, and by strengthening the process by which it develops assignments for volunteers. At the same time, the Peace Corps needs to strengthen its efforts to attain its intercultural goals.

Recruitment

The agency did not fully implement earlier initiatives such as its University Collaboration program or its Associate Volunteer program, to attract more highly skilled volunteers. Instead, it continued to rely heavily on recruitment methods that have attracted generalists; that is, volunteers with liberal arts degrees but no specialized skills, such as woodworking.

To compensate for its inability to fully meet countries needs for specialized skills, the Peace Corps has loosened its process for matching volunteers to assignments. It has been encouraging its

overseas staff to negotiate with host-governments to develop easier-to-fill requests. While the agency met nearly 100 percent of the requests for generalists during fiscal years 1986 to 1988, it filled only about 84 percent of the requests it received for individuals with scarce skills. Twenty-four percent of these requests were filled with "almost match" volunteers, who did not fully meet the Peace Corps' own criteria for the scarce skill positions.

Peace Corps recruiters often encountered difficulty attracting volunteers with scarce skills because their approach focused on generalists. Also, advertising was not directed towards recruiting scarce skill volunteers. And, Peace Corps recruiters were not offered incentives or rewards for recruiting scarce skill volunteers.

The Peace Corps has also relied increasingly on older applicants to meet needed volunteer numbers and skill levels. As a result, the percentage of volunteers and trainees under 26 years of age has decreased substantially--from a high of about 88 percent in fiscal year 1969 to about 52 percent in fiscal year 1988. Volunteers in the 26 to 50 age group, who often possess the professional skills sought by the Peace Corps, rose to nearly 39 percent of all volunteers by fiscal year 1988. Older volunteers (those over 50 years old) rose to 8.8 percent of the force by that time.

Our report makes several recommendations aimed at encouraging the Peace Corps to place greater emphasis on targeted recruitment programs to attract scarce skill volunteers, and providing recruiters with incentives for meeting or exceeding their targeted scarce skill recruitment goals.

In April 1990, Peace Corps officials told us they had begun to instruct recruitment offices to focus their energies on recruiting scarce skill and minority applicants. They stated that the flow of generalists could be easily maintained. They also told us that tracking and monitoring production resulting from recruitment and advertising has become a major focus at both headquarters and the area offices. Headquarters has also increased its emphasis on the use of incentives in recruiting increased numbers of scarce skill and minority applicants. Because these actions were taken after the completion of our review, we have not evaluated their effectiveness.

Volunteer Assignments

Until recently, the Peace Corps had no centrally managed policy for evaluating and monitoring assignments. Instead, the Corps relied upon various mechanisms for evaluating programs, none of which required in-country management to take actions on the basis of the evaluations. As a result, in-country managers were, for the most part, on their own to develop evaluation or monitoring systems for

their programming. While we observed many worthwhile assignments, we also visited with volunteers who had little or nothing to do or who spent 6 to 12 months of their 2-year tours developing their own assignments. We also interviewed volunteers who were not receiving sufficient host-government support or lacked adequate language skills to conduct their assignments.

These problems contribute to the fact that about one-third of all volunteers and one-half of older volunteers return before the end of their tours. Older volunteers return early at a faster rate largely because they tend to be more demanding of their assignments, have difficulty with the rigors of Peace Corps life, and often experience greater difficulty learning the local language.

We found assignment-related problems in several of the countries we visited. In Ecuador, for example, agency officials and volunteers informed us of many problems. Some volunteers were unable to perform their assignments because they lacked adequate Spanish language proficiency. Some volunteers cited poor job definition as a problem. In Honduras, some volunteers found that their local supervisors were unaware that they were scheduled to arrive and had nothing for them to do. Some assignments were poorly designed. Others had little development value. Some volunteers were actually working for wealthy land owners. Other volunteers stated that their assignments no longer served useful purposes. Volunteers

also complained about not having local individuals who would continue their work after they departed, and some volunteers said that their assignments actually took jobs away from local nationals.

In the Leeward Islands of the Eastern Caribbean, agency officials and volunteers identified many problems concerning assignment programming. They stated that the Peace Corps was experiencing difficulty programming development projects that would permit a transfer of skills from volunteers to local nationals. In a sense, the Peace Corps was simply providing free labor to help compensate for the "brain drain" experienced by that region of the world. Even host government officials told us that they sometimes considered volunteers to be "free or cheap labor" because it cost them nothing to have a volunteer working for them.

The situation in Kenya was much like the situation in Honduras. Peace Corps staff relied heavily on volunteers to structure their own assignments rather than take an active role in defining volunteer responsibilities and coordinating their efforts with the local supervisors. The Peace Corps did not have long-term plans to link the efforts of successive generations of volunteers in program sectors. Both staff and volunteers in Kenya cited lack of job definition and program continuity as problems limiting volunteer effectiveness.

We found a much better situation in Senegal. There the Peace Corps developed long term plans which served to coordinate the efforts of a series of volunteers placed in the same geographical areas. It also identified specific tasks Peace Corps volunteers would perform during their tours. Senegal has modified the way it defines volunteer job responsibilities so that volunteers know specifically what they are supposed to do. It has also established work groups in each project so that volunteers with more technical training or experience can assist lesser skilled or experienced volunteers. In-country Peace Corps management has also made an effort to provide volunteers with defined job duties, and Peace Corps staff informed us that volunteers on the modified assignments are more satisfied because they know what to do.

The Peace Corps has been well aware of these problems, and recently implemented agency-wide policies for planning, monitoring and evaluating programs. The new systems, called the Integrated Planning and Budgeting System and the Programming and Training System, were being implemented in January 1990 as we were completing our audit work, and we did not evaluate them.

Our report recommends that the Peace Corps follow through with its efforts to put in place procedures for ensuring that each country post develop program plans that provide for (1) workable contributions to the countries' continuing development, (2) the utilization of volunteers upon their arrival in country, (3)

adequate oversight of the volunteers' projects, (4) seeking host-government support for continuation of the work after the volunteers' departure, and (5) data upon which to judge the relative merits of differing types of contributions. While it is too early to reach judgement on the effectiveness of the Peace Corps' recently implemented systems, we believe that when fully operative they should address many of our recommendations.

Minority Representation Should Be Improved

We believe the Peace Corps, by working directly on a people-to-people basis in the small towns and villages of the countries served, has been generally successful in promoting better understanding of the American people. But attracting more minorities to become Peace Corps volunteers would serve to heighten an appreciation of the essential diversity of the American culture. As of January 1989, only 7 percent of Peace Corps volunteers were from minority backgrounds. Also, there have been few minorities in the upper levels of Peace Corps management to serve as role models to assist in recruitment efforts.

Attracting minorities, who sometimes are from poorer economic backgrounds and perceive the Peace Corps as a largely "white middle class" institution, is difficult. In April 1990, Peace Corps officials informed us that the agency now has 5 minorities in top management positions, and that of its current 58 Country Directors,

9 are minorities. They also said that they met their recently established 10 percent minority recruiting goal for the trainees they began recruiting in February 1990. These figures were achieved after we completed our review and we have not verified them.

Our report recommends that, as part of the Peace Corps' efforts to redesign its overall recruitment strategy, it should develop a comprehensive strategy to attract minorities. It should establish realistic minority goals and plans for improving minority participation in Peace Corps staff, develop plans for working more closely with minority colleges, and determine whether the 10 percent minority recruitment goal for each area office is appropriate.

Helping America Better Understand Other Cultures

The Peace Corps can better achieve its third goal of promoting a better understanding by Americans of other peoples by implementing programs to enhance the efforts of returned Peace Corps volunteers to teach the American people about the cultures of beneficiary countries. The Peace Corps operates a number of programs to provide such opportunities to returned volunteers; however, it has not devoted much consistent effort or resources to this goal.

The agency generally believed that the returned volunteers would perform this function on their own. Recently, returned volunteers formed a national association which seeks, among other things, to perform such "development education" activities. The Peace Corps gave the association grants of \$142,650 and has assisted in conducting mailings, but Peace Corps has not made full use of the association and its affiliated groups.

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In summary, Mr. Chairman, our evaluation of Peace Corps operations confirmed the widely held view that this unique agency has made significant contributions in less developed countries. The agency has made a major contribution to presenting a positive image of American generosity to people of other lands. I want to assure you that my testimony, and our report released today, while raising several management concerns, are in no way meant to detract from these positive accomplishments. Instead, our report and recommendations are offered with the hope and expectation that improvements in these areas will make the Peace Corps an even more effective contributor to our overall foreign policy objectives.

This concludes my prepared remarks. Thank you again for the opportunity to present our observations on the work of the Peace Corps. We will be happy to respond to any questions you may have.