

Foreign Service Nationals: America's Bridge

The Bureau of Human Resources



U.S. Department of State
Chairin Ma'Roef (right) discusses the process of immunofluorescence analysis as Ambassador John E. Lange views influenza viruses in the U.S. Naval Medical Research Unit Viral Isolation Laboratory in Jakarta, Indonesia.

America's Foreign Service Nationals (FSNs) comprise the bulk of the 42,000 locally employed staff members working at more than 250 U.S. embassies and consulates worldwide. They perform vital foreign policy program and support functions, and provide the unique knowledge and understanding of local culture and conditions that are so important to America's transformational diplomacy. In addition to the U.S. Department of State, all U.S. government agencies abroad, such as the Department of Agriculture, the Office of the U.S. Trade Representative, and the U.S. Centers for Disease Control, rely heavily on the FSN community and the continuity it provides. Their knowledge, special skills, and rich network of local contacts are priceless. They are America's bridge to the other nations of the world.

The FSN community is integral to America's transformational diplomacy across the globe. Over the years, in many parts of the world, U.S. embassy FSNs have helped advance the ideals and strengthen the institutions of democracy on every continent. Libraries and cultural

centers in closed countries, for example, provide a refuge where readers gain free and open access to a diversity of thought and opinion. Local national staff of these centers regularly host democracy study groups and book debates, teach English and Internet-searching skills, and facilitate advanced research. FSNs work closely with clients ranging from university students to supreme court judges. As Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice has stated: "There is no higher calling than to help other people fulfill their aspirations for a better life, a more democratic future, and a more peaceful world."

Economic development is another important area in which America's FSNs contribute. Many find this field particularly rewarding as they pursue initiatives that advance the economic success of their home countries while expanding the global marketplace. An FSN economics specialist in Praia, for instance, used her expertise to help Cape Verde increase its export of finished textiles six-fold in one year, resulting in 600 new jobs for her country.

FSN scientists and researchers are key to the world's scientific cooperation. Avian flu and HIV/AIDS are just two of the innumerable concerns America's foreign national employees are working to solve with host-country colleagues. For example, an FSN in Estonia worked closely with American colleagues to convince Estonian government officials that HIV/AIDS is as much a threat to her nation as it is elsewhere. As a result of her efforts, Estonia became the first country in the region to receive a \$10 million grant from the U.N. Global Fund on HIV, AIDS, and Tuberculosis.

Similarly, at the grassroots level, a maintenance worker at the U.S. Embassy in Mozambique has created a traveling theater group to present HIV/AIDS skits and productions to school and private sector audiences. These performances



Andrew McClearn, U.S. Embassy Mexico City

Mexico City Foreign Service National employee Victor Ponce is sorting visa application forms for shipment to the Kentucky Consular Center where they will be processed.

close with honest and frank discussions with U.S. health experts. Smiles, laughter, and pensive looks are proof that the important messages of these amateur “road shows” are being heard.

When American citizens find themselves in a distant country hurt or lost or without a passport, an FSN is often the first person they speak to at the U.S. embassy or consulate. Consular FSNs assist more than one million Americans every year with a range of services, from replacement passports to guidance on local health care services to aiding the return of abducted children. When the tsunami hit Southeast Asia in December 2004, America’s steadfast FSNs stepped in to aid the many U.S. visitors in their countries. Undaunted by the chaos, dangers, or long hours, many traveled to the disaster areas to immediately establish a visible American embassy presence and offer first-response assistance to stranded U.S. citizens. They provided transportation to hospitals, gave meals and clothing, assisted with communications to family and friends, and even generously opened their homes to some of the dispossessed travelers.

At the same time, these FSNs worked hard to support their own communities, playing a crucial role in the global response to the 2004 tsunami, the largest international humanitarian relief effort in history: They coordinated between donors and government officials and other diplomatic missions, organized blood drives and shuttled donating employees to local hospitals, and packed trucks with food, clothing, and medicine.

The community of 42,000 FSNs is unique, and its

members work hard to support each other and build bonds across their borders. A good example of this is the FSN staff of the U.S. Embassy in Belgrade who coordinated and organized a recent indoor soccer tournament for FSN teams from across the region. The event was so popular that they plan to make the tournament an annual event.

FSNs also support each other financially when serious hardship befalls their own. The global corps has given assistance to employees in earthquake-ravaged Pakistan, war-torn Liberia, and hurricane-ravaged Haiti. In addition to support for their FSN colleagues after the terrorist attacks in Jeddah, Nairobi, and Dar es Salaam, 70 FSNs who lost homes and property to civil unrest in Harare, Zimbabwe, also received aid from the worldwide FSN community. This strength of fellowship goes back as far as 1983 and the bombing of the U.S. Marine barracks in Beirut, when FSNs from as far away as El Salvador sent contributions to the families of those FSNs killed and injured. The FSN Relief Fund—with contributions from both FSNs and Americans—has granted more than \$300,000 to fellow employees in more than 22 countries.

America’s Foreign Service Nationals are the glue that holds our embassies together. These local national employees are an integral part of the U.S. diplomatic team, as only they best understand how to serve as a bridge for Americans to the cultural and political environment of their homelands. ■

<http://www.state.gov/m/dgbr/>



U.S. Department of State

Foreign Service National employees from Sarajevo (Bosnia and Herzegovina) and Podgorica (Montenegro) in the finals of an indoor football tournament hosted by the U.S. Embassy in Belgrade, Serbia. Other participating teams were from Belgrade, Budapest (Hungary), Zagreb (Croatia), and Sofia (Bulgaria). Podgorica won the finals 2-1.