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Opening Statement

Rep. Elijah E. Cummings, Ranking Member

Hearing on "Examining New Embassy Construction: Are New Administration Policies Putting Americans Overseas in Danger?"

July 10, 2014

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for holding this important hearing, and thank you to all of our witnesses for being here today.

The horrific bombings of our embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998 were a watershed moment for our nation. Following those attacks, the State Department reported that 80% of its overseas facilities did not meet security standards, and Congress authorized billions of dollars to expedite embassy construction around the world.

As part of this effort, the State Department's Bureau of Overseas Building Operations launched the Standard Embassy Design initiative to promote the use of standardized designs for small, medium, and large embassies. This program has been very successful in achieving its goals. Since the year 2000, the State Department has constructed 111 new buildings and moved more than 30,000 U.S. personnel into safer facilities.

The program also has its limitations. For example, it typically requires large parcels of land, which sometimes result in buildings being constructed further from urban centers. Critics contend that this impairs U.S. diplomatic efforts overseas and makes it harder for officials to conduct their work.

As one commentator noted, the Standard Embassy Design initiative was "an expedient solution to an urgent problem ... but one that narrowly defined an embassy as a protected workplace and overlooked its larger representational role."

So we commend the tremendous progress made under the Standard Embassy Design initiative, but we must always ask whether we can do more. On this Committee in particular, we must ask how to make this program run even more efficiently and even more effectively. To me, there are three basic factors we must consider: security, cost, and function.

In 2011, the Department launched a new embassy construction effort called Design Excellence. As I understand it, this effort aims to provide the same or better security—at the same or lower costs—while improving the ability of American officials overseas to do their jobs.

This new program seeks to achieve these goals by being more flexible than the current program. For example, by incorporating more customized designs rather than standard designs, the Department may be able to build on smaller or irregular lots. This may allow more embassies to be located in urban centers to improve the effectiveness of our missions. These more flexible designs also may reduce costs—through lower initial construction costs and lower long-term maintenance and operating costs.

For example, the new U.S. Embassy in London, although not constructed entirely under this new Design Excellence concept, shares many of its principles. According to the State Department, this new facility will be more secure than the existing embassy, it will be more functional and effective for our diplomatic missions, it will be completed on time, and it will be built at no cost to the U.S. taxpayer. This entire project is being funded through the proceeds of sales from existing U.S. properties there.

The challenge with this new program, however, is the lack of data. No embassies have been constructed to date based entirely on this new concept. The new embassy in Mexico City will be the first facility constructed from start to finish under this initiative, but it will not be completed until 2019. And according to Mr. Green, who is testifying here today, the Department has not put together a comprehensive business case that analyzes the potential costs and benefits of this new program in detail.

We all know what can happen with the lack of adequate planning. Under the previous Administration, the new embassy constructed in Iraq went wildly over budget, came in well after the deadline, and was plagued with corrupt contractors. It ended up costing the American taxpayers hundreds of millions of dollars more than it should have. And that money could have been used to secure other U.S. facilities and American personnel throughout the world.

So, as we evaluate the merits and drawbacks of this new effort, we must keep one goal at the top of our list—the security of our diplomatic officials serving overseas. Mr. Chaffetz, who serves as the Chairman of our National Security Subcommittee, has asked whether this new initiative to customize diplomatic facilities could delay their completion. In other words, if customizing is slower than using standard designs, does that keep our people in harm's way longer as they wait for new, secure buildings?

I believe this is a legitimate concern. And I want to know from the Department what their answer is. Our diplomatic officials deserve the safest embassies in the world, and they also deserve facilities that help them conduct U.S. foreign policy in the most effective and efficient manner possible. I truly believe that every Member of this panel feels the same way.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and I look forward to the testimony from our witnesses today.

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