(U) Management Assistance Report: Remote Missions Face Challenges Maintaining Communications With Locally Employed Staff and Host Country Government Officials
(U) AUD-MERO-21-16, March 2021
(U) Summary of Review

(U) In the event of a natural disaster, political instability, or other security threats, the Department of State (Department) may decide to evacuate an embassy and establish operations in a separate location known as a "remote mission," often in another country, for an indefinite period of time. Remote missions include the Yemen Affairs Unit (YAU), which is operating remotely from the U.S. Embassy in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia; the Venezuela Affairs Unit (VAU), which is operating remotely from the U.S. Embassy in Bogota, Colombia; and Embassy Mogadishu, Somalia, which began operating remotely from the U.S. Embassy in Nairobi, Kenya, but now mostly operates from the Mogadishu International Airport in Somalia.

(U) While U.S. direct hire staff typically relocate to the location where the remote mission has been established, locally employed (LE) staff remain in the host country to support the remote mission. In some instances, after an embassy's closure, LE staff perform their duties working remotely from their homes.

(U) During an audit of remote missions, which is currently underway, the Office of Inspector General (OIG) identified challenges remote missions encounter communicating with LE staff and host country officials. This Management Assistance Report is intended to provide early reporting on those challenges to prompt timely corrective action. First, LE staff who remain behind in the host country often lose access to OpenNet, the Department's computer network, following the suspension of operations. Second, it may not be possible to provide remote access to OpenNet to those LE staff working remotely or teleworking from home following the suspension of operations due to information security concerns.

(SBU) OIG also found that U.S. direct hire staff at the YAU, the VAU, and Embassy Mogadishu rely on the use of electronic messaging applications, (b) (3) (B), (b) (7)(E), (b) (7)(F) to communicate with LE staff in the host country, as well as with host country government officials in order to continue diplomatic relations. According to YAU and VAU officials, use of these applications was adopted out of necessity because they are often the only feasible mode of communication available. Further, in some instances, host country government officials prefer to use specific electronic messaging applications over others. For example, Venezuelan interim government and Somali government officials prefer to use (b) (3) (B) to communicate because they perceive it to be a more secure application as (b) (3) (B), (b) (7)(E), (b) (7)(F) However, the use of these applications does not always align with Department guidance, which, among other things, is designed to safeguard sensitive information and promote compliance with Federal record-keeping requirements.

(U) To address the challenges faced by remote missions, OIG recommends that the Department establish guidance and procedures to ensure posts develop contingency plans for remote missions, including providing LE staff with continued access to OpenNet when

feasible so they can carry out their assigned job duties following the suspension of operations. OIG also recommends that the Department update its policies and guidance to ensure the use of specific electronic messaging applications aligns with the unique needs of remote missions while simultaneously protecting sensitive information and fulfilling Federal record-keeping requirements.

(U) OIG made four recommendations that are intended to address the challenges identified in this report. On the basis of responses from the Bureaus of Diplomatic Security, Administration, Information Resource Management, and the Foreign Service Institute, OIG considers all four recommendations resolved, pending further action. A synopsis of management's comments to the recommendations offered and OIG's reply follow each recommendation in the Results section of this report. Management's responses to a draft of this report are reprinted in their entirety in Appendices A through C, respectively.