

Congress of the United States

House of Representatives

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Opening Statement Ranking Member Elijah E. Cummings

Hearing on "Review of the New London Embassy Project" December 8, 2015

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for calling today's important hearing. As I said at our first hearing on the London embassy project back in July of last year, our diplomats serving overseas deserve the most secure embassies in the world.

Today, a year and a half later, I am pleased that experts from the State Department and its construction contractor have confirmed that this project is meeting all security specifications, including for the glass curtain wall that is being built to comply with all of the required security standards.

The recent attacks in Paris, as well as those here in the United States, remind us that we face threats not only in high-risk locations like Afghanistan. And of course, London has been the victim of its own horrific terrorist attacks, including the 2005 suicide-bomb attacks against the public transit system that killed 52 people, as well as the stabbing incident last Friday, the details of which are still being investigated.

As the President discussed in his speech Sunday night, the terrorist threat continues to evolve here and abroad. In Assistant Secretary Starr's written testimony today, he highlights the Department's efforts to research, develop, and evaluate new and innovative methods in order to protect our people in the face of this ever-changing threat.

In addition to meeting all of the required security standards, construction of the London embassy remains on budget and on schedule, according to the State Department. In her written testimony for today's hearing, Lydia Muniz, the Director of the Bureau of Overseas Building Operations, states that this project "is on budget and on schedule to be completed at the end of 2016."

Some people may not know this, but this entire project is being funded through proceeds from the sale of our existing embassy property in London, meaning that this project has posed no additional cost to the U.S. taxpayer.

Meeting security, budget, and schedule milestones during such a large-scale and complex project is no small feat. The Department has a rigorous construction schedule so that it can move our personnel from the existing, outdated embassy to the new facility as quickly as possible.

I also want to thank the Inspector General for being here today and for the work of his office in ensuring that funding is being used judiciously on this project. We have come a long way since the massive cost overruns and delays we saw in the construction of the U.S. embassy in Iraq during the previous Administration. However, we must always strive to continue improving our processes. So I thank the Inspector General for his report, and I look forward to hearing about any remaining concerns that may still need to be addressed on this project.

The new embassy currently being built in London will have more stringent security features than many other high-profile buildings throughout the world, including the building we are sitting in right here today in Washington, D.C. These features include blast resistance, setbacks from the street, anti-climb barriers, and a number of other specifications.

Today, I hope our State Department witnesses will discuss all of these issues, but I also hope they will address one more. While we must ensure that our diplomats serving overseas have secure facilities, we also have to make sure they are able to do their jobs. According to press reports, many diplomats are concerned that the United States will not be well-served by preventing our diplomats from being able to interact abroad. They are concerned that a fortress mentality will impair their work.

So in addition to addressing security concerns, which are paramount, I hope our witnesses here today will also discuss how they plan for the new embassy to operate in a way that maximizes the functions of our critical international diplomacy while keeping our diplomats safe.

Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

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