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23 May 1980

MEMORANDUM FOR: Director of Medical Services

FROM: [redacted]
Chief, Center for Counterterrorism and Crisis Response

SUBJECT: Stress of Overseas Assignment

1. As you are aware, our Staff has been involved in preparing people for overseas assignments in the context of the increasing threat of international terrorism. In this work we have dealt with both new and experienced employees from all Directorates. During and following crises, we have had the opportunity to observe the reactions of a number of involved individuals. TDY travel has allowed us to observe personnel in a number of stations around the world.

2. The increasing hostility to Americans abroad, and particularly to US government officials, has increased the level of anxiety among both employees and their families. Specifically, the threat of violence has become more generalized and unpredictable. No longer is it sufficient to calculate the risk to oneself or one's family in terms of a known enemy; real sources of danger include terrorists, criminals, and mobs, all of which can occur, it seems, at any time and at any place. At the same time, there is the perception (real or imagined) that the USG is less able and/or less willing to afford adequate protection to its employees, viz. increased dependence on inadequate host government resources, apparent ambiguous policy statements, etc. In many cases employees successfully employ denial in dealing with this stress for themselves, but their problems become all too apparent in their concerns for their families.

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3. More generally we have found that families are playing a greater role in employee feelings about overseas assignment. For years spouses have had a difficult role of supporting employees by performing a number of operational functions about which they know very little. Spouses are becoming less tolerant of this exclusion and want greater recognition. At the same time there is the increasing incidence of spouses having independent careers; it is a rare overseas assignment where one of the family's careers does not suffer.

4. In the past the glamour of living overseas, as well as significant financial benefits, helped employees deal with the above general problems as well as the more specific stresses of particular locations (such as the cultural problems women have in the Middle East). Conditions have now changed so that the major benefit we hear from employees about serving overseas is that it takes them away from the problems at Headquarters. However, the problems at Headquarters contribute to the stresses overseas insofar as officers in the field feel they are getting insufficient support from Headquarters.

5. Increasing the financial rewards of overseas service may reduce, but will not eliminate, the effects of the above stresses. Its more direct effect would be to signal a reversal of the perceived trend to downgrade overseas duty exemplified by the Congressional and Treasury pressures to reduce allowances and tax benefits.

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