



March 2022

COVID-19

State Should Strengthen Policies to Better Maintain Overseas Operations in Future Crises

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-22-104519](#), a report to congressional addressees

Why GAO Did This Study

The U.S. government has over 22,000 U.S. staff working in more than 290 overseas posts. State made operational adjustments in an effort to balance overseas staff's health with the pursuit of diplomacy during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The CARES Act includes a provision for GAO to report on its ongoing oversight efforts related to COVID-19. In addition, GAO was asked to examine State's overseas operational response to COVID-19. This report examines, among other things, actions State took to respond to COVID-19 and how it communicated them to overseas employees, posts' operational adjustments and the effect on operations, and lessons learned identified by State.

GAO reviewed relevant State documents, including agency guidance and post-level reporting, and interviewed State and other U.S. agency officials. GAO also met with four selected overseas posts based on various factors, such as geographic location and proportion of U.S. overseas staff evacuated.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making six recommendations to State, including that it review its evacuation policies, maintain timely communication with other agencies present overseas, develop a plan to track overseas telework, and develop a procedure to ensure collection of lessons learned. State agreed with five of the recommendations and partially agreed with one.

View [GAO-22-104519](#). For more information, contact Jason Bair at (202) 512-6881 or bairj@gao.gov.

March 2022

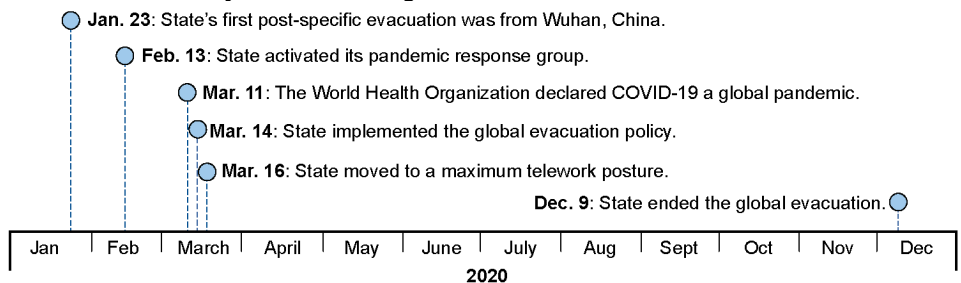
COVID-19

State Should Strengthen Policies to Better Maintain Overseas Operations in Future Crises

What GAO Found

The Department of State made key decisions for overseas posts (e.g., U.S. embassies and consulates) during the COVID-19 pandemic, as shown in the figure below, but did not communicate them to other overseas agencies before they went into effect. State created a new global evacuation policy with flexibilities that were different from the pre-existing policies for post-specific evacuations, which created confusion for staff on timelines, allowances, and conditions for returning to post. According to federal internal control standards, policies should be documented in the appropriate level of detail. However, State has not yet established an evacuation policy that could be used for future crises affecting multiple posts. In addition, State's decisions for posts affected all U.S. government staff overseas but State did not communicate these key decisions, and related policies, to other overseas agencies before announcing them to all staff. As a result, other overseas agencies had to develop guidance for their staff to follow after State's public announcements.

Timeline of State's Key Decisions during the COVID-19 Pandemic



Source: Department of State (State). | GAO-22-104519

Evacuations of key personnel and public health restrictions reduced some operations at posts, but information technology improvements and other adjustments largely allowed staff to continue to work. Nevertheless, some posts reported they did not have sufficient information to help them determine which staff should remain overseas and which could be evacuated. Posts implemented a maximum telework policy and State used COVID-19 relief funds to provide equipment and better network access. Federal internal control standards state that agencies should use quality information to make decisions. However, State does not track telework at overseas posts and, as a result, does not have the information needed to inform future decisions about its use overseas.

State has identified lessons learned on telework and communication but does not have a procedure for ensuring their collection from posts. According to State's guidance, lessons learned are required to be gathered and preserved after critical operational events. Individual posts reported lessons learned on communication, including the utility of informal communication between staff, but not all posts submitted required lessons learned. State does not have a procedure to ensure the collection of lessons learned from posts—a significant component of improving its future crisis response.

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Abbreviations

CGRCU	Coronavirus Global Response Coordination Unit
CIR	COVID-19 Interim Review
CMS	Office of Crisis Management and Strategy
COM	Chief of Mission
EAC	Emergency Action Committee
EAP	Emergency Action Plan
FAH	<i>Foreign Affairs Handbooks</i>
FAM	<i>Foreign Affairs Manual</i>
IRM	Bureau of Information Resource Management
LE staff	Locally Employed staff
MED	Bureau of Medical Services
OMB	Office of Management and Budget
OPM	Office of Personnel Management
OPMED	Directorate of Operational Medicine
State	Department of State
USAID	U.S. Agency for International Development

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March 16, 2022

Congressional Addressees

The Department of State (State) leads the operation of more than 290 overseas posts, staffed by employees from various government agencies.¹ In early 2020, as COVID-19 began to spread around the globe and the World Health Organization declared a pandemic, the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) and the U.S. Office of Personnel Management (OPM) issued guidance to federal agencies on ways in which they could adjust their operations to minimize risks to employee health while ensuring continuity of operations.² State made various operational adjustments in an effort to balance the health of more than 22,000 overseas staff with the pursuit of U.S. diplomacy.³

To support agencies' response to COVID-19, among other things, Congress passed six COVID-19 relief laws, including the CARES Act.⁴ The CARES Act includes a provision for us to report on our ongoing monitoring and oversight of federal efforts related to the COVID-19 pandemic.⁵ In addition, you asked us to review State's response to the pandemic at its overseas posts. This report examines (1) actions State leadership took in calendar year 2020 to respond to the global pandemic and how it communicated these actions to overseas employees; (2) how overseas posts adjusted their operations at the onset of the pandemic and the extent to which these adjustments affected post operations; (3)

¹State's overseas posts consist of U.S. embassies, consulates, missions to international organizations, and other diplomatic posts in foreign countries.

²See, for example, Office of Management and Budget, *Updated Guidance on Telework Flexibilities in Response to Coronavirus*, M-20-13 (Mar. 12, 2020) and U.S. Office of Personnel Management, *Preliminary Guidance to U.S. Agencies during Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19)*, CPM 2020-04 (Mar. 3, 2020).

³In this report, we are using "overseas staff" to refer to U.S. staff working overseas, which includes U.S. direct hires and employed eligible family members. It also includes U.S. and third country national Personal Services Contractors working for USAID. These data do not include locally employed staff.

⁴CARES Act, Pub. L. No. 116-136, 134 Stat. 281 (2020).

⁵See Pub. L. No. 116-136, § 19010, 134 Stat. at 579–81. We regularly issue government-wide reports on the federal response to COVID-19. For the latest report, see GAO, *COVID-19: Significant Improvements are Needed for Overseeing Relief Funds and Leading Responses to Public Health Emergencies*, GAO-22-105291 (Washington, D.C.: January 27, 2022).

how posts made operational decisions as the pandemic progressed and challenges they faced in returning evacuated staff overseas; and (4) lessons learned that State has identified regarding adjustments to overseas operations during the COVID-19 pandemic, and the extent to which State collected them.

To address these objectives, we reviewed relevant State documents, such as policy and procedures in its *Foreign Affairs Manual* (FAM) and *Foreign Affairs Handbooks* (FAH) pertaining to post operations and emergency preparedness, cables documenting department-wide operational decisions, and the Diplomacy Strong Framework. We also reviewed State data on post evacuations from January 2020 through December 2020. We interviewed State officials about the data and performed electronic testing to ensure consistency. We found the data to be sufficiently reliable to describe the proportion of overseas staff who evacuated during 2020.

To assess operational adjustments and decisions at overseas posts, we conducted interviews with a variety of officials in Washington, D.C., and at selected overseas posts. We interviewed officials in State offices and bureaus in Washington, D.C., that played a role supporting overseas posts during the pandemic, including officials in each of State's six geographic regional bureaus. We also met with officials from the American Foreign Service Association and members of various State employee groups, to discuss their experiences with operational adjustments. Additionally, we interviewed officials at the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) to obtain their perspectives as another agency with a significant presence at overseas posts. Lastly, we interviewed officials at four selected overseas posts—Azerbaijan, Barbados, Mongolia, and Kenya—to obtain their perspectives on their posts' operational adjustments. We selected these posts because of the diversity of their geographic locations and varying proportion of U.S. staff evacuated from them, among other factors.

To identify challenges and lessons learned from the pandemic and steps State is taking to address them in the future, we conducted a content analysis of lessons learned documents that overseas posts submitted to State regarding their evacuation or COVID-19 experiences. We also reviewed a subset of completed questionnaires and the final report resulting from State's COVID-19 Interim Review (CIR)—the department's

internal lessons learned exercise.⁶ We interviewed State officials to understand what steps they planned to take to address the identified lessons learned. Appendix I provides additional details of our scope and methodology.

We conducted this performance audit from September 2020 to March 2022 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

Background

Composition and Organization of U.S. Overseas Posts

Chief of Mission. The presence of U.S. government agencies within overseas posts is collectively referred to as “missions,” and the Chief of Mission (COM) is the principal officer in charge. The COM—an ambassador or chargé d’affaires who acts as the official spokesperson to the foreign government—determines the structure of the posts within the country, and has responsibility for the direction, coordination, and supervision of all U.S. government executive branch employees in that country.⁷ This responsibility is referred to as COM security responsibility and authority.

U.S. footprint abroad. The United States has more than 22,000 overseas staff at more than 290 posts in 173 countries. These staff are spread across State’s six geographic regions, as shown in figure 1.⁸ The

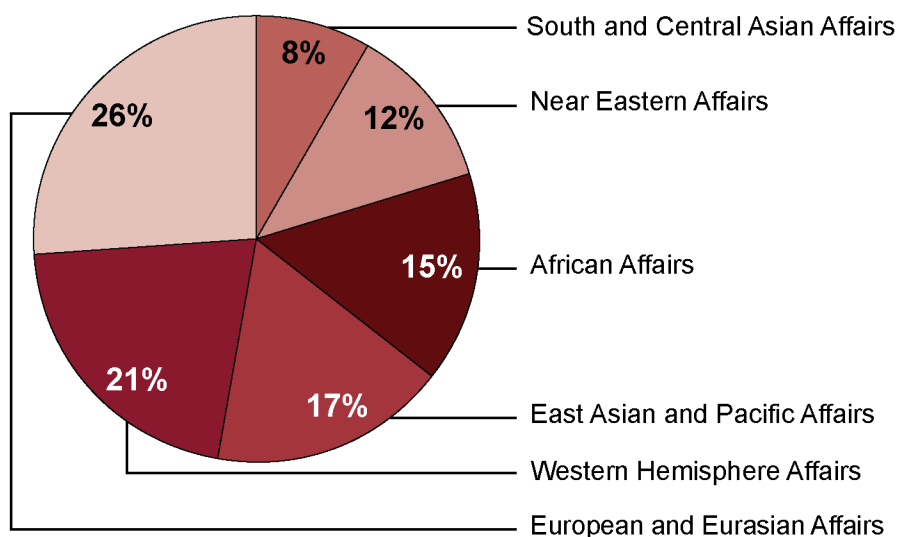
⁶Department of State, *Lessons Learned from the Department of State’s Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic: December 2019-December 2020* (Washington, D.C.: June 2021).

⁷The COM acts under the direction of the President. The COM does not have authority over Voice of America correspondents on official assignment, executive branch employees officially on the staff of an international organization and performing the functions of that organization, or employees under the command of a U.S. military Geographic Combatant Commander. See 2 FAH-2 H-112.1 Chief of Mission Authority and 22 U.S.C. § 3927.

⁸Data are from State and represent filled positions for U.S. direct hires and employed eligible family members, as of December 2020. In this report, we are using “overseas staff” to refer to U.S. staff working overseas, which includes U.S. direct hires and employed eligible family members. It also includes U.S. and third country national Personal Services Contractors working for USAID. These data do not include locally employed staff.

majority of these personnel—about 15,000—work for State, approximately 3,000 work for the Department of Defense in defense attaché offices or in other capacities, 1,600 work for USAID, and 1,000 work for the Department of Homeland Security. At least 20 other U.S. government agencies have smaller numbers of personnel at these posts, including the Departments of Agriculture, Commerce, Justice, and Health and Human Services.

Figure 1: Overseas Staff by Region

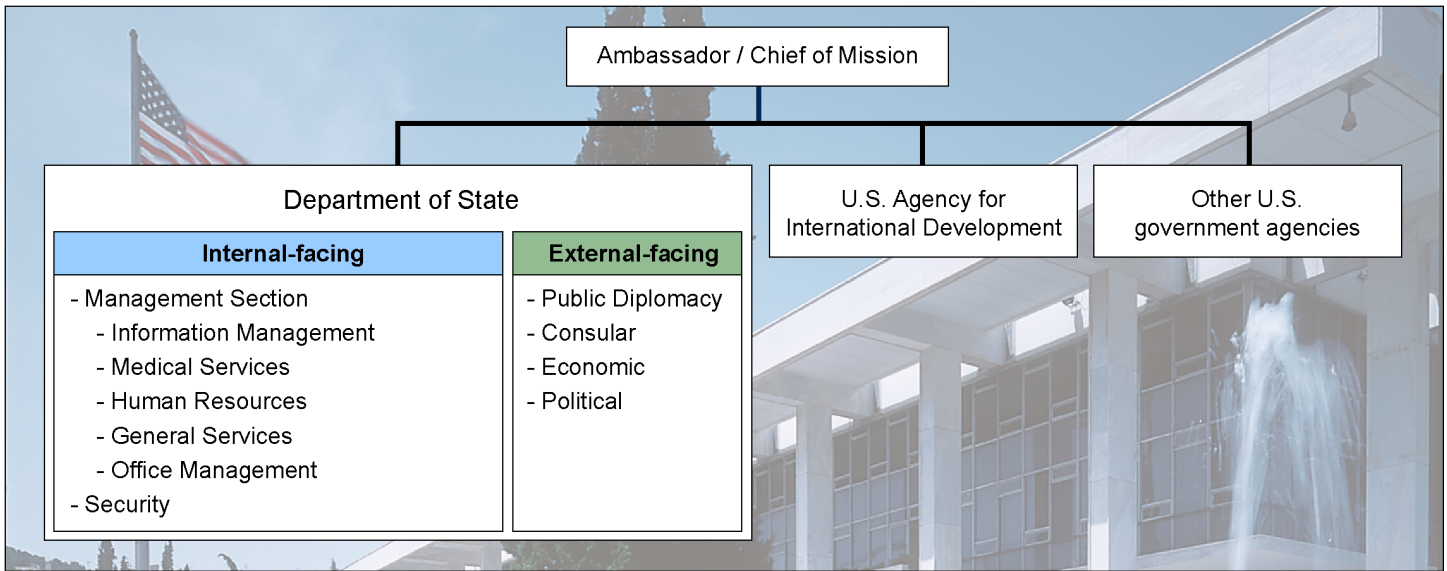


Source: GAO analysis of Department of State data. | GAO-22-104519

Note: Data are from State and represent filled positions for U.S. direct hires and employed eligible family members, as of December 2020. In this report, we are using “overseas staff” to refer to U.S. staff working overseas, which includes U.S. direct hires and employed eligible family members. It also includes U.S. and third country national Personal Services Contractors working for the U.S. Agency for International Development. These data do not include locally employed staff. Regions represent State regional geographic bureaus.

Post staff and organization. The staff at overseas posts include U.S. direct hires, employed eligible family members, Locally Employed (LE) staff, and various types of contractors. Embassies are the largest category of overseas posts. As shown in figure 2, their organization can generally be divided into two categories—sections that are “internal-facing,” supporting the operational aspects of the post; and those that are “external-facing,” supporting the diplomatic, consular, and other external functions.

Figure 2: Organization of a “Typical” Overseas Post



Source: GAO analysis of Department of State documentation; photo: Department of State. | GAO-22-104519

Emergency Preparation and Response at Overseas Posts

The COM and the Emergency Action Committee (EAC), a group that generally includes subject matter experts designated by the COM with representation from all sections and leadership of other U.S. agencies at post, work together to prepare for and respond to emergencies at overseas posts. The EAC meets periodically, or as situationally required, to prepare for and assess risks to the health, safety, and security of the post. The EAC is responsible for drafting and updating the post’s Emergency Action Plan (EAP), a document that provides procedures and responses to a range of foreseeable contingencies, including post-specific planning considerations meant to help EACs identify potential risks to health, safety, or security. State’s guidance requires EACs to prepare the EAP and specifies certain EAP components that are mandatory for inclusion. According to State guidance, posts must conduct a comprehensive review of their EAP annually, which is to include updating any out-of-date information and certifying that all other information is still current. State’s guidance also contains emergency

planning information for posts on a variety of scenarios including, among other things, natural disasters, bombings, hijackings, and political unrest.⁹

In response to an emergency, EACs may decide to recommend to the COM an evacuation of staff, and the COM in turn can request authorization from the Under Secretary for Management.¹⁰ Prior to the pandemic, State guidance provided for two types of evacuations of an overseas post, depending on the circumstances: authorized departure, which allows eligible employees and family members to apply to depart post, and ordered departure, in which eligible family members or certain employees are required to depart. Staff under these types of evacuations are eligible to receive monetary allowances that cover lodging, meals, and incidental expenses while they are away from their overseas post.

Headquarters Support for Overseas Posts

Overseas posts receive ongoing and emergency situational support from a variety of bureaus and offices at State headquarters in Washington, D.C.

Bureau of Information Resource Management (IRM). IRM provides information technology and services to State employees and manages Information Management Officers at posts.

Bureau of Medical Services (MED). MED provides healthcare to U.S. government employees and their families assigned to overseas posts. The bureau's Directorate of Operational Medicine (OPMED) executes State's operational medicine program, which includes planning and executing medical contingency plans.

Office of Crisis Management and Strategy (CMS). CMS, in the Executive Secretariat's Operations Center, coordinates crisis response across the department and with other federal agencies. CMS is responsible for coordinating department-wide crisis preparedness and response activities, including monitoring potential crises, coordinating some evacuations, convening and supporting task forces, and collecting lessons learned after crises have concluded.

⁹When personnel at overseas posts have a health emergency that the local health system is not equipped to handle, they can be flown out of the country to receive medical attention (medical evacuation, or "medevac"). The planned route for medevac is one aspect of overseas posts' emergency planning and preparation.

¹⁰COMs may initiate an evacuation under their own authority if necessary to protect the lives of U.S. citizens, according to State guidance.

Regional geographic bureaus. State has six regional geographic bureaus whose personnel guide the policy direction and operation of the overseas posts within their regional jurisdiction, including providing support and information during crises. These bureaus include African Affairs, East Asian and Pacific Affairs, European and Eurasian Affairs, Near Eastern Affairs, South and Central Asian Affairs, and Western Hemisphere Affairs.

State Guidance on Telework Overseas Prior to the Pandemic

Just prior to the onset of the pandemic, State announced guidance on telework at overseas posts.¹¹ According to the guidance:

- Posts that want to approve telework for State employees overseas must establish a post telework policy, and the decision to establish the policy falls to the COM.
- Once a post telework policy is in place, post management has the authority to approve telework arrangements for State employees in accordance with post policy and on a case-by-case basis.
- Posts may include LE staff in the telework policy after a review of local labor law, the Local Compensations Plan, and consultations with human resources/overseas employment.
- Post telework policies should be implemented in consultation with the regional bureau executive office.

State's *Foreign Affairs Manual* outlines State's policy on telework, including special considerations for telework abroad. These considerations include security, inviolability of employees' personal residences (or lack thereof), and location of personal residences.¹²

State's COVID-19 Interim Review

State leadership initiated the COVID-19 Interim Review (CIR) in fall 2020 to capture lessons learned over the first year of the crisis, identify problem areas and best practices, and recommend changes to improve its response to the current pandemic and future crises. According to State, the CIR surveyed State employees, analyzed lessons learned cables, conducted focus groups with selected overseas posts and domestic bureaus, and sent questionnaires to other selected posts. In June 2021, State completed a report detailing its findings, focused on State's response in four broad areas: crisis planning and response coordination,

¹¹Department of State, *Overseas Telework Policy for Department of State Employees*, 19 STATE 126438 (Dec. 4, 2019).

¹²See 3 FAM 2360, and in particular, 3 FAM 2362.3.

workforce management and safety, supporting U.S. citizens, and advancing U.S. foreign policy.

Opportunities Exist for State to Strengthen Its Evacuation Policies and Communication with Other Overseas Agencies

State evacuated overseas staff in 2020 using post-specific policies and a newly created global evacuation policy for COVID-19 that allowed staff to evacuate from any post. Since ending the global evacuation in December 2020, State has not updated its policies to include an evacuation policy that applies to more than one post and has not reviewed the preexisting evacuation policies to identify flexibilities that could better prepare State for future crises. State created a pandemic response group, but this group did not communicate key decisions—such as the global evacuation policy—to other overseas agencies before they went into effect. State also created a conditions-based, location-specific decision-making framework to minimize the risk of COVID-19 to its workforce and help posts make operational decisions.

State Evacuated Overseas Staff Using New and Existing Policies with Differing Guidance

State Created a Global Evacuation Policy for Overseas Staff during COVID-19 but Has Not Established a Similar Policy for Future Crises Affecting Multiple Posts

During 2020, State evacuated overseas staff using existing post-specific evacuation policies as well as a global evacuation policy created to respond to COVID-19. Wuhan, China, was the first post State evacuated, and a week later State announced evacuations for all other posts in China. From January 23, 2020, through March 13, 2020, State approved post-specific evacuations for 14 posts.¹³

According to State, as global travel restrictions tightened and hospitals became overwhelmed, it created a global evacuation policy, effective March 14, 2020, to alleviate staff's anxiety and ensure their safety.¹⁴ Under the policy, the Secretary of State approved an evacuation from any overseas post (global evacuation) for individuals who were at higher risk of a poor outcome if exposed to COVID-19, or who requested evacuation

¹³For the purposes of this report, we are using "post-specific evacuation" to refer to an authorized or ordered departure. The 14 post-specific evacuations were in Wuhan, China; Beijing, China; Chengdu, China; Guangzhou, China; Shanghai, China; Shenyang, China; Canberra, Australia; Hong Kong, Hong Kong; Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia; Milan, Italy; Baku, Azerbaijan; Ashgabat, Turkmenistan; Kolonia, Micronesia; and Dushanbe, Tajikistan.

¹⁴Department of State, "Global Authorized Departure for Individuals at Higher Risk from COVID-19," MRN 20 State 28418 (Mar. 15, 2020).

based on a commensurate justification in foreign areas. This policy applied to all overseas staff of U.S. agencies under COM authority.

Timeline of the Department of State's COVID-19 Response in 2020

Jan. 23 State's first ordered departure was at its post in Wuhan, China

Feb. 13 State activated the Coronavirus Global Response Coordination Unit

Mar. 11 The World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a global pandemic

Mar. 14 State implemented the global evacuation policy

May 1 State launched the Diplomacy Strong Framework

Dec. 9 State ended the global evacuation

Source: State documents. | GAO-22-104519

According to State officials, State created the global evacuation policy for COVID-19 because State did not have an evacuation policy that could be applied across regions. Since ending the global evacuation, State has not updated its policies to reflect the potential need to evacuate more than one post in response to a future crisis. Standards for internal control in the federal government call for management to document policies for an operational process's objectives and related risks.¹⁵ The policies should be documented in the appropriate level of detail to allow management to effectively monitor the control activity.¹⁶

Overseas officials explained that, on the basis of the new global evacuation policy, they directed staff interested in the global evacuation to have confidential consultations with their post's Bureau of Medical Services (MED) representative. They also said that the guidance provided flexibility for posts to approve evacuations of individuals who had a commensurate justification. For example, officials in Barbados told us that individuals participated in global evacuation because they were concerned that the local medical system would be overwhelmed and that it would be challenging to receive needed supplies on the island.

The global evacuation lasted a total of 270 days—from March 14, 2020, through December 9, 2020. The Secretary initially approved the global evacuation for 60 days but subsequently issued five extensions for approximately 30 days each until his announcement on September 26, 2020, that the evacuation would end in December. Officials we interviewed who participated in the global evacuation said that the uncertainty and short time frame of these various extensions were disruptive. For example, they said they did not know whether State would continue to approve the global evacuation until a week before it was about to expire every month. As a result, some noted that they could not identify longer-term housing leases because they were not sure how long the global evacuation was going to last. For example, some officials told us that they had to move to different housing four to six times while on global evacuation because of the uncertainty.

¹⁵GAO, *Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government*, Principle 12.03, GAO-14-704G (Washington, D.C.: September 2014).

¹⁶GAO-14-704G, 12.03: Documentation of Responsibilities through Policies.

According to State's CIR, uncertainty and anxiety grew among staff each time the evacuation period was about to expire. The report stated that the decisions to approve extensions were made at the last minute, leaving little time to notify staff, and recommended that State develop a plan to include timely decisions and notification of key dates and extensions to better serve staff.

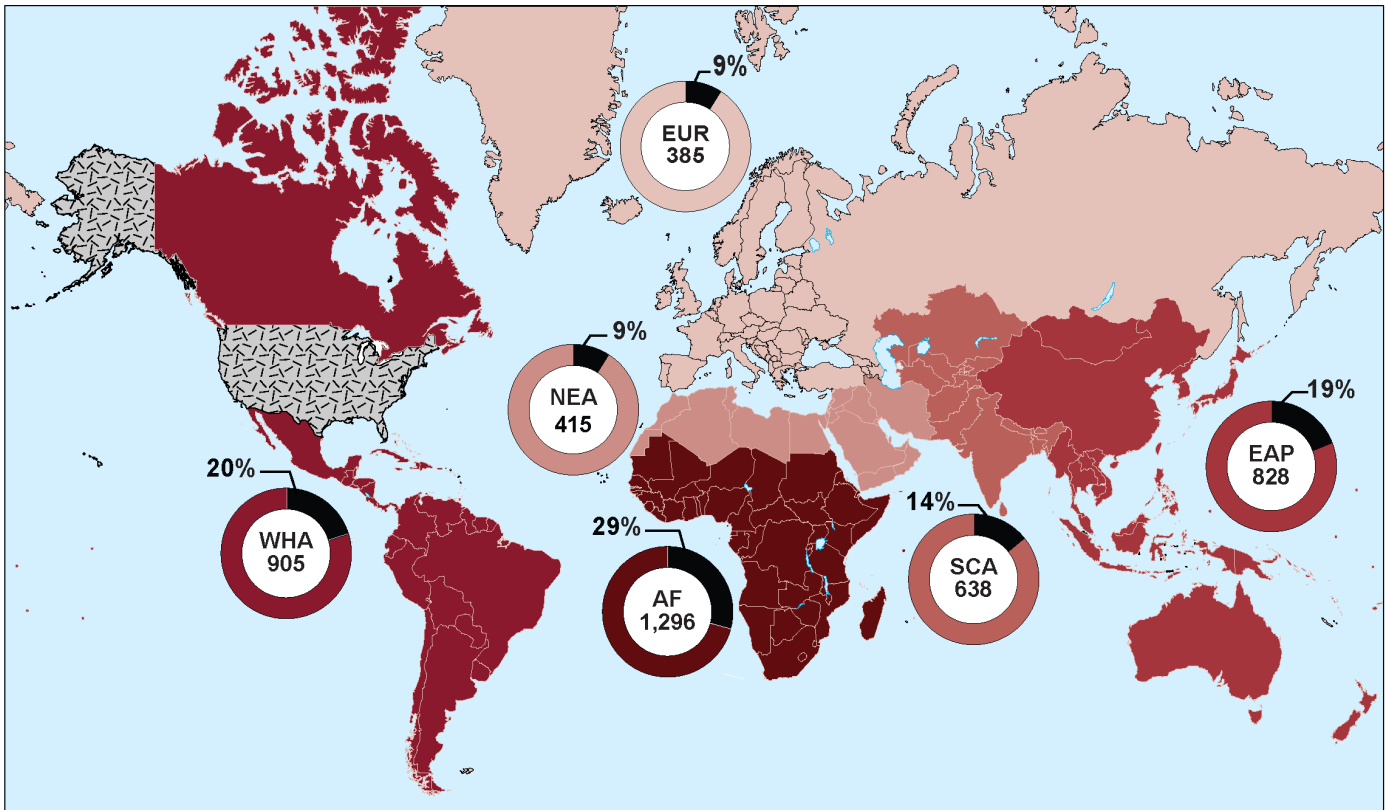
Although the global evacuation lasted 270 days, staff were only eligible to participate and depart post within the first 54 days. As a result, overseas staff in regions that experienced an increase in COVID-19 cases after the 54th day of the policy—during early May 2020—could not participate. For example, officials in State's Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs said that posts in the region experienced first and second waves of COVID-19 around May 2020 through September 2020, at which point officials could not participate in the global evacuation. Other officials said that this eligibility timeline created disparities among staff in different regions since COVID-19 affected regions differently over time.

State acknowledged that it had abruptly announced the decision to end eligibility for the global evacuation and that, as the epicenter of the pandemic changed, some countries experienced rising case numbers after May 2020, which limited the available options for staff in these posts. In the CIR, State indicated that the global evacuation might have been better implemented by using metrics to guide rolling regional or multi-regional evacuations as COVID-19 spread. According to the report, these types of data-informed evacuations could assist in determining when and for how long a regional evacuation should be used. Establishing an evacuation policy that applies to more than one post, such as the global evacuation policy for COVID-19, could enhance State's ability to identify and develop policies before a future regional or global crisis.

Guidance for Evacuated Staff Varied Based on the Evacuation Policy They Used

From January 2020 through December 2020, 20 percent of overseas staff across all U.S. agencies—almost 4,500 individuals—evacuated from their respective overseas posts under either the global evacuation policy or a post-specific evacuation policy. Figure 3 shows the number of evacuated staff from State's six geographic regions during 2020.

Figure 3: Number of Evacuated Overseas Staff, by Region, January 2020–December 2020



Legend: AF = Bureau of African Affairs; EAP = Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs; EUR = Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs; NEA = Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs; SCA = Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs; WHA = Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs.

Sources: GAO analysis of Department of State data (data); Map Resources (map). | GAO-22-104519

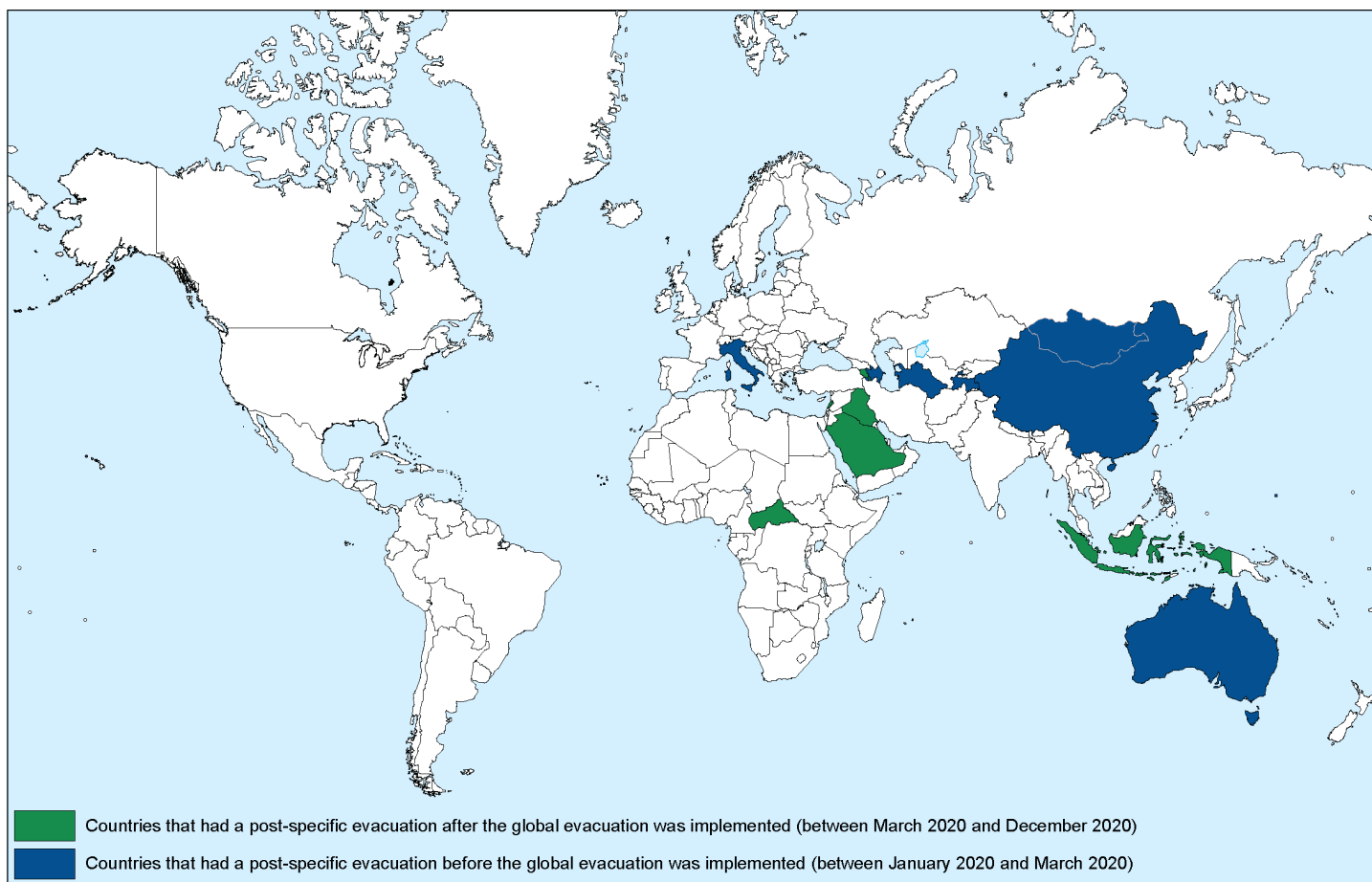
Note: Data are from State and represent filled positions for U.S. direct hires and employed eligible family members, as of December 2020. In this report, we are using “overseas staff” to refer to U.S. staff working overseas, which includes U.S. direct hires and employed eligible family members. It also includes U.S. and third country national Personal Services Contractors working for the U.S. Agency for International Development. These data do not include locally employed staff. Regions represent State regional geographic bureaus

Some of the staff evacuated as part of a post-specific evacuation.¹⁷ Figure 4 highlights the countries these posts were in and identifies the countries that had a post-specific evacuation before State implemented the global evacuation. In addition to participating in a post-specific evacuation, officials in these countries also had the opportunity to use the

¹⁷In addition to COVID-19, some posts were evacuated for other reasons, such as security.

global evacuation. As a result, some posts had to manage overseas staff who were evacuated under more than one evacuation policy.

Figure 4: Countries with Post-Specific Evacuations, January 2020–December 2020



Sources: GAO analysis of Department of State data (data); Map Resources (map). | GAO-22-104519

Standards for internal control in the federal government call for management to periodically review policies or procedures for continued relevance in achieving the agency’s objectives or addressing related risks.¹⁸ State created its global evacuation policy for COVID-19, which contained efficiencies and flexibilities that do not exist in post-specific evacuation policies, but has not reviewed the existing post-specific

¹⁸GAO-14-704G, Principle 12.05: Periodic Review of Control Activities.

evacuation policies to determine whether they could be updated. For example, unlike the post-specific evacuation policies, the global evacuation policy did not establish an initial limit on the maximum length of the evacuation and did not include requirements related to post status at the end of the evacuation period. The global evacuation policy also provided for an approach to calculating monetary allowances for overseas staff evacuated through that policy that differed from the approach used for staff evacuated under post-specific evacuation policies.

During our interviews and in our review of lessons learned cables, officials emphasized that they had experienced some confusion given the various evacuation policies. Examples include:

- **Two evacuation policies in one post.** In a lessons learned cable, officials from Indonesia reported that they had staff evacuated under both post-specific and global evacuation policies. They said that having both of these policies in effect at the same time created confusion related to timelines, allowances, and conditions for staff's return. Further, officials explained that other agencies at post interpreted the evacuation policies differently, which resulted in disparities for staff from varying agencies at post.
- **Transition between policies.** Officials we interviewed expressed conflicting responses on whether staff could transition to the global evacuation once their post-specific evacuation ended. While officials in State's Office of Management Strategy and Solutions told us that they were not aware of any guidance that would enable staff to do so, a State cable included allowance guidance for evacuees that converted from a post-specific evacuation to the global evacuation. In addition, some officials we spoke with stated that overseas posts could not implement this transition, but officials from an overseas post told us that they were able to transition staff from their post-specific evacuation to the global evacuation.
- **Length of evacuation policies.** Some overseas posts that were on a post-specific evacuation would have liked the option to either extend their post-specific evacuation or have their evacuated staff transition to the global evacuation. According to State guidance, post-specific evacuations could be approved for an initial period, and could be extended incrementally up to the maximum number of days provided in the guidance. Under the guidance, if a return to post is not authorized by the end of the maximum period provided for post-specific evacuations, the post will convert to unaccompanied status

unless otherwise determined.¹⁹ The global evacuation policy, however, did not establish a limit on the maximum length of the evacuation, and State extended the length of the global evacuation beyond the maximum period of time provided in guidance for post-specific evacuations. Additionally, the global evacuation policy, unlike the post-specific evacuation policies, did not include requirements related to the status of the post at the end of the evacuation period.

- An Ambassador we met with said that his post was days away from becoming an unaccompanied post when he made the difficult decision to end its post-specific evacuation. The Ambassador also noted that State had told him that staff on post-specific evacuation could not transition to the global evacuation policy. He explained that he wanted to avoid his post becoming an unaccompanied post because that could affect continuity of operations and significantly affect staff morale since staff would be required to return without their family members. He added that some staff did not return to post. The Ambassador said that when the country experienced a military conflict around 2 months later, he and the rest of the EAC decided not to request another post-specific evacuation; instead, they implemented restrictions, such as stopping travel for all staff.
- **Allowance calculations.** Another aspect of the global evacuation policy that was different from post-specific evacuation policies was the process used to calculate monetary allowances. State implemented a more streamlined process for calculating allowances for staff on global evacuation. According to State, it developed a simplified methodology to calculate allowances because the established process is a manual, labor-intensive process requiring various interactions with evacuated staff and recalculations. State implemented this change to simplify the process for the staff on global evacuation requesting allowances, as well as for the staff processing the allowances. However, State officials could only use the simplified methodology for staff on global evacuation and continued using the established manual and labor-intensive process for staff on a post-specific evacuation.

Reviewing its new global evacuation policy for COVID-19 and existing post-specific evacuation policies could help State identify efficiencies and

¹⁹According to 3 FAM 3772.2, the Under Secretary for Management is responsible for designating unaccompanied posts, which are posts located in areas of imminent danger at which family members are not authorized to reside. Unaccompanied post designations may change from time to time to reflect changing circumstances.

flexibilities that could be incorporated into its evacuation policies. In doing so, State could be better prepared for future crises.

State Created a Pandemic Response Group but Did Not Communicate Key Decisions to Other Overseas Agencies before They Went into Effect

State's Executive Secretary established the Coronavirus Global Response Coordination Unit (CGRCU) to help manage and lead its response in February 2020. According to State, officials formed the unit to bring together bureaus to ensure a coordinated response, and receive and disseminate information within State and other U.S. government agencies regarding those efforts.

Although the CGRCU was responsible for coordinating State's engagement with other U.S. government agencies, including agencies with an overseas presence, State's CIR noted that it provided limited visibility about its decisions to overseas agencies. Standards for internal control in the federal government call for management to externally communicate the necessary quality information to achieve the entity's objective.²⁰ However, State made decisions that affected all U.S. government staff overseas under COM authority, such as implementing the global evacuation, but did not communicate these key decisions before they went into effect. As a result, the leadership of other overseas agencies, such as USAID, had to develop guidance for staff to follow after State's public announcements. In the CIR, State reported that it was challenging to identify an appropriate structure and leadership for the CGRCU, resulting in a disorganized and uncoordinated response. The CIR recommended that State improve its crisis information distribution, including to other government agencies, to better coordinate in a crisis.

USAID officials said that it would have been helpful if State had provided them with an advance notice of the global evacuation policy for a variety of reasons:

- **Preparing travel logistics.** USAID officials would have wanted more time to prepare logistically for the evacuation of USAID staff. For example, USAID had to prepare travel authorizations for all posts and pay for the evacuation of its staff. USAID reported spending around \$32 million of its COVID-19 relief funds to pay for evacuations and daily allowances for 700 staff and their families on evacuation.
- **Clarifying guidance for USAID workforce.** Because, according to USAID, its COVID-19 task force was unable to establish ongoing communications with State about key decisions, USAID could only

²⁰GAO-14-704G, Principle 15: Communicate Externally.

respond and establish guidance after State announced new policies and guidance applicable to overseas staff. For example, the cable that State released announcing the approval of the global evacuation stated that USAID staff and family members should consult with USAID for guidance regarding fiscal allowances.²¹ The cable also mentioned that contractors employed by the U.S. government, including Personal Services Contractors (PSC), were not categorized as staff for evacuation purposes.²² USAID staff we interviewed said that some had interpreted this guidance as meaning that PSCs were not eligible for the global evacuation. However, USAID's guidance issued the next day clarified that USAID's PSCs were eligible.

- **Providing evacuation guidance to USAID workforce.** Similarly, State did not communicate with USAID before announcing the end of the global evacuation. State announced time frames for the end of the evacuation on September 26, 2020, stating that other U.S. government personnel should follow their agency's guidance following the conclusion of the evacuation.²³ After reviewing State's guidance, USAID developed its guidance and shared it with its staff almost a week later, on October 2, 2020. Receiving timely evacuation guidance was critical because a delay of a couple of days could have been the difference between being able to secure a flight for officials to return to post and navigate countries' COVID-19 restrictions.

In their lessons learned cable, U.S. officials in China reported that non-State agencies had faced challenges communicating with State officials in headquarters. The cable added that some procedures and policies were not clearly communicated with the appropriate contact at non-State agencies. For example, according to the cable, State did not communicate its regulatory change that allowed for evacuees to select a safe haven location other than Washington, D.C. State established an internal process to change safe haven locations and communicated it to

²¹Department of State, "Global Authorized Departure for Individuals at Higher Risk from COVID-19," MRN 20 State 28418 (Mar. 15, 2020).

²²USAID's PSCs are non-direct hire U.S. and third country national citizens on contract for the specific services of those individuals. PSCs represent a significant proportion of USAID's workforce. As we have previously reported, USAID uses personal services contracts for a broad range of functions, such as program management, security analysis, and logistics.

²³Department of State, "Transition of Global Authorized Departure," MRN 20 State 95682 (Sept. 26, 2020).

State staff, but according to the cable, non-State agencies struggled to establish a process.

U.S. officials in Indonesia also reported in their lessons learned cable that non-State agencies had difficulty understanding State's requirements and regulations. Their cable stated that non-State agencies at post had interpreted the evacuation policies differently, which resulted in disparities for staff from varying agencies at post. As a result, their cable recommended that State should ensure that non-State agencies understand tracking requirements and State regulations. Maintaining timely communications with overseas agencies during a crisis, such as by establishing requirements for response groups to communicate with overseas agencies, would enhance State's ability to clarify new guidance and policies to prevent confusion.

State Created a Decision Framework to Help Posts Respond to COVID-19

In April 2020, OMB and OPM issued a memorandum that broadly described a phased process for federal agency leaders to use when making decisions about resuming workforce operations.²⁴ In response, in May 2020 State published the Diplomacy Strong Framework and described it as a conditions-based, location-specific decision-making framework to minimize the risk of COVID-19 to its workforce.²⁵ According to State, the framework incorporated federal guidance from the White House and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, among others.

The framework started at phase 0, where mandatory telework is enforced, and proceeded to phase 3, where 80 percent or more staff could be working on-site. According to the framework, overseas posts were to first consider medical and health conditions at each location as the primary criteria to move between each phase (see sidebar for more details of these conditions).

²⁴Office of Management and Budget and Office of Personnel Management, *Aligning Federal Agency Operations with the National Guidelines for Opening Up America Again*, Memorandum M-20-23 (Apr. 20, 2020).

²⁵In September 2021, State replaced the Diplomacy Strong Framework with the COVID-19 Mitigation Process (CMP), its new framework for helping posts make workplace operational decisions. According to State, through the CMP, post leadership will review four main local risk indicators in order to determine the appropriate on-site workforce posture (mission-critical functions only; mission-critical and on-site-dependent functions only; or all functions). The CMP also provides guidance on mitigation practices according to a location's given workforce posture.

Diplomacy Strong Framework's Medical and Health Conditions

The Department of State developed the Diplomacy Strong Framework to help overseas posts make operational decisions. The framework included six medical and health conditions as the primary criteria for posts' decision-making. These conditions were

1. a downward trajectory of cases within 14 days,
2. a downward trajectory of positive tests within 14 days,
3. permission of public health authorities/State's Bureau of Medical Services for limited return of non-essential personnel,
4. pre-COVID-19 abilities at local healthcare facilities,
5. ability to perform contact tracing for State personnel, and
6. established regional or global medevac capabilities.

Source: State's Diplomacy Strong Framework. | GAO-22-104519

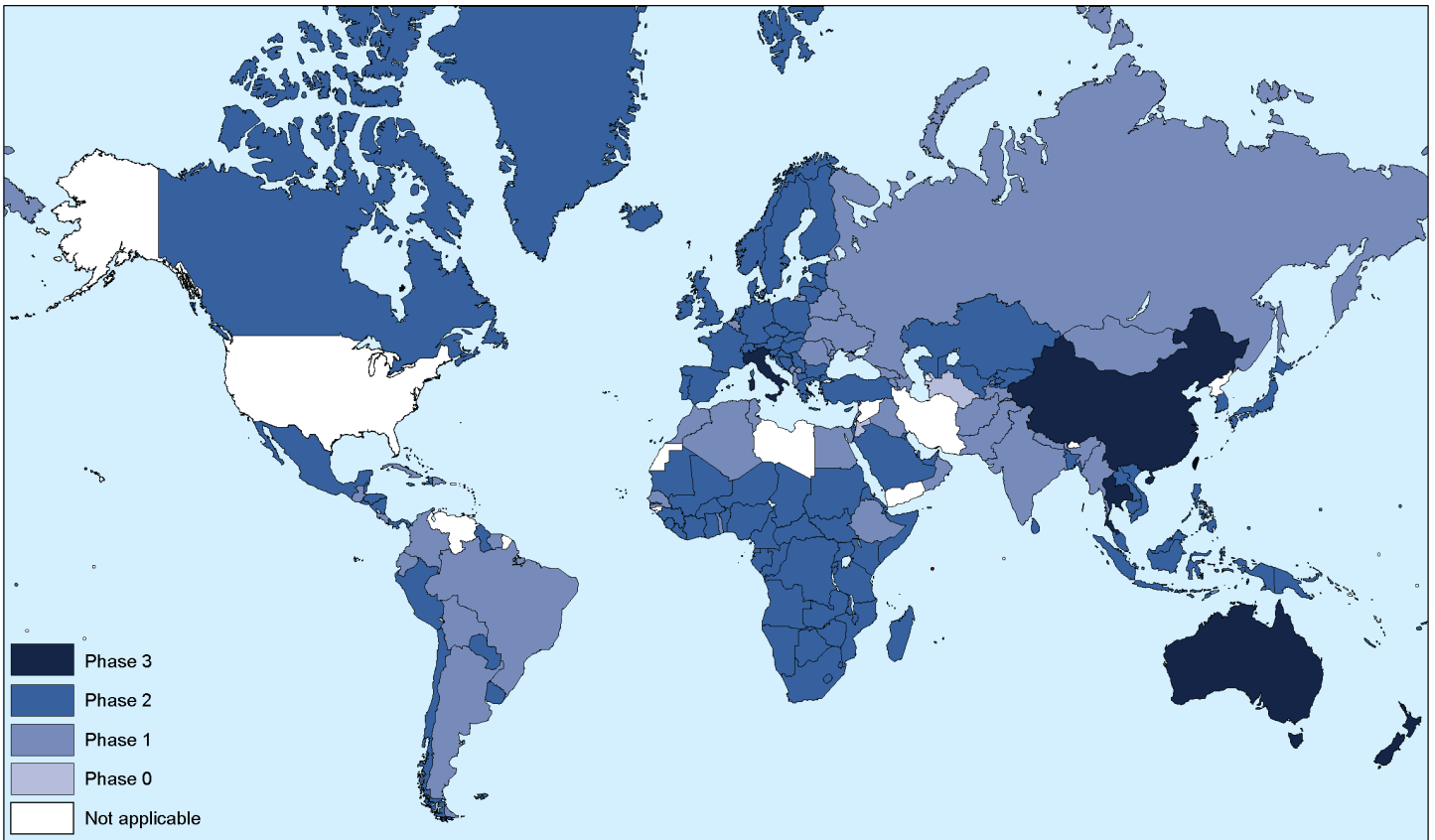
The framework then suggested that overseas posts consider additional local conditions to move between phases. Local conditions for overseas posts included a total of 27 indicators for overseas posts that were divided into six categories: (1) host country posture, (2) advisories in effect, (3) transportation, (4) security, (5) supply chain services, and (6) work environment.

The last consideration for posts, according to the framework, was policy and operational conditions based on their phase. For example, if a post was in phase 1, passport services were limited to processing life-or-death and mission-critical applications. If a post was in phase 2, posts were to practice moderate social distancing and could reopen common areas with established social distancing measures.

Overseas posts kept track of the six medical indicators and local conditions to make decisions about moving forward or back to a certain phase. For example, if essential businesses were open in the country, the post could be in phase 1. Once non-essential businesses opened, then, depending on the status of the other indicators, the post might have been able to move forward to phase 2. Each overseas post was responsible for updating its Diplomacy Strong phase in a dashboard that State had developed to summarize and visualize data. This phase dashboard displayed all overseas posts and phase status for users to filter through by region, country, post, and designated phase.²⁶ According to State, its use of a data-informed framework helped leaders make critical decisions about workforce posture, with a focus on health and safety. Figure 5 shows countries' Diplomacy Strong phase as of December 2020. State collected these data in its dashboard.

²⁶State developed additional dashboards to present data that it regularly updated to ensure that decision-makers had the most up-to-date information. For example, one dashboard reported host nations' posture toward U.S. government employees, including quarantine status and testing policies. State also created a dashboard to track the numbers of employees and family members on a global or post-specific evacuation. When State replaced the Diplomacy Strong Framework with the CMP, it also replaced these dashboards with the COVID-19 Priority Risk Indicators dashboard, which tracks four main risk indicators—community transmission, employee vaccination status, local hospital capacity, and local conditions.

Figure 5: Countries by Phase of State’s Diplomacy Strong Framework, as of December 2020



Source: GAO analysis of Department of State data (data); Map Resources (map). | GAO-22-104519

Note: The map illustrates the phases of State’s Diplomacy Strong Framework, which ranged from most restrictive COVID-19 mitigation measures (phase 0) to least restrictive measures (phase 3).

Despite Loss of Key Personnel and Public Health Restrictions, Telework and Other Adjustments Helped Overseas Staff Continue to Work

The evacuation of key personnel, in conjunction with public health restrictions limiting in-person work, reduced operations at overseas posts, with some posts losing more than 60 percent of their staff. State’s emergency planning guidance and the global evacuation policy did not provide sufficient information to posts on how to determine the staff resources and skills required during the pandemic. Equipping posts with this information, for varying types of emergencies, would better prepare them for future evacuations. While information technology improvements largely allowed overseas staff to telework, State does not collect information on overseas telework, limiting its ability to make data-driven decisions about its future use.

Evacuation of Key Personnel and Public Health Restrictions Reduced Operations at Overseas Posts

Impact on Overseas Operations Was Uneven, with Some Posts Reduced by More Than 60 Percent

The evacuation of about 20 percent of overseas staff from 291 posts between January 2020 and December 2020 affected overseas operations unevenly, with a small number of posts losing a large proportion of staff. As shown in the table below, 12 posts of varying size and location lost 60 percent or more of their overseas staff via evacuation.²⁷ In contrast, almost half of overseas posts lost less than 10 percent of their staff. More than half of these posts were in Europe, but there were posts in most regions of the world that lost a minimal number of staff.

Table 1: Posts from Which 60 Percent or More of Overseas Staff Evacuated during Calendar Year 2020

Post	Regional bureau	Percentage of overseas staff evacuated
Wuhan, China	East Asia and Pacific	100 ^a
Lusaka, Zambia	Africa	100 ^a
U.S. Mission to the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN), Indonesia	East Asia and Pacific	100
Addis Ababa, Ethiopia	Africa	76
Yaounde, Cameroon	Africa	73
Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia	East Asia and Pacific	73
Surabaya, Indonesia	East Asia and Pacific	71
Ashgabat, Turkmenistan	South and Central Asia	67
Jakarta, Indonesia	East Asia and Pacific	65
Dar Es Salaam, Tanzania	Africa	62
Nairobi, Kenya	Africa	61
Lima, Peru	Western Hemisphere	60

Source: GAO analysis of Department of State data. | GAO-22-104519

Note: We estimated the percentage of overseas staff evacuated by dividing data on the total number of overseas staff evacuated during calendar year 2020 by the total number of filled positions as of December 2020. In this report, we are using “overseas staff” to refer to U.S. staff working overseas,

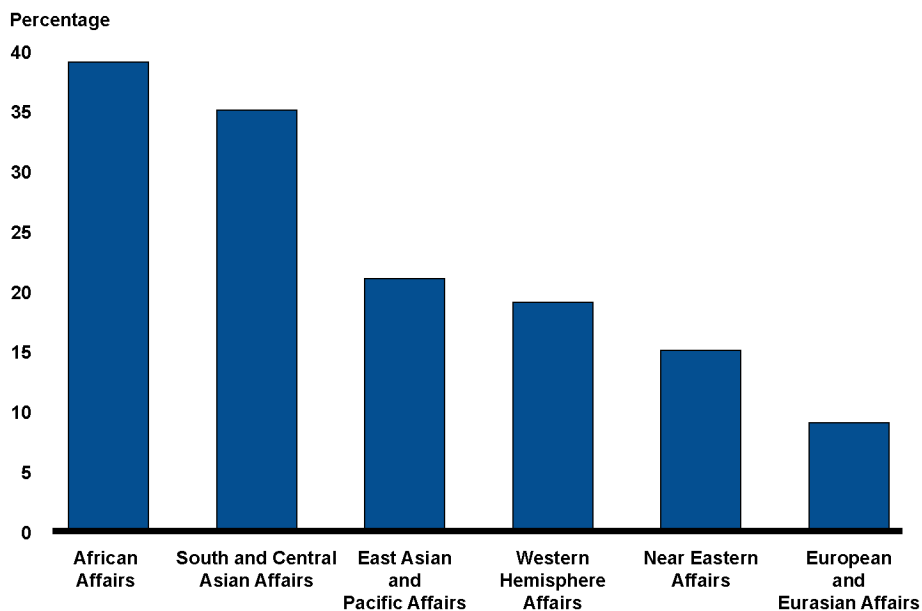
²⁷We estimated the percent of overseas staff evacuated (in total, and by post) by dividing data on the total number of individuals evacuated (U.S. direct hires and employed eligible family members) during calendar year 2020 by the total number of filled positions as of December 2020. Our post-level analysis excluded the 40 out of 291 posts with five or fewer overseas staff assigned.

which includes U.S. direct hires and employed eligible family members. It also includes U.S. and third country national Personal Services Contractors working for the U.S. Agency for International Development. These data do not include locally employed staff. Our analysis excluded the 40 out of 291 posts with five or fewer overseas staff assigned.

^aState data indicated that the number of staff evacuated from this post over the course of 2020 exceeded the number of filled positions. State said that this could be explained by inconsistencies in how posts reported data at different points in time and the different purpose of data trackers for evacuations and filled positions. In addition, some posts may have evacuated more staff during the course of the year than they have filled slots, because of rotation or curtailment.

Posts in Africa and South and Central Asia experienced the highest level of staff evacuations. About 39 percent of overseas staff assigned to posts in Africa and 35 percent of overseas staff assigned to posts in South and Central Asia were evacuated, as shown in figure 6. State officials in the Bureau of African Affairs told us that many staff departed posts in Africa because they feared experiencing a pandemic in a resource-constrained environment with limited access to quality healthcare. State officials said that a lack of access to respirators in host country healthcare systems was a particular concern for posts in Africa, and some staff were encouraged to evacuate.

Figure 6: Percentage of Overseas Staff in Each Region Who Evacuated during Calendar Year 2020



Source: GAO analysis of Department of State data. | GAO-22-104519

Note: We estimated the percentage of overseas staff evacuated by dividing data on the total number of overseas staff evacuated from posts in that region during calendar year 2020 by the total number of filled positions at posts in that region as of December 2020. In this report, we are using "overseas

staff" to refer to U.S. staff working overseas, which includes U.S. direct hires and employed eligible family members. It also includes U.S. and third country national Personal Services Contractors working for the U.S. Agency for International Development. These data do not include locally employed staff. Regions represent State regional geographic bureaus.

Evacuations resulted in staffing losses that were sometimes unevenly distributed across post sections. For example, in Kenya, staff told us that the consular and political sections were heavily affected by evacuations. In Azerbaijan, EAC members noted that the consular section as well as USAID had been greatly affected.

Some Posts Lost Key Personnel in the Absence of Information on Determining Staffing Levels and Critical Skills

State's emergency planning guidance for overseas posts, as well as the global evacuation policy created during the pandemic, did not provide sufficient information to posts to help them to determine the appropriate staff resources and skills required during the pandemic. State's emergency planning guidance stated that if an evacuation were necessary, the post must plan to keep a sufficient number of staff at the post to maintain certain emergency operating functions until a decision is made to lift the departure or suspend operations completely. According to the guidance, in preparing for a drawdown of overseas staff, the post must ensure that the following programs have sufficient resources: security, facilities and logistics, communications with State headquarters, U.S. citizen and other consular services, communication of U.S. foreign policy, public affairs, and human resources. The guidance noted that staffing needs may vary depending on the type of emergency and that posts should anticipate the number of staff members with appropriate skill sets that are needed to ensure continuity of operations. The guidance instructed posts to conduct a realistic staffing analysis for ordered departures and provided a worksheet for posts to identify the number of employees that should remain at post in each organizational unit and overall. However, the guidance did not provide information on how posts were to determine what would constitute a sufficient level of staff or how to determine the types of skills required at post for a particular type of emergency.

Further, the guidance did not require posts to calculate proposed staffing levels for authorized departures because, as noted in the guidance, staff were not required to leave. Most of the staff evacuated during 2020 were evacuated under State's global evacuation policy for COVID-19—and that policy did not contain information for posts on determining staff resources and skills required during the pandemic, beyond specifying that consular

officers should generally remain until the last phase of an evacuation.²⁸ While the global evacuation policy stated that employees occupying emergency positions who wished to depart post should review arrangements to fill the positions and consult with the regional bureau's Executive Office, it did not address overall staffing levels by section or the post as a whole.

Interviews with overseas posts and a review of lessons learned indicated that posts struggled with decisions on staff drawdowns and stated that the resources available to them for determining an appropriate staff "footprint" during the pandemic, including their EAP, were inadequate. EAC members in Kenya told us they did not use their EAP in conjunction with evacuation decisions, and said the embassy did not think strategically about its emergency staffing level, including which essential staff needed to stay at post. In Azerbaijan, EAC officials said they had consulted their EAP but found it to be of limited use in the pandemic emergency. They told us they looked beyond the EAP to assess people's backgrounds and skill sets to ensure coverage of critical functions. Officials in Turkmenistan reported that they were not prepared for the number of officers who decided to leave—especially those in key positions, such as in the Consular and Management sections. They suggested that each post evaluate its decision criteria for the evacuation of officers occupying critical positions, especially those necessary for the continued and secure operation of the post. In Milan, officials reported that the post's emergency personnel lists indicating who might need to remain at post were not suitable for a pandemic and required changes during the crisis. Officials in Kenya and Azerbaijan noted that responding to different types of emergencies requires different skill sets and entails different optimal staffing patterns. Providing posts with information to assist them in determining the skills and staff needed in different types of emergencies would help them be better prepared for future evacuations.

Posts Closed or Heavily
Restricted Access to Protect
Staff, and Host Countries
Imposed Lockdowns, Limiting
In-Person Work

In the first half of March 2020, some posts began imposing restrictions on travel and telling staff to limit their meetings. By mid-March, as some staff were evacuating, posts had implemented measures to minimize the number of staff working inside post facilities. Post management instructed most staff to stay home and telework to the maximum extent possible, and limited access to post facilities. On March 20, 2020, State announced

²⁸Department of State, "Global Authorized Departure for Individuals at Higher Risk from COVID-19," MRN 20 State 28418 (Mar. 15, 2020).

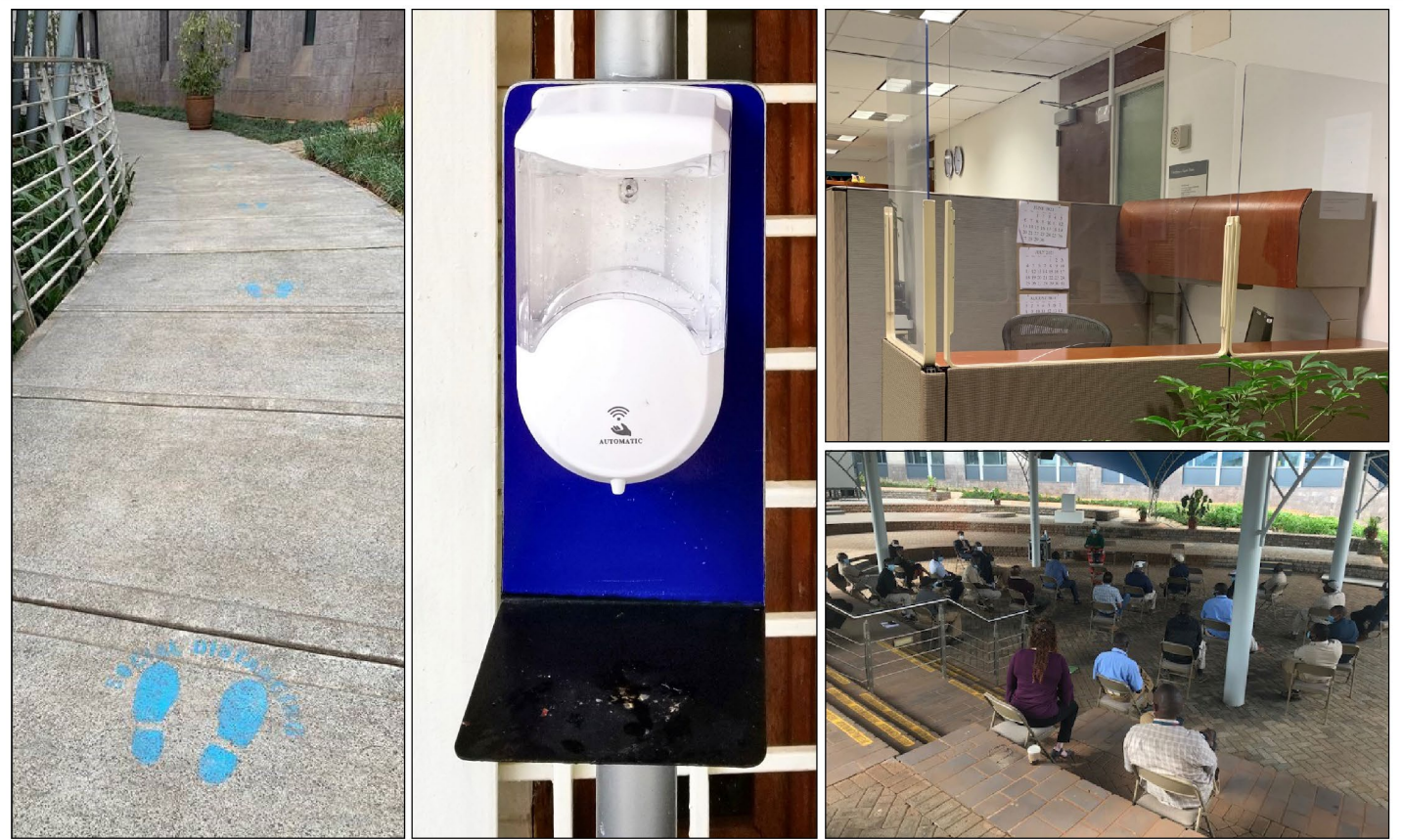
a suspension of routine visa services at overseas posts, which require in-person interaction.²⁹ Posts also began implementing team-based alternating schedules for those mission critical staff who needed to come into the office, such as maintenance staff and individuals working on classified information, in order to minimize the health risk.³⁰

As the pandemic progressed, State's Bureau of Overseas Buildings Operations developed a "COVID-19 Mitigation at Overseas Posts Toolkit" with guidance to help posts determine how to disinfect and reorient workspaces and other areas, improve ventilation, promote physical distancing, and install signage and hand disinfecting stations. Figure 7 shows some of these pandemic response measures at State's overseas posts.

²⁹This suspension of services lasted until July 2020, when State announced that posts could begin offering limited routine visa services according to the phase of Diplomacy Strong they had attained.

³⁰Team-based alternating schedules consists of creating cohorts or teams within an office and placing the cohort or team on alternating schedules for in-person work.

Figure 7: Examples of Pandemic Response Measures inside the Department of State's Overseas Posts



From left: physical distancing reminders, hand sanitizer, sneeze guards installed around workspaces (top), physically distanced meeting (bottom).

Source: Department of State. | GAO-22-104519

According to State, some host countries imposed strict lockdowns that impeded staff movements. For example, according to post reporting, the government's lockdown restrictions in Mongolia included closing all non-essential businesses and schools, prohibiting non-essential movement outside one's residence except during a few hours per day, and enforcing mask wearing by financial penalty.³¹ According to State, the government deployed national police who stopped vehicles and pedestrians at all major intersections in the capital to verify their purpose of travel and

³¹According to State, Mongolia did not experience community transmission of the virus until fall 2020, and imposed its first lockdown that November.

Employees Remaining Overseas Indicated that Staffing Shortages and Movement Restrictions Adversely Affected Operations

check whether they were associated with one of the excepted critical infrastructure organizations, which included foreign diplomatic missions. State officials told us that while diplomatic personnel were sometimes exempted from government lockdowns, it could be challenging for LE staff to access the post unless the embassy provided transportation with diplomatic license plates. In Mongolia, for instance, LE staff told us that the embassy provided transportation in embassy vehicles for staff who needed to travel to the office.

Overseas staff who remained at posts reported that their workload increased tremendously as their colleagues evacuated and the pandemic created additional tasks, particularly for those in the Consular and Management sections. As we previously reported, in response to the pandemic, State carried out a historic repatriation of more than 100,000 individuals who were in 139 countries between January 2020 and June 2020.³² This effort—largely led by consular staff at overseas posts—involved working with host governments, using social media to communicate with U.S. citizens, coordinating with other overseas posts, and drawing on staff’s local knowledge to navigate airports and around the country.

The Management section at overseas posts saw its workload increase with the addition of responsibilities related to post operations, creation and implementation of telework policies, and the logistical and physical aspects of staff evacuations. According to State officials in Kenya, staff evacuated quickly and did not always properly secure their residences or prepare them for an extended absence. As a result, the Management section faced several challenges while trying to manage the properties, including rodent infestations, property damage from water leaks, and problems accessing residences. As a result, substantial damage occurred to some staff housing, as shown in figure 8 below.

³²See GAO, *COVID-19: State Carried Out Historic Repatriation Effort but Should Strengthen its Preparedness for Future Crises*, GAO-22-104354 (Washington, D.C.: Nov. 2, 2021). The 139 countries include two territories, the West Bank and Gaza.

Figure 8: Damage to Post Housing in Kenya from a Water Leak



Source: Department of State. | GAO-22-104519

State's CIR surveyed overseas posts regarding the pandemic's impact on various aspects of posts' functions and found that operations were greatly affected, particularly in the first month of the pandemic (see sidebar).

Selected Findings from the Department of State’s COVID-19 Interim Review Survey of Overseas Posts

State surveyed 23 overseas posts and provided us with responses from 17. The survey asked respondents to characterize the impact of the pandemic in the first month, as well as in October 2020 and November 2020. Selected findings include the following:

- **“Very Negative”** impact on operations. Fifteen of the 17 posts stated that the impact of COVID-19 on internal operations in the first month of the pandemic was very negative, as did five of the 17 posts with regard to October 2020 and November 2020.
- **“Very Negative”** impact on the consular section. Sixteen of the 17 posts stated that the impact of COVID-19 on the work of the consular section was very negative in the first month of the pandemic, as did 11 of the 17 posts with regard to October 2020 and November 2020.
- **“Slightly Negative”** impact on security. Eleven of the 17 posts stated that the impact of COVID-19 on their security posture in the first month of the pandemic was slightly negative, as did eight of the 17 posts with regard to October 2020 and November 2020.

Source: Department of State. | GAO-22-104519

In particular, the CIR survey found that the pandemic had a very negative effect on the work of the consular section and a slightly negative effect on posts’ security. Eight posts cited the role of the Management section in overcoming operational challenges, with several posts noting that this section bore the brunt of the operational adjustments while also experiencing reduced staffing because of evacuations.³³ Moreover, State’s CIR report found that the staffing shortages caused by evacuations led, at times, to reduced critical services along with resentment among staff who stayed at post and were managing a significantly higher workload than before the pandemic.

Our interviews with overseas staff at posts illustrated the impact of personnel shortages on operations—staff we spoke with were covering multiple positions, sometimes across sections. For example, in Azerbaijan, officials told us that a member of the Economics office ran the Consular section for a period of time. In Mongolia, the Information Management Officer (IMO) had been acting as Facility Manager during the pandemic and was due to take over as the Acting Management Officer.

In addition to its effects on operations, the pandemic has also affected implementation of foreign assistance programs at overseas posts. According to State and USAID officials, travel restrictions and other public health regulations affected the agencies’ planned programming. We previously reported that the pandemic substantially affected State’s, USAID’s, and their implementing partners’ ability to conduct project monitoring.³⁴ The USAID Office of Inspector General has reported that the pandemic and associated travel restrictions limited USAID’s ability to monitor its foreign assistance programs, increasing the potential for fraud or misuse, and that the effectiveness of the agency’s shift to remote monitoring is still to be determined.³⁵ However, agencies said that they were generally able to repurpose funds to meet changing needs brought on by COVID-19. In addition, USAID officials told us that one positive aspect of pivoting to virtual programs during the pandemic was an

³³State provided us with survey responses from 17 of the 23 posts that CIR surveyed, and we determined that was sufficient for our review.

³⁴See GAO, *COVID-19: Better USAID Documentation and More-Frequent Reporting Could Enhance Monitoring of Humanitarian Efforts*, GAO-22-104431 (Washington, D.C.: Jan. 26, 2022).

³⁵U.S. Agency for International Development Office of Inspector General, *USAID Adapted to Continue Program Monitoring during COVID-19, but the Effectiveness of These Efforts is Still to be Determined*, Audit Report 9-000-21-007-P (Washington, D.C.: May 21, 2021).

increased participation rate among program participants. For example, in Mongolia, more women were able to attend online trainings because they did not have to travel, find childcare, or overcome other logistical barriers, according to USAID.

Overseas staff we interviewed—those who remained at post and those who evacuated—generally mentioned experiencing high levels of stress during the pandemic. Staff at overseas posts cited stress from an increased workload and expressed concerns with being overseas while borders were closed, commercial flights had stopped, mail was delayed, and local medical systems were potentially overwhelmed. Evacuated staff mentioned stress from uncertainty regarding their timeline for returning overseas and workday adjustments to align with the time zone of their overseas post. Both categories of staff noted that telework tended to blur the lines between work and home life. Posts cited a variety of measures instituted to boost staff resiliency, such as virtual events, as well as promoting access to mental health care through counseling resources.

Information Technology Improvements Largely Allowed Overseas Staff to Telework, but State Does Not Collect Information on Telework at Posts

Posts Implemented a Maximum Telework Policy and State Took Steps to Support It

State implemented a maximum telework posture on March 16, 2020, directing most staff to work from their personal residences. IRM officials told us that State had already begun migrating some functions to the cloud pre-pandemic, which helped to facilitate telework. However, prior to the pandemic, overseas posts did not regularly utilize telework, as State maintained that the responsibilities of overseas positions required in-person attendance. This meant that posts needed to pivot quickly to an operational posture they had never envisioned.

Telework Access to the Department of State's Network

State officials described the following options for accessing the department's network for telework.



"GO mobile" on smartphones.

GO mobile allows smartphone users to access State's Microsoft 365 applications and OneDrive. State officials told us that newer smartphones are needed to use GO mobile.



"GO browser" on personal computers.

GO browser provides web-based access to some State systems through an internet browser on the user's personal computer. State officials said that most staff were using it at the transition to maximum telework.



"GO virtual" on personal computers.

GO virtual is a Citrix environment that allows users access to more State applications than GO browser. State officials told us there is a \$360 annual cost per user.



"GO desktop" devices.

GO desktop devices, which are specifically configured laptops, create a Virtual Private Network (VPN) session with headquarters. According to State officials, it is the most efficient way to access State's network.

Source: State Bureau of Information Resource Management.
| GAO-22-104519

State officials said that State helped overseas posts transition to maximum telework posture by providing department-wide guidance on the creation of telework policies, and posts' Management section and human resources department determined post-specific policies and drafted telework agreements for State staff. Officials at the four overseas posts with which we conducted virtual site visits told us that their State/IRM colleagues worked diligently to assist in getting State staff connected to State's network and to provide necessary equipment such as smartphones, laptops, wifi hotspots, webcams, and headsets. Information Management Officers at posts also created user guides and assisted staff with trainings and troubleshooting.

In the weeks and months after moving to maximum telework, State expanded the infrastructure and access for existing products that allowed teleworking staff to access State's network, or "Global OpenNet" (GO) (see sidebar).

State officials noted that the most effective way for staff to telework was through GO desktop devices—specially configured laptops—which were increasingly provided to U.S. staff in overseas posts as the pandemic progressed. Nine out of the 10 interviews we conducted with State's regional bureaus and EACs identified GO desktops as an example of a key technology improvement that aided telework. A regional bureau official commented that GO desktop laptops helped them be more productive by allowing them to access systems that were not on GO browser and could only be accessed through State's OpenNet. Appendix II provides details on how State used COVID-19 relief funds to enhance access while teleworking and to purchase equipment.

Overseas Staff Experienced Some Challenges Teleworking, but State Considers Telework an Operational Success

State overseas staff and LE staff experienced challenges in teleworking from their residences when State initially moved to a maximum telework posture. State's CIR report acknowledged that telework had not been a traditional part of State's work culture in overseas posts. The report noted that, for State staff in general, a number of issues made telework challenging, if not impossible, for many employees. These issues included lack of equipment, the number of legacy platforms that are difficult to access and use while working remotely, the inexperience of staff in using real-time collaboration tools, and the high cost of sufficient home internet connections. The report also noted that the transition to maximum telework highlighted equipment access issues, particularly for the approximately three-quarters of State staff who had not been issued U.S. government-furnished mobility equipment, such as laptops.

State's CIR report identified high cost and limited accessibility of internet connections as a barrier to teleworking overseas. Officials we spoke with emphasized internet connectivity as a challenge, as well as other issues specific to host countries (see sidebar).

Department of State and U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) Officials' Reflections on International Telework

State and USAID officials we interviewed described some benefits of telework, including work-life balance. However, teleworking from home required successfully connecting to an employer's network. State and USAID officials at selected posts around the world told us they experienced the following problems in doing so.

- **Power outages.** "It's frustrating to be working and have the power go out, since that also means the internet goes down, and then you can't access any websites or do any work." "Telework is tough; frequent power outages can make internet access challenging," and officials often went into the office because "internet access is more predictable there." —Officials at a post in Africa
- **Uneven internet coverage.** "The biggest challenge is that the internet drops a lot and we don't have enough bandwidth to use video on our team calls." "Internet connection quality depends on where you live." —Officials at a post in Asia
- **Expiring passwords.** "Some people's passwords expired after they had left post on Global Authorized Departure...it was weeks, maybe even months" before State HQ found a way to remotely reset them. They could not telework during this time. —Officials at a post in the Caribbean
- **Host government restrictions.** The government unpredictably placed restrictions on the internet, which complicated telework capabilities. "We couldn't use messaging or video conferencing applications." —Officials at a post in Eurasia

Source: State and USAID officials at overseas posts. | GAO-22-104519

According to State officials, in some parts of the world, LE staff do not have internet at their residences. Officials said the cost of maintaining a fast enough connection, if one is available, can be prohibitively expensive. According to State's CIR report, 28 percent of LE staff at posts in Africa and 17 percent of LE staff at posts in South and Central Asia said that a poor or non-existent home internet connection, stemming from the host country's technical infrastructure, hindered their ability to effectively do their work. The report also noted that for staff located in countries where internet connections are not a standard feature in personal homes, the cost of internet installation and recurring service fees can be a significant financial burden.

Despite these challenges, in all 10 interviews we conducted with officials in State's regional bureaus and members of posts' EACs, officials characterized telework as an overall success. For example, officials from a regional bureau stated that State went to extraordinary lengths to enable global telework, characterizing it as "an enormous lift that has been hugely successful." Members of one post's EAC said that when their personnel were spread across various time zones on global evacuation, the post was able to develop a "telework rhythm" and have coverage most of the day. The post appointed a U.S.-based "telework deputy" who would receive assignments from staff at post as they logged out and would then distribute these assignments to the U.S.-based staff to work on while staff at post were offline.

State conducted a Telework Capabilities Survey about 6 weeks after maximum telework was instituted to assess employees' telework experiences and identify barriers to telework productivity and effectiveness. State sent the survey to 108,000 domestic and overseas State personnel, including LE staff. In response, 80 percent of almost 20,000 respondents indicated being "very satisfied" or "somewhat satisfied" with their overall telework experience. In addition, 44 percent of respondents said they expected to telework more often than before COVID-19. Finally, State reported that a key takeaway of the survey was "don't revert to business as usual (because the) workforce sees the value of telework."³⁶

In October 2021, State issued updated guidance on overseas telework. State told us that the guidance requested that all overseas posts develop

³⁶Department of State, *Telework Capabilities Survey: Results and Findings* (June 2020). The survey was conducted from April 27, 2020 through May 30, 2020.

State Does Not Track Use of Telework at Overseas Posts

post-specific telework policies for U.S. direct hires by December 1, 2021. According to State, the policies will allow situational telework but will not permit regularly scheduled telework—in line with the department’s policy prior to the pandemic.

State does not maintain any information on telework participation for U.S. direct hires at overseas posts. *Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government* states that management should use quality information to achieve the entity’s objectives, and as changes to objectives and risks occur, management should change information requirements as needed.³⁷ Management should process the data into quality information which should be used to make informed decisions and evaluate the entity’s performance in achieving key objectives and addressing risks. In addition, management should periodically review policies, procedures and related control activities and if there is a significant change to a relevant process, it should be reviewed.³⁸

State did not authorize routine telework at overseas posts prior to the pandemic. State told us that there is currently no requirement to collect information on telework for its overseas U.S. direct hires. According to State, telework agreements are completed on electronic forms maintained at the post, and electronic payroll systems for State staff assigned overseas do not collect information on telework. As a result, State cannot track or report on telework overseas for any State employee. State used telework as an operational response to the pandemic and, according to State officials, will continue to approve situational telework moving forward.³⁹ However, without information on overseas telework, State cannot assess its use and will not have the ability to make data-driven decisions about the future of telework abroad. Developing a plan that specifies how it could collect this information would position the agency to make informed policy decisions regarding telework.

³⁷GAO-14-704G, Principles 13.01, 13.02, 13.03: Use Quality Information – Identification of Information Requirements.

³⁸GAO-14-704G, Principle 12.05: Implement Control Activities – Periodic Review of Control Activities.

³⁹We have previously reported on the use of telework across the federal government during the pandemic, including at State. See GAO, *COVID-19: Federal Telework Increased during the Pandemic, but More Reliable Data are Needed to Support Oversight*, GAO-22-104282 (Washington, D.C.: Feb. 8, 2022). State collects and reports information on telework for domestic staff.

Posts Used State's Decision Framework to Evaluate Local Conditions and Return Staff to Posts Amidst Challenges

Overseas Posts Used State's Diplomacy Strong Framework to Evaluate Local Conditions and Make Operational Decisions

EACs at posts met frequently throughout 2020 to use the Diplomacy Strong Framework to assess medical and other local conditions, determine whether to recommend the COM change the post's Diplomacy Strong phase, and report their recommendation to State through a cable. According to the Diplomacy Strong Framework, the COM, EAC, and other post management, in partnership with the Under Secretary for Management, would drive the decision-making. Our analysis of cables from four selected overseas posts found that posts weighed the following factors, which included medical and operational benchmarks:

Local medical information, including data on new COVID-19 infections. EACs discussed local medical information, such as trends in new cases—one of the medical and health conditions included in the Diplomacy Strong Framework. In Kenya, the EAC cited the increased capacity and levels of testing by the country's Ministry of Health and the Embassy Medical Unit when recommending a phase progression in summer 2020. In Barbados, the EAC noted pressure on limited medical resources, among other factors, when recommending a phase regression.⁴⁰

Availability of commercial flights and medevac routes. Another factor noted by EACs was the ability of personnel to fly out of the country if necessary, particularly if a medical emergency occurred. Global medevac capabilities and the status of commercial air were discussed in almost every cable. In Azerbaijan, the EAC cited the ability for OPMED to

⁴⁰Some EAC reporting cables from 2021 contain discussions of vaccination rates at post and in host countries more generally. State began distributing vaccines to overseas posts in Iraq, Afghanistan and Somalia beginning in December 2020, but most posts received vaccines beginning in February 2021. State offered vaccines to U.S. staff, eligible family members, members of household, and locally employed staff. According to the four posts we met with, as overseas staff were vaccinated, portions of the workforce returned to the office.

provide aircraft to post within 48 hours as one of the factors allowing it to recommend that the post lift its authorized departure policy.

Host government pandemic response policies. Policies implemented by the host government to prevent virus spread, such as lockdowns, testing, contact tracing, quarantines, border controls, and masking, were cited by EACs in their discussion of phase changes. In Mongolia, the EAC cited significant changes in the government’s state of emergency in the capital city of Ulaanbaatar—announcement of a stay at home order, closure of non-essential businesses and schools, resumption of the 5-week quarantine, and suspension of inbound flights—in support of its recommendation that the post regress from phase 2 to phase 1.

The MED units at posts also played a role in providing the EAC with local medical information, including information on healthcare availability. According to overseas MED staff we met with, they also helped assess COVID-19 data reported by host governments; in some cases, these data were unreliable, but the MED units used different methods to verify trends. For instance, staff in the MED unit in Azerbaijan told us that they corroborated data provided by the government by checking with contacts in the health sector—if the government reported that COVID-19 cases were decreasing, and local medical officials reported that hospital beds were becoming more available, they could have more confidence in the data. One post told us that their MED unit did not typically play a large role on the post’s EAC, but given that the pandemic was a health emergency, the MED unit’s input was particularly important, and over time, their role in the conversation about phase changes grew.

Most of the officials we spoke with in State’s regional bureaus and at overseas posts characterized the Diplomacy Strong Framework as useful in making operational decisions during calendar year 2020, despite some limitations. Some officials told us they struggled to use some of the framework’s indicators—for example, whether to consider a school “open” if it was conducting virtual instruction—and said that State should have provided more instructions regarding the framework’s application. State’s CIR report found that personnel expressed the need for training in how to use the framework and a clearer description of the key terms and metrics. The report concluded that though the framework was useful at the start of the pandemic to guide missions as to how to structure their workforce, it waned in utility as the pandemic progressed, and updated metrics, to include criteria to move back phases, would have bolstered its

usefulness. State replaced the Diplomacy Strong Framework in September 2021 with the CMP.⁴¹

Flight Availability, Quarantine, and Testing Requirements Affected the Return to Posts for Evacuated Staff

With the Slow Return of Commercial Flights, State Arranged Charter Flights to Return Staff to Some Posts

International commercial air travel ground to a halt at the beginning of the pandemic, and for some countries, air space closures persisted for months, causing delays in the movement of U.S. government personnel. For example, State reported that Azerbaijan, Mongolia, and Kenya all stopped international air travel in spring 2020, and commercial flights did not resume until several months later. Even when international flights resumed, they were still quite limited in some countries, which made it hard for U.S. government personnel to secure seats.

As evacuated staff began returning to posts and staff started to rotate to new overseas assignments in June 2020, State needed to utilize charter flights in addition to commercial means of transportation. State reported that it used its OPMED aviation capabilities to move approximately 4,400 U.S. government personnel to and from overseas posts. This number represented a significant increase in OPMED's air support—according to State, OPMED conducted a total of 476 missions in fiscal year 2020 (including movement of U.S. government personnel as well as repatriations of private American citizens), as compared with 26 to 50 missions per year in previous years.⁴²

Even with the addition of charter flights, some posts reported delays in returning personnel because of the difficulty of securing a flight. For example, in Mongolia, State officials told us that the last group of

⁴¹According to State, the CMP is intended to reduce post workloads by eliminating some previous reporting requirements, as well as to simplify decision-making and allow greater flexibility domestically and overseas.

⁴²In addition to transporting personnel, the OPMED flights offered an opportunity to send needed laboratory equipment, PPE, and diplomatic cargo to posts. For example, in Azerbaijan, OPMED delivered equipment that provided COVID-19 and other medical testing capabilities to the embassy. According to State's CIR report, OPMED delivered close to 3,000 diplomatic pouches and over 150,000 pounds of cargo to posts, in addition to COVID-19 testing equipment.

Posts Needed to Negotiate with Host Governments on Quarantine and Other Requirements

evacuated staff returned via a charter flight in January 2021 because it was not possible to secure a flight until that time. State officials in Azerbaijan told us that obtaining permission for a U.S. citizen to arrive in the country is a large administrative burden that involves seeking permission from the Cabinet of Ministers via multiple diplomatic notes.

In addition to the logistical challenge of moving personnel between different countries during the pandemic, posts also needed to contend with each host country's pandemic-related entry requirements. The Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations sets international standards for the treatment of diplomats.⁴³ State told us that the Vienna Convention's standards are relevant to testing and quarantine requirements for U.S. government employees returning to overseas posts.

State officials at overseas posts said that they worked with State headquarters to negotiate the terms of testing and quarantine requirements with individual foreign countries. For example, State officials in Mongolia said that they had reached an agreement with the host government to allow MED personnel to monitor U.S. personnel in quarantine and conduct COVID-19 testing, rather than Mongolian government officials, and to prevent personnel who tested positive from being immediately detained and sent to the hospital. State officials noted that the family of an ambassador from another country was detained for an extended period in a Mongolian hospital. State officials at other overseas posts also mentioned negotiations with host governments regarding testing.

State MED's Health Alert Response Team (HART) in Washington D.C. played a large role in ensuring that U.S. staff returning to overseas posts met any pre-departure COVID-19 testing requirements. MED HART staff, some of whom were LE staff brought from overseas posts to the United States, tracked the various testing requirements, such as timelines and types of tests, for entry into each country. According to State's CIR report, between July 2020 and December 2020, MED HART coordinated or conducted pre-travel testing for 8,761 people, of whom 79 tested positive, were isolated, and delayed from traveling overseas.

⁴³Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations (1961).

State Has Identified Lessons Learned but Lacks a Procedure to Ensure Their Submission

State is responsible for collecting and preserving lessons learned from overseas posts after a critical operational event. During COVID-19, some individual posts reported lessons learned, including on communication, but not all posts submitted required lessons learned. State initiates the collection process by sending a request to posts for their lessons learned; however, it does not have a procedure to ensure that all posts submit them.

Posts Reported Lessons Learned on Communication and Telework

During the COVID-19 pandemic, State collected various lessons learned from 18 posts about their experiences and operational adjustments. State initiates lessons learned requests by sending a lessons learned template to a post following a critical operational event. CMS then collects the completed lessons learned template from the post and analyzes it. Of the 18 posts, six voluntarily submitted lessons learned related to the pandemic and 12 submitted them as required by their post-specific evacuation.⁴⁴

The 18 posts provided insights on successful operational adjustments and identified gaps. For example:

- **Informal communications were critical for connecting staff.** Thirteen of the 18 overseas posts reported using informal communication channels. A post reported that informal communication channels, such as weekly virtual town halls, were critical for providing clear, correct information, noting changes, responding to questions, and keeping the lines of communication open. Some of the 13 posts also created group chats in a messaging application to maintain communication within the post community.

Through the CIR, State identified that even after in-person engagements resume, foreign officials will expect to engage with State employees through a variety of means, including messaging applications. A recommendation of the CIR is that State should determine how to facilitate federally compliant use of messaging platforms by State staff to communicate with foreign officials.

- **Crisis management training could strengthen emergency preparedness.** Ten of the 18 overseas posts identified a need for future crisis management guidance, training, or planning. For

⁴⁴We previously reported on lessons learned State collected from overseas posts that assisted in the repatriation of U.S. citizens; see GAO-22-104354. In this report, we focused our analysis on the 18 cables that were intended to reflect lessons learned related to operational adjustments.

example, although U.S. officials in Saudi Arabia reported that the overall management of authorized departure at the post level was a success, it recommended that training in crisis communications and preparedness be a part of an annual training for key positions that have responsibilities for managing evacuations. U.S. officials in Iraq reported that when staff evacuated, the post lost capability and institutional memory. The post lacked specific cross-training or updated, written, standard operating procedures to handle the loss of staff and Iraq recommended that crisis management planning could include more information on how to maintain continuity of operations and reevaluate an initial approach to a longer crisis.

- **Connectivity is key for telework productivity.** Six of the 18 overseas posts identified telework connectivity issues as adversely affecting telework productivity. For example, U.S. officials in Azerbaijan reported bandwidth issues preventing the use of cameras in Microsoft Teams during its weekly country team meeting, which negatively affected communication. U.S. officials in Indonesia reported that the data connectivity required for video conferencing applications or telework posed challenges for almost all sections with LE staff. A lesson learned is to use simpler communication technology that require less bandwidth for town halls and other large events connecting hundreds of community members using various devices in multiple locations.
- **Telework requires sufficient equipment.** Five of the 18 overseas posts identified a need for more equipment in order to effectively telework. For example, some essential LE staff in Indonesia did not have government-issued smartphones with internet access, which posed communication challenges. LE staff at other posts were only able to access their work emails and make calls through their government-issued smartphones with internet access. In Botswana, post reported that its cell phone policy was created 5 years ago and limited smartphones to a certain subset of employees, effectively excluding others. According to the post, embassy management tried to ensure that LE staff could attend virtual meetings without smartphones, but some LE staff never succeeded in attending such meetings.
- **State could take steps to further facilitate telework.** Six of the 18 overseas posts had proposals concerning telework and its place in the future overseas work environment. For example, U.S. officials in Botswana proposed that every State employee should have a smartphone, contingent upon training and use of a handful of State telework applications (such as Microsoft Teams), to ensure that the

State community can speak a common technological language. U.S. officials in Thailand recommended that teleworking options should still be available after the pandemic following a review of the efficacy of situational telework across its large and diverse interagency, bilateral, and multilateral engagement.

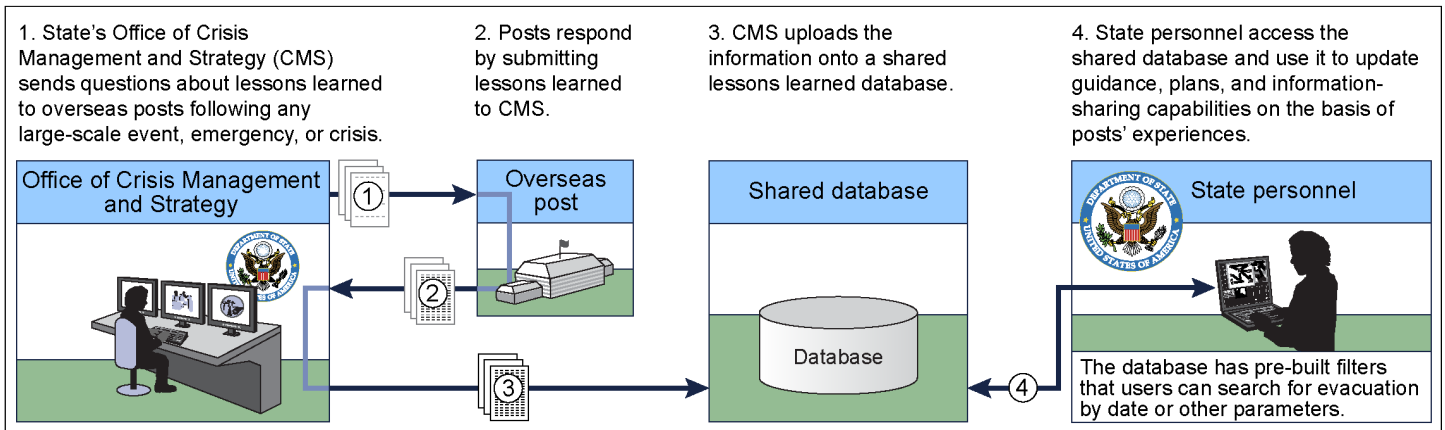
State Does Not Have a Procedure to Ensure that Posts Submit Lessons Learned as Required

State's CMS is responsible for collecting lessons learned, but there are currently no procedures in place for CMS to ensure their submission by overseas posts. According to the FAM, CMS has responsibility for convening State and interagency stakeholders to gather and preserve lessons learned after critical operational events to share across the organization.⁴⁵ At the beginning of the pandemic, State required posts to submit lessons learned to CMS following a post-specific evacuation. CMS officials told us that this requirement did not apply to posts that used the global evacuation policy during COVID-19. However, in March 2021 State updated its guidance to require posts to submit lessons learned following any large-scale event, emergency, or crisis, which State officials said would include a future global pandemic.

During 2020, 26 posts were on post-specific evacuation and were required to submit lessons learned, but three of the posts did not submit them. According to State guidance, CMS initiates the lessons learned process by sending a request to the post after the event, and the lessons learned review should be conducted within 30 days following the termination of an authorized departure, ordered departure, or a significant incident. Figure 9 illustrates this process.

⁴⁵1 FAM 022.2-3 Operations Center (S/ES-O).

Figure 9: State’s Process for Collecting Required Lessons Learned from Overseas Posts



Source: GAO analysis of Department of State data and interviews. | GAO-22-104519

The State guidance that requires lessons learned does not state what to do if a post does not respond to the initial request for lessons learned or lay out any other procedure by which CMS can ensure their submission. State’s CIR report found that CMS’s current process for collecting lessons learned fails to compel submissions. The CIR report recommended that State implement a lessons learned review procedure to ensure that best practices are captured and incorporated into preparations for future crises.

If posts do not comply with the lessons learned requirement, then CMS will not be able to fulfill its role to gather, preserve, and share these lessons. In addition, without developing a procedure to ensure that posts submit lessons learned, State may miss opportunities to leverage information to help improve its policies, procedures, or plans for future crisis response.

Conclusions

The COVID-19 pandemic has surprised the world with its global reach, duration, and impact on public health and the economy. State needed to make quick operational adjustments for more than 22,000 federal employees working in 173 countries around the world. In large part, these adjustments were successful—State was able to continue advancing U.S. interests abroad while shifting to a maximum telework posture. State’s global evacuation policy allowed staff to voluntarily depart posts and its Diplomacy Strong Framework provided guidance for making operational decisions.

However, overseas employees' varying interpretation of the new global evacuation policy and the brief eligibility timeline caused confusion and disparities among those employees on post-specific evacuations. Establishing an evacuation policy that applies to more than one post, such as the global evacuation policy used during the pandemic, and reviewing State's existing post-specific evacuation policies would help decrease confusion and uncertainty in future implementation. In addition, State's pandemic response unit did not have timely communication and engagement with other U.S. overseas agencies. Establishing guidance that directs State crisis response groups to maintain regular communication with other agencies present at overseas posts would help provide those agencies with the information they need to make decisions.

Further, while evacuations were occurring, some overseas posts did not have the information they needed to determine the resources and skills needed to staff the embassy in a pandemic, and in some cases, key staff departed. Providing guidance to posts on how to assess and document the critical skills required for different types of emergencies would enhance posts' crisis preparedness. During the pandemic, State created the infrastructure necessary for staff to telework from their overseas residences—something that had never been envisioned prior to the pandemic. State has also authorized posts to permit situational telework moving forward. However, it does not collect information on the use of overseas telework. While collecting such information could require adjustments to State's information systems, developing a plan that specifies how it could collect this information would position it to make informed policy decisions regarding telework.

State conducted an agency-wide interim review of its pandemic response and collected required lessons learned from some posts, but not others. Without a procedure to ensure that posts submit required lessons learned, State may miss opportunities to leverage information that could be used to improve the policies, procedures, or plans for future crisis response.

Recommendations for Executive Action

We are making the following six recommendations to State:

The Secretary of State should ensure that the Under Secretary for Management establishes a policy for evacuations that applies to more than one post to prepare for future global or regional crises. (Recommendation 1)

The Secretary of State should ensure that the Under Secretary for Management conducts a review of existing evacuation policies and determines whether such policies should be updated to include new efficiencies and flexibilities used during COVID-19, such as a streamlined process for calculating monetary allowances and increased flexibility regarding the length of evacuations. (Recommendation 2)

The Secretary of State should ensure that the Director of Crisis Management and Strategy establishes guidance that directs agency-wide groups responding to crises to maintain timely interagency communication with agencies present at overseas posts that would be affected by policies State implements during crises. (Recommendation 3)

The Secretary of State should ensure that the Bureau of Diplomatic Security provides additional information to posts on how to assess and document in their Emergency Action Plans the staff resources and critical skills required at post for different types of emergencies. (Recommendation 4)

The Secretary of State should ensure development of a plan that specifies how the department should collect information on overseas telework participation. (Recommendation 5)

The Secretary of State should ensure that the Director of Crisis Management and Strategy develops a procedure to ensure that overseas posts submit required lessons learned. (Recommendation 6)

Agency Comments and Our Evaluation

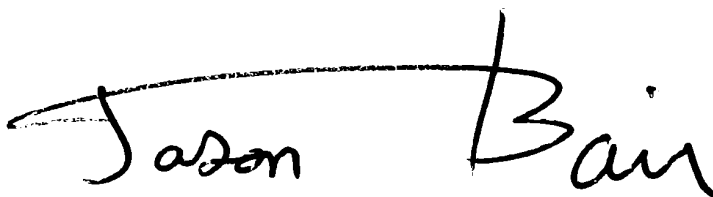
We provided a draft of this report to State and USAID for review and comment. State's comments are reprinted in appendix III and USAID's are reprinted in appendix IV. State and USAID also provided technical comments, which we incorporated as appropriate.

State concurred with five of our six recommendations. State partially agreed with our recommendation to ensure timely communication with interagency partners during crises, indicating that it already has a mechanism to share information with other agencies. Since that mechanism—the Washington Liaison Group—existed during the pandemic and we and State's own CIR report identified problems with interagency communication, we believe that additional action is necessary to ensure timely communication.

We are sending copies of this report to the appropriate congressional committees, the Secretary of State, and the Administrator of USAID. In

addition, the report is available at no charge on the GAO website at <https://www.gao.gov>.

If you or your staff have any questions about this report, please contact me at (202) 512-6881 or bairj@gao.gov. Contact points for our Offices of Congressional Relations and Public Affairs may be found on the last page of this report. GAO staff who made major contributions to this report are listed in appendix V.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jason Bair". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long horizontal stroke above the name.

Jason Bair
Director, International Affairs and Trade

List of Committees

The Honorable Patrick Leahy
Chairman
The Honorable Richard Shelby
Vice Chairman
Committee on Appropriations
United States Senate

The Honorable Ron Wyden
Chairman
The Honorable Michael Crapo
Ranking Member
Committee on Finance
United States Senate

The Honorable Robert Menendez
Chairman
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Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs
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Committee on Homeland Security
House of Representatives

The Honorable Carolyn B. Maloney
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The Honorable James Comer
Ranking Member
Committee on Oversight and Reform
House of Representatives

The Honorable Richard E. Neal
Chairman
The Honorable Kevin Brady
Republican Leader
Committee on Ways and Means
House of Representatives

Appendix I: Objectives, Scope, and Methodology

This report examines (1) actions Department of State leadership took to respond to COVID-19 and how it communicated these actions to overseas employees; (2) how overseas posts adjusted their operations at the onset of the pandemic and the extent to which these adjustments affected post operations; (3) how posts made operational decisions as the pandemic progressed and challenges they faced in returning evacuated staff to overseas posts; and (4) lessons learned that State has identified regarding adjustments to overseas operations during COVID-19, and the extent to which State collected them.

To obtain information for all of our objectives, we reviewed relevant State documents, such as policies and procedures in the *Foreign Affairs Manual and Foreign Affairs Handbooks* pertaining to post operations and emergency preparedness, cables documenting department-wide operational decisions, the Diplomacy Strong Framework, and the COVID-19 Interim Review (CIR) report.¹ We reviewed State data on post evacuations and the Diplomacy Strong phases that posts were in from January 2020 through December 2020.² We interviewed State officials about the data and performed electronic testing to ensure consistency. We found these data to be sufficiently reliable to describe the Diplomacy Strong phases of posts and the proportion of overseas staff who evacuated during 2020. We also reviewed data on State's use of COVID-19 relief funds through October 1, 2021. We found these data sufficiently reliable for our purpose of presenting State's use of COVID-19 relief funds for operational adjustments.

To examine the actions State leadership took to respond to the pandemic and how it communicated them to overseas employees, we reviewed guidance related to the global evacuation policy that State developed during COVID-19 and compared it to existing evacuation policies. We determined that the control activities and information and communication components of internal control were significant to this objective. Specifically, the underlying principles that management should document responsibilities through policies; periodically review policies, procedures,

¹Department of State, *Lessons Learned from the Department of State's Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic: December 2019–December 2020* (Washington, D.C.: June 2021). The CIR was conducted to identify lessons learned and make recommendations for improvement in emergency planning and response.

²State told us that posts were responsible for manually updating evacuation records and Diplomacy Strong phase data. They also told us that it is possible the evacuation data contain data entry errors and there may be a lag between when an individual departed post or returned and when the data were updated.

and related control activities; and communicate externally were relevant. We interviewed officials in a variety of State offices and bureaus in Washington, D.C., that played a role supporting overseas posts during the pandemic. These bureaus included the Office of Crisis Management and Strategy (CMS), the Bureau of Information Resource Management (IRM), and the Bureau of Medical Services (MED). We also interviewed officials in each of State's six regional geographic bureaus to discuss their role in communicating with overseas posts. Additionally, we interviewed officials at the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) to obtain the perspective of another agency with a significant presence at overseas posts.

To examine how overseas posts adjusted their operations at the onset of the pandemic and the extent to which these adjustments affected post operations, we obtained information on overseas posts' operational adjustments and decision-making during the pandemic, as well as the return of evacuated staff to posts. We determined that the information and communication component of internal control was significant to this objective, along with the underlying principle that management should use quality information. We selected four of 291 overseas posts with which to conduct virtual site visits: Azerbaijan, Barbados, Kenya, and Mongolia. Interviews with the overseas posts are not generalizable. At each post, we interviewed officials from the Emergency Action Committee, IRM, MED, and USAID, as well as locally employed staff, to gain their perspectives on their posts' operational adjustments, including information on overseas telework participation. We selected these posts on the basis of their size and geographic location, the proportion of U.S. staff who were evacuated, and the presence of a USAID mission, among other factors. We also interviewed officials in each of State's six regional bureaus to determine their role in operational decision-making, as well as officials with the American Foreign Service Association and members of various State employee groups to discuss their experiences with operational adjustments. Lastly, we assessed completed questionnaires from 17 of the 23 overseas posts involved in State's CIR that provided information to the department on posts' operational experiences during the pandemic.

To determine the lessons learned that State has identified, we conducted a content analysis of 18 lessons-learned cables that 18 overseas posts submitted to State regarding their evacuation or COVID-19 experiences. An analyst conducted the content analysis, which another analyst then independently verified. We also reviewed the completed CIR questionnaires, which contained questions on lessons learned, as well as

the CIR final report, which catalogued lessons learned and made recommendations for improving crisis response. We interviewed State officials to understand what steps they planned to take to address the identified lessons learned.

We conducted this performance audit from September 2020 to March 2022 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

Appendix II: Department of State Use of COVID-19 Relief Funds for Operational Adjustments

Congress has provided funding to support the Department of State's operational adjustments during the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2020, two COVID-19 relief laws appropriated about \$580 million for State's Diplomatic Programs account for expenses to prevent, prepare for, and respond to coronavirus, including for maintaining consular operations, reimbursement of evacuation expenses, and emergency preparedness.¹ In 2021, a COVID-19 relief law appropriated an additional \$204 million to State for similar purposes.² State reported obligating about \$700 million of this funding, as of October 1, 2021. See table 2 below for a description of how State used this funding.

Table 2: State's Use of COVID-19 Relief Funds for Operational Adjustments, as of October 1, 2021

Responsible bureau/office	Purpose	Allocated (dollars in millions)	Obligated (dollars in millions)	Expended (dollars in millions)
Bureau of Consular Affairs	Prevent, prepare for, and respond to COVID-19, sustain consular operations, support direct hire and locally employed staff, modernize information technology.	420.4	346.5	284.1
Bureau of Medical Services	Contract aviation support services, procurement of machines and testing supplies, vaccine distribution, knowledge management.	181.4	178.2	139.3
Bureau of Information Resource Management	Capacity expansion, licenses, network implementation for Global OpenNet, other costs/fees, acquisitions of mobile devices, increase in contracted staffing support.	63.2	62.2	55.7
Bureau of Administration	Cleaning, hand sanitizers, increased diplomatic pouch costs, emergency preparedness supplies.	24.2	23.6	13.7
Post Assignment Travel	Increased permanent change of station expenses because of movement delays and restrictions related to COVID-19.	46.0	43.2	43.2
Various bureaus and offices	Equipment, bandwidth, and other supplies to facilitate telework, physical distancing, and sanitized work spaces.	16.8	11.1	9.1

¹This funding was provided through two COVID-19 relief laws, the Coronavirus Preparedness and Response Supplemental Appropriations Act, 2020, and the CARES Act, and directed to specific accounts. Pub. L. No. 116-123, tit. III and IV, 134 Stat. at 147-148 and 152-53; Pub. L. No. 116-136, div. B, tit. VIII and XI, 134 Stat. at 554 and 590.

²This funding was provided through the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021, Pub. L. No. 117-2, tit. X, 135 Stat. at 238.

**Appendix II: Department of State Use of
COVID-19 Relief Funds for Operational
Adjustments**

Responsible bureau/office	Purpose	Allocated (dollars in millions)	Obligated (dollars in millions)	Expended (dollars in millions)
Foreign Service Institute	Procurement of technology licenses for virtual training and employment of additional instructors for language training.	12.2	12.2	10.2
Global Engagement Center	Address harmful COVID-19 propaganda and disinformation.	11.3	10.9	10.6
Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs	Repatriation of U.S. and foreign exchange program participants and extension of financial stipends.	5.0	5.0	5.0
Office of the Undersecretary for Management	Center for Analytics, Reimagine Task Force, and change management.	4.4	4.3	3.5
Bureau of Intelligence and Research	Opinion polling and global health analysis of pandemic response, unclassified mobile devices, secure mobile equipment for classified connectivity, and support contractors.	3.0	2.8	1.8
Bureau of Oceans and International Environmental and Scientific Affairs	Augment the capacity of the Office of International Health and Biodefense to respond to outbreaks of infectious diseases internationally.	0.7	0.5	0.3
Bureau of Global Talent Management	Emergency back-up childcare and adult care and development of leave guidance.	3.5	3.4	0.2
Total		792.0	703.9	576.6

Source: GAO analysis of Department of State data. | GAO-22-104519

Appendix III: Comments from the Department of State



United States Department of State
Comptroller
Washington, DC 20520

March 2, 2022

Thomas Melito
Managing Director
International Affairs and Trade
Government Accountability Office
441 G Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20548-0001

Dear Mr. Melito:

We appreciate the opportunity to review your draft report, “COVID-19: State Should Strengthen Policies to Better Maintain Overseas Operations in Future Crises” GAO Job Code 104519SU.

The enclosed Department of State comments are provided for incorporation with this letter as an appendix to the final report.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "William B. Davisson".

William B. Davisson (Acting)

Enclosure:
As stated

cc: GAO – Jason Bair
M – John R. Bass
OIG - Norman Brown

Department of State Comments on GAO Draft Report
COVID-19: State Should Strengthen Policies to Better Maintain Overseas
Operations in Future Crises
(GAO 22-104519SU, GAO Code 104519)

The Department of State thanks GAO for the opportunity to comment on your draft report entitled “*COVID-19: State Should Strengthen Policies to Better Maintain Overseas Operations in Future Crises*”. The report includes six recommendations for the Department. The Department concurs with these recommendations with modifications, as noted below.

The Department of State appreciates that GAO has already adjusted the language of recommendation 4, recognizing there is existing guidance for posts on how to assess and document in their Emergency Action Plans the staff resources and critical skills required at post for different types of emergencies.

Recommendation 1: *The Secretary of State should ensure that the Under Secretary for Management establish a policy for evacuations that applies to more than one post to prepare for future global or regional crises.*

Response: The Department of State concurs with this recommendation. The Department has mechanisms in place to respond to global and regional crises and will update our policies to clarify its applicability for evacuations involving more than one post.

Recommendation 2: *The Secretary of State should ensure that the Under Secretary for Management conducts a review of existing post-specific evacuation policies and determines whether such policies should be updated to include new efficiencies and flexibilities used during COVID-19, such as a streamlined processes for calculating monetary allowances and increased flexibility regarding the length of evacuations.*

Response: The Department of State concurs with this recommendation with a modification. The Department respectfully requests that GAO remove “post-specific” from the recommendation as evacuation policies are managed by the Department and apply to all 285 posts worldwide.

The Department will conduct a review of existing evacuation policies and determine whether such policies should be updated to include new efficiencies and flexibilities used during COVID-19.

Recommendation 3: *The Secretary of State should ensure that the Director of Crisis Management Strategy establishes guidance that directs agency-wide groups responding to crises to maintain timely interagency communication with agencies present at overseas posts that would be affected by policies State implements during crises.*

Response: The Department partially agrees with this recommendation. The Office of Crisis Management and Strategy shares every authorized departure and ordered departure notification with the interagency through the Washington Liaison Group and elicits feedback or questions. Each agency is responsible for disseminating that information within their respective agency or department and CMS cannot direct other agencies to communicate that in a certain way.

Recommendation 4: *The Secretary of State should ensure that the Bureau of Diplomatic Security provides additional information to posts on how to assess and document in their Emergency Action Plans the staff resources and critical skills required at post for different types of emergencies.*

Response: The Department of State concurs with the recommendation. The Department will provide additional information to posts on how to assess and document in their Emergency Action Plans the staff resources and critical skills required at post for different types of emergencies.

Recommendation 5: *The Secretary of State should ensure development of a plan that specifies how the Department should collect information on overseas telework participation.*

Response: The Department of State concurs with this recommendation. The Department recently created a new "eTelework" application for domestic USDH employees to establish telework agreements with their supervisor/office. The site enables the Department to collect and analyze data generated within the application. The Department intends to develop enhancements to the "eTelework" application that will enable data collection on telework by overseas USDH employees as well.

Recommendation 6: *The Secretary of State should ensure that the Director of Crisis Management Strategy develops a procedure to ensure that overseas posts submit requested lessons learned.*

**Appendix III: Comments from the Department
of State**

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Response: The Department concurs with this recommendation, as it already has a process to collect lessons learned reporting from overseas posts. The Department acknowledges additional improvements can be made to further mandate and enforce this requirement and will explore ways to update our policies and training.

Appendix IV: Comments from the U.S. Agency for International Development



February 15, 2022

Jason Bair
Director, International Affairs and Trade
U.S. Government Accountability Office
441 G Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20226

Re: COVID-19: State Should Strengthen Policies to Better Maintain Overseas Operations in Future Crises (GAO-22-104519SU)

Dear Mr. Bair:

I am pleased to provide the formal response of the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) to the draft report produced by the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) titled, COVID-19: State Should Strengthen Policies to Better Maintain Overseas Operations in Future Crises (GAO-22-104519SU).

USAID is committed to supporting the health, safety, and security of its personnel worldwide, while also achieving continuity of operations. USAID has been operationally resilient throughout the pandemic and continues to learn and adapt during our worldwide response. The COVID-19 pandemic identified areas of opportunity for USAID to improve operational readiness. As a result, USAID is taking substantive steps to reshape its approach to operational readiness worldwide.

I am transmitting this letter and the enclosed comments from USAID for inclusion in the GAO's final report. Thank you for the opportunity to respond to the draft report, and for the courtesies extended by your staff while conducting this engagement. We appreciate the opportunity to participate in the complete and thorough evaluation of the Department of State's overseas crisis response during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Sincerely,

Colleen R. Allen

Colleen R. Allen
Assistant Administrator
Bureau for Management

Enclosure: a/s

**COMMENTS BY THE U.S. AGENCY FOR INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT ON
THE DRAFT REPORT PRODUCED BY THE U.S. GOVERNMENT
ACCOUNTABILITY OFFICE (GAO) TITLED, COVID-19: STATE SHOULD
STRENGTHEN POLICIES TO BETTER MAINTAIN OVERSEAS OPERATIONS IN
FUTURE CRISES (GAO-22-104519SU)**

The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) would like to thank the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) for the opportunity to respond to this draft report. We appreciate the extensive work of the GAO engagement team.

Responding to the COVID-19 pandemic has challenged organizations, including USAID, to adapt quickly to changing operational environments worldwide. USAID appreciates the efforts of our colleagues at the Department of State to facilitate maintaining operations overseas while also protecting the health, safety, and security of our personnel. Planning for crisis events and learning from actual responses is an invaluable tool to ensuring continuity of operations, delivery of our foreign assistance objectives, and protecting personnel and other assets. We look forward to continued collaboration with our colleagues at the Department of State to reinforce our response efforts.

USAID has taken formative steps to learn from and improve its operational readiness. In January 2020, the Agency established the Critical Coordination Structure in the Bureau for Management. The Critical Coordination Structure as the name suggests coordinates with operating units in Washington and overseas to surge operational support prior to and during an emergency. In the last year, they supported responses to a breadth of country-specific and regional crises including most recently USAID Afghanistan and Operation Allies Welcome and a large-scale evacuation from Ethiopia. The support of the Critical Coordination Structure has improved internal and external coordination with key stakeholders, expedited policy and other support in response to the immediate needs of overseas personnel, and minimized operational disruptions.

The Agency committed to operational readiness as a strategic priority, measured through a Readiness Assessment. USAID is also partnering with the Department of State to learn from their established crisis management training and exercises to identify ways for posts with USAID missions to augment USAID engagement in these opportunities to improve post-specific responses. The Critical Coordination Structure meets regularly with key partners at the Department of State, which has improved our joint ability to coordinate on overseas operations.

Appendix V: GAO Contact and Staff Acknowledgments

GAO Contact

Jason Bair, (202) 512-6881, bairj@gao.gov

Staff Acknowledgments

In addition to the contact named above, Valérie L. Nowak (Assistant Director), Jennifer Young (Analyst-in-Charge), Nicholas Pigeon Rossy, Katya E. Rodriguez, Debbie Chung, Neil Doherty, Justin Fisher, and K. Nicole Willems made key contributions to this report.

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