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One Hundred Twelfth Congress
U.S. House of Representatives
Committee on Foreign Affairs
2170 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515
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October 15, 2012

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The Honorable Hillary Rodham Clinton
Secretary of State
U.S. Department of State
2201 C Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20520

Dear Madam Secretary:

We all agree that the deaths of four brave Americans at the hands of those responsible for the attack on the U.S. consulate in Benghazi is a tragic loss for our nation. We must therefore honor our fallen patriots by undertaking a full inquiry into how security was breached and how to prevent such a catastrophe from happening again. As you have stated, "It's essential that we go through all of the information and the entire context so that we can get a full and complete, accurate understanding of what happened... our diplomats and the American people deserve a rigorous, careful process."

The Department's and our Committee's responsibilities extend beyond the sequence of events leading up to the attack on Benghazi to other assaults on U.S. overseas posts on 9/11 and in ensuing weeks, including on our missions and diplomats in Egypt, Tunisia, and Yemen. Issues we must address include the process for assessing security needs, as well as questions of policy toward the host governments. As such, there are a number of oversight questions that require a full and immediate response.

Under Secretary of State for Management Patrick Kennedy testified to Congress on October 10th that: "The Department of State regularly assesses risk and allocation of resources for security; a process which involves the considered judgments of experienced professionals on the ground and in Washington, using the best information available. The assault that occurred on the evening of September 11, however, was an unprecedented attack by dozens of heavily armed men." How can anyone consider such an attack to be unprecedented? The persistent threat from Islamist extremists determined to do harm to frontline U.S. posts, particularly around the 9/11 anniversary, cannot be news to anyone after repeated acts of violence against our missions abroad, such as the takeover of our embassy in Tehran in 1979, the attack on our Beirut embassy in 1983, and the horrific bombings of the U.S. embassies in Nairobi and Dar-es-Salaam in 1998.

Moreover, it remains problematic that the security concerns of diplomats in the field may go unheeded by the State Department. Recent news reports indicate that Ambassador Christopher Stevens had expressed concern about security threats in Benghazi as attacks on Western targets increased and as his name along with those of certain Western European ambassadors, appeared on an al-Qaeda hit list. In the face of these threats, the requests for added security by the Regional Security Officer (RSO) responsible for Benghazi were ignored. In fact, RSO Eric Nordstrom testified that he previously said to a fellow RSO: “You know what is the most frustrating about this assignment [in Benghazi], it’s not the hardships, it’s not the gunfire, it’s not the threats. It’s dealing, and fighting, against the people, programs, and personnel who are supposed to be supporting me. . . For me, the Taliban is on the inside of the building.”

Given the difficult mission and competing demands on the Diplomatic Security Service (DS), the Government Accountability Office (GAO) has repeatedly recommended that the State Department perform a strategic review of DS so that it can properly allocate its resources and balance security needs with the diplomatic mission. According to the GAO, DS continues to face staff shortages and operational challenges that tax its ability to provide protection for an increasing number of dangerous posts. The review would focus on human capital and operational challenges, such as providing security for facilities that do not meet security standards. However, the State Department has failed to follow up on this recommendation, with the result, according to GAO, that DS fails to perform adequate training and oversight and continues to deploy inexperienced staff and personnel. Among other things, without strategic planning, DS is forced to utilize stopgap measures, including detailing domestic officers to unfamiliar overseas posts, to make up for shortages in protective details.

Absent the Department’s own strategic review, I would appreciate your response to a number of questions regarding the State Department’s allocation of funds and its priorities regarding the security of its personnel deployed abroad:

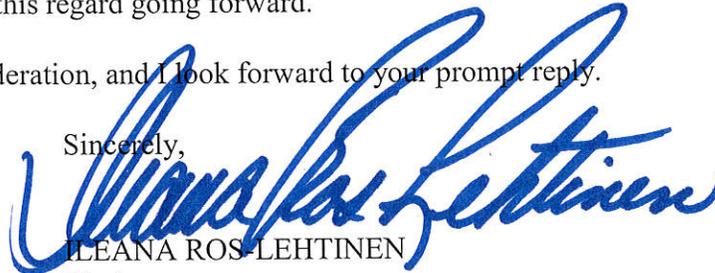
- Was there a waiver of the minimum security requirements at the post in Benghazi? Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Charlene Lamb testified before Congress that, “we had the correct number of assets in Benghazi at the time of 9/11.” When asked whether there were any budget considerations that led her not to increase the number of people in the security force in Benghazi, she answered, “No, sir.” Acknowledging that hindsight is 20/20, do you believe the risk assessment for Benghazi was adequate?
- How will the Department re-evaluate the risk assessment process for other vulnerable U.S. sites overseas as a result of the Benghazi attack? What re-assessments, if any, have taken place regarding attacks against our posts in Egypt and Yemen on 9/11 and the ensuing days and weeks?
- In the February 2012 report on the Department’s waivers of security requirements mandated by the Secure Embassy Construction and Counterterrorism Act of 1999, there were two waivers for U.S. diplomatic buildings in Sanaa, Yemen. Can you explain the process by which the Department determines waivers of physical security requirements and provide an explanation of how the waivers for Yemen were justified?
- Was there a waiver of the minimum security requirements at the post in Benghazi?

- Did the Government of Libya fail to fulfill its commitment to the security of the U.S. diplomatic mission? What should have been done differently?
- In August 2011, the Department requested \$800,000 in NADR funds to improve the capability of Libyan law enforcement to combat terrorists and terrorist organizations. In September 2012, the Department requested \$4,000,000 for Libyan border security. Given the concern with law enforcement capacity in Libya, why was security outside our consulate in Benghazi left in the hands of Libyan personnel?
- At what point do risk-mitigation measures reach a level that withdrawal from an overseas post is deemed to be necessary? Or as RSO Nordstrom so aptly asked: “How thin does the ice have to get before someone falls through?”

Finally, I would like to underscore the State Department has declined repeated requests by our Committee for hearings and classified briefings on Libya, Egypt, Iran, and other flashpoint areas. I request your full cooperation in this regard going forward.

Thank you for your consideration, and I look forward to your prompt reply.

Sincerely,



ILEANA ROS-LEHTINEN
Chairman