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**Statement of Chairman Daniel K. Akaka
“A Review of U.S. Diplomatic Readiness:
Addressing the Staffing and Foreign Language Challenges Facing the Foreign Service”
Subcommittee on Oversight of Government Management,
the Federal Workforce, and the District of Columbia
Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs**

September 24, 2009

This hearing of the Subcommittee on Oversight of Government Management, the Federal Workforce, and the District of Columbia – *A Review of U.S. Diplomatic Readiness: Addressing the Staffing and Foreign Language Challenges Facing the Foreign Service* – will examine the results of two Government Accountability Office (GAO) reviews of diplomatic readiness at the State Department.

Diplomatic readiness means having the right people with the right skills in the right place at the right time to carry out America’s foreign policy. GAO’s reports make it clear – the State Department’s diplomatic readiness has been consumed by current operations, and now it must focus on rebuilding its capabilities.

The State Department struggles, in particular, with staffing and experience gaps at hardship posts. Mid-level gaps in public diplomacy are especially acute. GAO found that an ongoing shortage of Foreign Service officers (FSOs) has led to an over-reliance on junior officers working in positions meant for more senior officers. This undermines diplomatic readiness as junior officers handle duties without adequate preparation and experience, and senior diplomatic leaders spend more time assisting junior officers.

I urge the Department to follow GAO’s recommendation to fill hardship post positions with at-grade officers and thoroughly evaluate the incentives it offers to FSOs considering these assignments.

Foreign language gaps aggravate the staffing shortfalls, and are limiting the effectiveness of U.S. diplomacy. According to GAO, 73 percent of Foreign Service officers serving in Afghanistan and 57 percent of FSOs serving in Iraq do not meet the language proficiency requirements of their positions. Overall, almost one-third of all positions that require language proficiency are filled with individuals who do not fully meet the job’s language requirements. One number that especially troubles me for strategic reasons is the 40 percent language shortfall among FSOs serving in the Near East and South and Central Asia.

This is the third time this decade that GAO has recommended that the State Department take a strategic and systematic approach to addressing its language shortcomings. I believe the Department needs to fully commit to a strategic effort that involves its senior leadership and produces the meaningful performance measures and objective language proficiency analysis that GAO has called for.

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The State Department is not alone in its struggle for language proficiency. As a nation, the United States lags far behind other nations in foreign language proficiency, with less than ten percent of its citizens being able to speak another language fluently. When compared to the 56 percent of people who are multi-lingual in the European Union, it is clear that while the State Department needs a strategy for addressing its language shortfalls, the nation as a whole needs one too. We need more Americans both inside and outside of government to have the language skills that will support our national security and economic stability.

Earlier this year I reintroduced the National Foreign Language Coordination Act (S. 1010) to address our government-wide language gaps. Previous attempts, such as the National Security Language Initiative, were limited in scope and lacked clear leadership and sustainability. This bill would require the appointment of a National Language Advisor, the formation of a National Foreign Language Coordination Council, and the development of a national foreign language strategy. Leadership in this effort must be comprehensive, as no one sector – government, industry, or academia – has all of the needs for language and cultural competency, or all of the solutions.

Today, in addition to receiving State's and GAO's testimonies, I am pleased that we will also have the opportunity to hear from the American Foreign Service Association (AFSA) and the American Academy of Diplomacy. AFSA represents our FSO's and has been a champion for raising issues affecting diplomatic readiness. The American Academy of Diplomacy will give additional perspective on their report from 2008 entitled *A Foreign Affairs Budget for the Future*. Eight former Secretaries of State recently wrote a letter in support of this report and its recommendations for a significant increase in FSOs and an investment in the development of the Department's personnel.

The Obama Administration and this State Department understand the need and have requested funding for hundreds of additional Foreign Service officers. This growth in officers will provide sufficient staff and resources to allow for long-term foreign language training and other professional development without interfering with the Department's operations. But as we saw earlier this decade, with former Secretary of State Colin Powell's Diplomatic Readiness Initiative, these personnel and training gains can be quickly depleted if the strategic environment changes and long-term strategic workforce planning and resourcing are not firmly in place.

I look forward to hearing more about the issues affecting diplomatic readiness. We are fortunate that momentum is on our side and that there is a broad consensus that our Foreign Service needs to be supported.

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