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STATE
DEPARTMENT

Problems in the
Diplomatic Courier
System



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**National Security and
International Affairs Division**

B-233559

February 6, 1989

The Honorable James A. Baker III
The Secretary of State

Dear Mr. Secretary:

Our review of the State Department diplomatic courier pouch system indicated that improvements are needed to ensure timely and secure communication between federal agencies in the United States and U.S. diplomatic posts abroad. Diplomatic pouches used to carry material are inviolate—they cannot be opened or detained by a receiving country. About 15 percent of U.S. pouch material is classified and must always be accompanied by couriers. The focus of this report is the material to be accompanied by courier.

Results in Brief

We found the following specific problems:

- Shipment of large, bulky items has strained the capability of the pouch system. Volume has more than doubled in the last 5 years.
- Individual courier trip reports identified numerous problems that affected pouch delivery and security. These problems are related to shortcomings in security escort efforts, improper handling of classified materials, breakdowns in delivery trucks, and trucks without communication capabilities.
- Use of nonprofessional couriers is not limited to emergencies and isolated cases as required by State regulations. Because the use of nonprofessional couriers is not centrally controlled or monitored, State officials do not know how many nonprofessional couriers have been authorized at the over 250 diplomatic posts. However, State internal studies have indicated that breaches of security had resulted because nonprofessional couriers were being used almost at will. Our work in Washington and at the Frankfurt regional courier office showed significant increases in the use of nonprofessional couriers in 1987 and 1988 compared to such use in 1986. Moreover, some of the reasons given by State for using nonprofessional couriers do not appear to meet the emergency justification requirement.
- State has not performed routine spot inspections or periodic test checks of ordinary pouched packages or crates to have reasonable assurance that drugs, liquor, and other prohibited material are not entering the system.

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- An issue is emerging that may affect the diplomatic pouch system in the future. The State Department has decided to provide escorted transport for building materials associated with construction and security upgrades. However, a growing number of countries view the shipment of large bulky items as courier-accompanied pouch material to be a breach of the spirit of the international agreement that governs the use of diplomatic pouches.

Agency Views

In an August 3, 1988, letter, we presented our concerns to the Under Secretary of State for Management and asked about any ongoing or planned efforts in these areas. On August 19, 1988, the Acting Under Secretary responded that during the past several years the Department has been giving close attention to improving the pouch system but, because of budget constraints, has not been able to do everything it would have liked. He also stated that changing technology and demands on the system require the Department to reassess how best to provide courier service to ensure maximum security and efficiency as economically as possible. He made the following comments on our concerns:

- Until recently the courier service was somewhat successful in restricting the use of courier channels for the shipment of large, heavy, bulky items of questionable classification. It now appears that large, heavy courier loads are a fact of life and will not readily disappear. Adjustments are continually being made to cope with this situation.
- Although the Department strongly supports the escort program, a number of inherent problems and impediments do exist.
- Major improvements and changes in logistics and storage have occurred or are planned.
- The increase in nonprofessional couriers is a serious concern to the Department. In Washington attempts are being made to stem the number of nonprofessional couriers. Only the courier office headquarters is allowed to issue courier letters. The reason for such use must be fully justified, and the courier must personally appear for a briefing. However, persons designated as nonprofessional couriers at overseas posts are issued courier letters by the post. They are not required to be briefed but are requested to read instructions sent out by the courier service to all posts.
- It is not practical to unpack, examine, and repack all items received at the pouching center, but items are inspected for originator authorization, proper preparation, and its contents if warranted. If items do not fit standard-sized pouches or for some reason concern the pouch control

officer or others processing the parcels, the originators are always questioned.

- The Diplomatic Courier Service must function under the guidelines of the Vienna Convention and State's policy on security for diplomatic material.

Conclusions

We believe that with the expected continued high volume of classified pouch material and the security and logistical problems already being experienced, State must take the necessary steps to avoid breaches in the safe and prompt delivery of such material. In our view, State can enhance the diplomatic courier pouch system's capability to carry out its mission by improving management controls and operational practices.

Although State acknowledges that the increased use of nonprofessional couriers is a serious problem that has resulted in breakdowns in security, the use of such couriers has not declined. Even after having received a briefing or having read security instructions, nonprofessional couriers do not have the support system or the experience that professional couriers have to effectively cope with the various logistical and security problems that may arise. Therefore, we believe State needs to tighten its controls, with the objective of reducing the number of nonprofessional couriers. This should include oversight by the Washington headquarters of the Diplomatic Courier Service on the number of nonprofessional couriers used by overseas posts and the rationale for such use.

To provide reasonable assurance that use of the courier pouch is not being abused, State should not be expected to open and examine every package. However, a periodic test check is necessary to deter improper and possibly illegal use of the pouch system.

Recommendations

We recommend that the Secretary of State

- ensure that professional couriers are used whenever possible, as required by regulations, and implement controls to ensure that the use of nonprofessional couriers is limited to emergencies and isolated cases and
- routinely perform periodic inspections of pouches to provide reasonable assurance that only appropriate material enters the courier system.

The head of a federal agency is required by 31 U.S.C. 720 to submit a written statement on actions taken on these recommendations to the Senate Committee on Governmental Affairs and the House Committee on Government Operations not later than 60 days after the date of the report and to the House and Senate Committees on Appropriations with the agency's first request for appropriations made more than 60 days after the date of the report.

Appendix I provides a more detailed discussion of our findings and the Acting Under Secretary's comments. Appendix II shows the objectives, scope, and methodology of our review.

We are providing copies of this report to the Director, Office of Management and Budget, and to appropriate congressional committees.

This report was prepared under the direction of Joseph E. Kelley, Senior Associate Director. Other major contributors are listed in appendix III.

Sincerely yours,



Frank C. Conahan
Assistant Comptroller General

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Abbreviations

DCS Diplomatic Courier Service

Problems With the State Department's Diplomatic Courier Pouch System

Background

By agreement of the 81 signatories of the 1961 Vienna Convention, as well as general agreement among nonsignatory countries, the diplomatic pouches used to carry material are inviolate—they cannot be opened or detained by a receiving country. About 15 percent of U.S. pouch material is classified and must always be accompanied by couriers. The focus of this report is the material to be accompanied by couriers.

Courier services are provided for the U.S. government on regularly scheduled routes by the State Department's Diplomatic Courier Service (DCS) or the Defense Courier Service, depending on the destination. State Department employees with diplomatic passports can also be used as special nonprofessional couriers for unique requirements, emergencies, or in isolated cases for which scheduled courier routes do not provide the service required. DCS has 75 professional couriers that are headquartered in Washington, D.C., with Regional Diplomatic Courier Divisions in Washington, D.C.; Frankfurt, West Germany; and Bangkok, Thailand. Operating costs—excluding salaries—increased from \$6.3 million in fiscal year 1982 to \$11.4 million in fiscal year 1987.

In the United States, classified material may enter the State Department pouch system only through the Office of Communication's Diplomatic Mail and Pouch Center at the State Department headquarters building. At the Center, communication personnel prepare the pouches and necessary transmittal documents and sort the pouches by destination. Pouches destined for parts of Africa, the Caribbean, and Central and South America are picked up and delivered by couriers from the DCS Washington Regional Diplomatic Courier Division.

The remaining pouches are sent to the Defense Courier Service receiving station at Fort Meade, Maryland. The Defense couriers then transport the pouches on military or commercial airplanes to overseas receiving stations, where State Department personnel pick them up. The DCS couriers then carry the pouches to posts around the world on scheduled routes, generally providing weekly service.

Volume of Classified Material Increases

The volume of classified materials entering the State Department's pouch system increased from 1.5 million pounds in fiscal year 1982 to 3.6 million pounds in fiscal year 1987. The DCS has evolved from an organization carrying small envelopes to a major freight-hauling concern. Much of the current pouch volume is heavy, bulky crates. Pouch transportation and logistical systems, which were designed for the

movement of mail, are overcrowded and poorly equipped for the movement of large, bulky items.

At mail and pouch centers in Frankfurt and Washington, which handle 86 percent of the total volume of DCS material, much of the freight is processed by hand in cramped quarters. The pouch center in Frankfurt moves at least 26,000 pounds of classified pouches each week, largely by hand—including 200- to 400-pound crate pouches measuring 3 by 3 by 4 feet—in a basement facility with ceilings too low to use forklifts. Our review of pouches on hand during one week showed that about 31 percent of the pouches were large, unwieldy crates weighing an average of 114 pounds each. Division personnel told us that it is not unusual for a courier to accompany 35 to 50 pouches on a single trip.

The number of trips taken by the DCS over the past 2 years has increased by 21 percent, the number of days spent en route is up 13 percent, and the average weight carried each trip is up by 24 percent. According to a DCS official, it has been difficult to handle the increased volume. The number of full-time traveling couriers has not increased, but retired couriers are being asked to help on a part-time basis. Also, the official believes that the DCS has been able to cope with the increased volume by making other adjustments, such as special flights and increased use of nonprofessional couriers.

From 1982 to 1987, eight internal Department studies and issue papers raised concerns about the courier system's ability to transport the increasing volume of material securely and efficiently.

The large volume of classified pouches has led directly to security problems. To illustrate, in May 1987 a courier returned to Frankfurt from Vienna, Austria, with a load of 80 pieces weighing 5,291 pounds. According to this courier's report, it is "impossible" to provide adequate security when trying to oversee the loading, offloading, and maneuvering of "16 full baggage carts through a crowded terminal."

The result of the large increase in volume has been a shift in DCS emphasis from security to logistics. For example, according to one State Department study, the continual use of State courier channels to transport large pouch loads and crates is viewed by a growing number of countries as a breach of the spirit of the Vienna Convention accords, which portray the diplomatic bag as being primarily a means of communication. The study says that this situation represents "a depreciation in international credibility for the United States."

Support Problems Affect Delivery and Security

We reviewed Frankfurt couriers' trip reports covering the period from January 1 to September 15, 1987, to obtain information on the courier system operations. Our review disclosed that in 111 instances, couriers asserted that support problems had adversely affected delivery and/or security of the pouched material. Breakdowns in the courier support system that were reported include inadequate or late transportation at overseas airports, breakdowns in delivery trucks, trucks without communication capabilities, late or inadequate security escorts, improperly prepared pouches, or problems caused by the large pouch loads.

The security escort program, which some of the problems related to, was enacted in 1985 to provide the couriers with a cleared escort at all times, except when in flight. These escorts also provide surveillance over loading and unloading of pouches in aircraft cargo holds while the courier is aboard the airplane. We found that escorts were repeatedly late or were not provided. Also, Department studies have shown that DCS has not received full support from overseas posts in implementing the escort program.

The following examples are illustrative of security escort and other problems. In July 1987 a courier arriving at Leningrad in the Soviet Union was met by an embassy contact, but the contact failed to bring the proper identification. The exchange of incoming and outgoing pouches could not be made, and the incoming pouches had to be returned to Helsinki, Finland, and rescheduled for shipment.

In a second example, in February 1987 a courier leaving Frankfurt for Nairobi, Kenya, and other African posts found that one pouch was improperly prepared and had to be returned to the pouch center, correctly prepared, and rescheduled for delivery. Continuing his route, he found no escorts on arrival at two subsequent stops. On the third stop he arrived at the post, only to find that post personnel had forgotten to make arrangements to assist him with his 1,000-pound load. The courier was delayed for more than 3 hours, as laborers had to be found to carry the crates to a secure area. Continuing his route, he again found no escort upon arrival at another subsequent stop.

Some classified pouches were improperly handled. For example, in January 1987 a courier en route to Rabat, Morocco, was delayed overnight in Paris due to snow. The courier turned over his pouches to the security escort, who put them in the embassy vault for safekeeping. However, according to State records, the escort apparently left the door to the vault open and the pouches unattended. The next morning the courier

discovered the open vault door and unattended classified files and unsealed pouches. No Americans could be found. The escort returned about 1-1/2 hours later.

Increased Use of Nonprofessional Couriers Adversely Affects Security

State Department regulations state that a professional courier is to be used whenever possible. Nonprofessional couriers are to be used only in "emergencies" or in "isolated cases" for which DCS cannot provide the required service.

In the Frankfurt regional courier office, the use of nonprofessional couriers rose from 57 to 99 between 1986 and 1987. In Washington the number of nonprofessional couriers increased from 393 in 1986 to 500 in 1987. State officials advised us that, as of December 18, 1988, the number of nonprofessional couriers in Washington in 1988 was 477. Because the use of nonprofessional couriers is not centrally controlled or monitored, State officials do not know how many nonprofessional couriers have been used at over 250 other overseas diplomatic posts.

The frequent use of nonprofessional couriers is a cause of security concerns expressed in State Department studies. According to these studies, nonprofessional couriers are used almost at will, and incidents of classified pouches discovered to be out of the control of nonprofessional couriers have been numerous. Also, State officials told us that the increasing use of nonprofessional couriers has lowered security. They cited examples in which nonprofessional couriers have (1) lost control of classified pouches by checking them into passenger baggage handling systems unescorted, (2) allowed the pouch contents to be x-rayed in violation of the Vienna Convention protection, and (3) lost control of classified pouches for hours.

According to State, several factors account for the increased use of nonprofessional couriers. Among them are the necessity of responding to urgent needs when the courier service cannot deliver material on a regular schedule and the need of an employee going to a post for special duty to have classified material with him to complete the mission. However, other reasons that were given are less substantive. For example, (1) an agency may believe that the material will be misrouted by the pouch clerk or (2) the originating agency fails to anticipate a requirement and does not coordinate with the courier service. Courier trip reports noted instances of a nonprofessional courier being on the same plane as a professional courier.

Inspections Needed to Detect Pouch Misuse

State Department regulations generally limit the use of courier pouches to classified or official-use materials, certain unclassified but sensitive equipment, and occasional lightweight, unclassified letters. Narcotics, liquor, or items that could destroy life or property or injure persons handling pouches are among prohibited items. To ensure that regulations are being followed, the Department reserves the right to examine all materials intended for shipment through the pouch.

According to State's regulations, the use of diplomatic pouches is to be "strictly controlled." However, State does not periodically test check the contents of packages or crates to ensure that prohibited items are not being transmitted through the system. The regulations specifically authorize the inspection of improperly prepared or otherwise questionable pouches. However, such inspections are also generally not done.

According to pouch control officers in Washington and Frankfurt and other Office of Communications and DCS officials, restrictions on material entering the courier pouch system have not been enforced for years. For example, according to the Washington Pouch Control Officer, he has not opened a courier pouch since 1982. At that time, the Department attempted to control prohibited materials from entering the system, but an agency sending material objected, and the Department stopped. Other officials told us that because of objections by agencies sending material, there is little incentive for tight enforcement.

Internal Department studies suggest that a significant portion of pouch material may not properly qualify for courier pouches and is composed of improperly classified documents and equipment or other prohibited materials. However, the studies do not show the detailed basis for this conclusion. They do note instances of unqualified items, such as office supplies, liquor, and a plain steel pipe, having been found in classified pouches.

In the absence of pouch inspections, the extent of misuse is unknown. Most misuse is found incidentally. For example, in January 1988 Moscow personnel processing incoming classified pouches grew suspicious of a 163-pound pouch because it "sloshed," and liquids are prohibited from being carried in pouches. The pouch was subsequently opened and found to be filled with plastic bottles of drinking water. According to DCS personnel, in addition to being a pouch violation, the water cost over \$335 to ship, and it could have been ordered through the commissary in Moscow.

Emerging Issues

The volume of material carried through the courier system is likely to continue to increase in the future despite internal State recommendations to reduce pouch volume and international attempts to restrict pouch volume. The Omnibus Diplomatic Security and Anti-Terrorism Act of 1986 authorized a massive \$2.1 billion construction program to make security upgrades at posts around the world. Most of the overseas missions are being renovated in some way, and several new missions are being constructed. According to a September 30, 1987, policy decision by the Assistant Secretary for Diplomatic Security, much of the material to be used for these upgrades must be accompanied by a courier while in transit to post construction sites. Classified and unclassified items such as construction materials, furniture, furnishings, and supplies to be used in secure post areas are included in this requirement. Only concrete ingredients, paper, and cloth material are excluded.

The volume of material involved is expected to continue to have a substantial impact on DCS over the next 5 years. For example, according to a May 15, 1987, report on the program, shipments were being delayed because of problems in finding adequate courier support for relatively small projects in Eastern Europe.

As a counterpoint to this expected increase, pressures for reduced pouch volume have been building inside and outside the Department for years. Internal State Department studies have expressed concern about the greatly expanding definition of official-use items covered by pouch protocols. These internal studies urged the Department to voluntarily reduce pouch volume and seek alternate means of transporting large items.

The United Nations International Law Commission has proposed a draft set of articles¹ under which use of the diplomatic pouch could be more restrictive than under the existing Vienna Convention articles. The State Department's Assistant Legal Adviser for United Nations Affairs told us he believes that under existing Vienna Convention articles countries cannot limit the pouches.² However, internationally, 38 countries are

¹The U.N. International Law Commission was established by the General Assembly to promote the progressive development of international law and its codification. When the Commission completes draft articles on a particular topic, the General Assembly usually convenes an international conference of plenipotentiaries to incorporate the draft articles into a convention, which is then opened to states to become parties.

²The Vienna Convention indicates that (1) official correspondence between governments and overseas missions are considered inviolable and (2) diplomatic bags may contain only diplomatic documents and articles intended for official use.

now imposing their own restrictions on pouch size and type in response to large volume, terrorism, and economic considerations.

Agency Views and Our Evaluation

In his August 19, 1988, letter, the Acting Under Secretary of State for Management provided the following comments in response to our specific concerns:

- Until recently the courier service had been somewhat successful in restricting the use of courier channels for shipment of large, heavy, bulky items of questionable classification. Since 1986, when the Courier Service became part of the new Bureau of Diplomatic Security, rapid changes have taken place and new policies have been implemented. The main reason for the high increase in courier-accompanied dispatches was the policy change to require that all materials to be placed or installed within the core area of overseas missions, whether classified or unclassified, be accompanied by a courier. Many overseas missions are experiencing some type of renovation, and several new missions are being constructed. Large, heavy courier loads are a fact of life and will not readily disappear. Adjustments are continually being made to cope.
- Due to inherent problems with such things as schedules and traffic congestion, there will always be situations when the escort will not be at the ramp when the courier arrives. Other impediments include restrictions by host governments on escort access to the tarmac, customs requirements, and local security considerations. Couriers transit over 120 locations. State now has about 30 full-time escorts stationed in the most critical areas that require heavy courier activity. At other locations the recipient/sending post is responsible for providing escorts on a rotating basis from its staff members.
- Many improvements and changes in logistics and storage have occurred or are planned. New, larger vehicles can accommodate oversized loads. Secure warehouses have been constructed in two European locations to receive diplomatic material arriving by ship or air freighter. All new embassies will have adequate vaults, and other embassies' vaults will be upgraded to cope with larger pouch materials.
- The increase in nonprofessional couriers is a serious concern. Many cannot perform the job in a professional manner, and negative feedback from the field is often reported. Nonprofessional couriers do not have the support system necessary to cope with airport transits or solve problems on the spot when necessary; they may sometimes project a negative image of the courier service and the U.S. government.
- The pouch section in the Department and communications personnel overseas inspect all letters, flats, parcels, and other containers presented

for pouch dispatch for originator authorization, proper preparation, and its contents, if warranted. The Department receives an average of 123,000 items daily at its pouching center in Washington. It is not practical to unpack, examine, and repack these items. However, the Department always questions originators about items that do not fit standardized pouches or items that, for one reason or another, concern the pouch control officer or others processing the parcels. The Department has no current plans to review the enforcement of existing pouch restrictions.

- The Courier Service must function under the guidelines of the Vienna Convention and State's own policy on security for diplomatic material.

Even though the Department is required to maintain strict control over the use of pouches, it does not periodically test check the contents of packages or crates to ensure that prohibited items are not being transmitted through the system.

Under the concept of reasonable assurance, the cost of internal control should not exceed the benefits expected to be derived. In other words, State should not be expected to open and examine every package. However, without at least some periodic test checks, there is no deterrent to the improper and possibly illegal use of the pouch system. Moreover, State has no way of estimating the extent to which the system is perhaps being used for unauthorized purposes.

Objectives, Scope, and Methodology

This report marks our initial performance review of the diplomatic courier system. Accordingly, we performed a broad-based review to determine what problems, if any, the system has been experiencing in its efforts to provide timely and secure delivery service. Our work was primarily conducted in the Diplomatic Courier Service and Diplomatic Mail and Pouch Center offices in Washington, D.C., and Frankfurt, West Germany, which handle 86 percent of the total volume of DCS material. We interviewed officials, reviewed fiscal and programmatic records and reports, performed a variety of data analyses, and observed State staff during the course of their duties.

We also discussed courier operations with officials at Defense Courier Service headquarters and the receiving station at Rhein Main Air Force Base, near Frankfurt, West Germany.

Our work was performed between September 1987 and August 1988 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards.

Major Contributors to This Report

**National Security and
International Affairs
Division**

Joseph E. Kelley, Senior Associate Director, (202) 275-4128
Joseph F. Murray, Assistant Director
Roy F. Hutchens, Assignment Manager

European Office

John W. Nelson, Evaluator-in-Charge

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