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One Hundred Sixteenth Congress
U.S. House of Representatives
Committee on Foreign Affairs
2170 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515
www.foreignaffairs.house.gov

May 11, 2020

The Honorable Gene L. Dodaro
Comptroller General
United States Government Accountability Office
441 G St. NW
Washington, DC 20548

Dear Comptroller Dodaro:

The COVID-19 outbreak has created unprecedented challenges for the State Department as international border closures and other travel restrictions around the world have made it very difficult for tens of thousands of Americans around the world to return home. The State Department effort to help bring these individuals back to the United States has resulted in the repatriation of more than 80,000 Americans to date. State Department efforts to repatriate Americans continue and could spike again depending on virus-related developments around the globe.

We are aware that the Government Accountability Office is reviewing the United States Government's efforts, led by the Department of State, to repatriate American citizens during the COVID-19 outbreak. An audit of the strategic planning and implementation of these efforts is vital and will help Congress determine the effectiveness of the strategies utilized and possible ways to enhance the Department of State's capabilities to repatriate Americans in crisis, including through additional legislation or resources. We look forward to receiving the results of this effort.

In order to further the Committee's understanding of both the planning and effectiveness of efforts by the U.S. government to repatriate American citizens during the COVID-19 crisis, we request that GAO's ongoing review include the evaluations of the following as feasible:

- The Department of State's level and quality of preparedness and strategic planning in place at the outset of this crisis to repatriate Americans from around the globe.
- The effectiveness of Department of State communications with U.S. citizens regarding repatriation assistance, including when issuing passports or travel documents, at the outset of the crisis, and over the duration of the global repatriation effort.
- The establishment, mandate, and operations of the Repatriation Task Force as the key node in the Department for coordinating and executing global repatriations, and the communications and coordination between the Repatriation Task Force and U.S. embassies and consulates engaged in repatriations.
- The State Department's diplomatic engagement and negotiations with foreign countries to retain or re-open commercial air space to enable the departure of U.S. persons from foreign countries in a timely fashion.
- The Department of State's decision to prioritize use of commercial charter flights, in addition to directly operating "K-fund" charter flights and review whether the Department sufficiently considered other means to support repatriation efforts, including requesting Secretary of Defense activation of the Civil Reserve Air Fleet or using Department funds to subsidize or otherwise incentivize the standing up of commercial charter flights.
- The Department of State's system for issuing promissory notes to citizens to cover the costs of their repatriation flights, including whether the Department has effective mechanisms to ensure repayment of these loans.
- A determination of whether prices for State chartered K-fund repatriation flights were consistent with pre-crisis prices as required by Department of State regulations, how the Department responded to any evidence it received of possible price gouging on commercial charter flights operated at the Department's request, and steps the Department took to address price concerns with commercial carriers.
- The total cost of COVID-19 repatriation efforts for the Department of State and a determination whether existing Consular Affairs fee generation/cost-recovery mechanisms are adequate for supporting current and future repatriation needs.

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- A determination of whether the Department of State provided adequate Personal Protective Equipment to employees physically involved in repatriation efforts where social distancing may have been difficult to observe, and if Bureau of Medical Services protocols for protecting against transmission risk on State-organized evacuation flights were sufficient.

We thank you for your assistance in this matter and your efforts to undertake this important audit. Please do not hesitate to contact our staff at (202) 225-5021 with any questions or concerns, or to discuss these issues in more detail.

Sincerely,


ELIOT L. ENGEL
Chairman


MICHAEL T. McCAUL
Ranking Member