

Implementing Partners' meeting Notes: August 13, 2024

Agenda:

1. Mission Director Introduction of staff and advice on working in the current context
2. RSO Briefing on ordered departure issues and current situation
3. PLSO points and advice on security
4. OAA allowability of costs for the ordered departure, disruptions in field activities, and data calls
5. Q&A session facilitated by the Deputy Mission Director

Participants:

Reed Aeschliman, Mission Director

Carrie Rasmussen, Deputy Mission Director

Brian Aaron, Supervisory Agreement/Contracting Officer

Daniel Bleakmore, Regional Security Advisor, US Embassy, Dhaka

Fredrick Onyango, Supervisory EXO

David Browne, Mission Controller (A)

Lindsay Harnish, HAO Director(A)

Keith Nichols, PLSO

Kamruzzaman Shopon, PLSO

Reed Aeschliman, the Mission Director opened the session and thanked all the participants for joining. He also introduced the colleagues joined from USAID, and State. He stressed the need for security planning. Reed discussed different aspects of the security plan referring to uncertainty of the current situation. He noted that every situation has challenges and opportunities. He quoted: Look for areas where you can work on. Look for opportunities. Talk to your AOR/COR. USAID will extend all the support necessary to all the activities being implemented in the field. Together we will move forward. Inshallah we will get back with the help of all the IP's.

RSO explained the role of RSO, and the contribution it makes to the EAC for the safety and security of all the employees, and IPs. RSO quoted: "EAC comprises section heads and RSO who provides security recommendations to the Chief of Mission (COM), works closely with MD, and PLSO. RSO has standardized processes and practices. There is no one-size-fits all approach. RSO shares ideas and relies on individuals to find specific security needs and resource constraints. Therefore, do not be upset if you see the situation does not match with the existing security procedure. Emergency planning is important. It is bound to change. Planning should have flexibility. Key part of EAC is a series of decision points similar to trip wires/triggers. If any of

these points are met, a series of actions triggers". RSO also explained the start of student movements that led to violence to shelter in place to the introduction of 100% accountability. RSO explained Authorized Departure (AD) and Ordered Departure (OD) and what made RSO move from AD to OD. RSO noted that the Mission leadership is working to lift OD as soon as it is safe. Advised all to update planning, improve process, focus on the team, pause, restart, recalibrate. He expressed his optimism that the Mission will soon be able to operate smoothly after it reverses the decisions made (Shelter in place, OD, and AD).

PLSO: Explained the need for a proactive plan and to engage with PLSO for all the field level activities. PLSO will be better positioned to advise on all the security situations to both the IPs and USAID staff. PLSO coordinates with the Embassy RSO and shares the information available to all the IPs. PLSO noted that the security plan developed during the election could have been tailored to meet the current situation should it be made flexible. PLSO advised the IPs to review the existing security plan and emergency operations and take a look at how the staff and the situation is impacted. PLSO also advised all IPs to verify any information before making a decision. PLSO asked all the IPs in the field to relay the information available and pass those to the US embassy. PLSO in coordination with RSO will review that information, verify for authenticity and will provide feedback. PLSO also noted that USAID Washington is fully aware of the situation in Bangladesh. He advised all to stay vigilant and safe.

Brian Aaron: A letter has been issued from the Office of Acquisition and Assistance (OAA) signed by Brian Aaron, the OAA Office Director on August 12, 2024. Evacuation costs for US and TCN staff are allowed under any Assistance and Acquisition awards. Reach out to OAA for a copy if needed. Brian stated the letter was sent to USAID/Bangladesh bilateral awards. For field support awards the letter will be sent to A//CORs in Washington (OAA is collecting A/Cor contacts as of 8.14.24 so they letter is yet to be sent.) Brian stressed that the policy will not apply to BHA funded mechanisms. Brian stressed the need for the safety and security of all individuals over the program implementation. He noted that if an activity cannot be implemented, look for areas where activity can be implemented; find the areas where the opportunities are and work with AOR/COR and make the changes needed to do the right thing in this environment; Work with AOR/COR and brainstorm; OAA is open to discuss work plans, deliverables, reporting and BSMP. If BSMP with USAID logo is creating a problem, contact OAA via AOR/COR; Expect data calls asking USDH, and TCN location information, etc.; indicate where the activity is slowing down or speeding up in the field operations; when it is safe to operate; what is the status of USG property; any damages; projected expenditures; information on increase in expenditure in certain areas and decrease in other areas. Brian advised all the IPs to reach out to OAA in case an IP receives data calls from multiple sources for the same information. Upon receipt of such information, OAA will streamline it.

Question & Answer:

Question: I'm currently in Nepal, having been (reluctantly) evacuated last Wednesday. I'm working with my security office in order to expedite a return. I get the STEP updates periodically, but they're rather general. Can I get more specific security information from the RSO to feed to my security people in order to make decisions about returning to Dhaka?

Answer: This is a complex security environment. RSO provides general information such as do not travel. For specific information reach out to PLSO. PLSO will use its contacts with RSO and in the Mission to get you information. RSO is ready to provide best advice based on your individual interest. Take advantage.

Question: How long will the OD status remain? Does the OD status affect consular services for Bangladeshi Nationals?

Answer: As soon as it is safe and reasonable. Daily basis assessment is being done. EAC will meet and discuss this to reverse the OD decision. 30-days from the original authorized departure date of July 20 will be the first step. If the situation continues after 30-days, OD will be extended.

Question: What is your guidance for organizing events with Government officials in the coming days. What is the posture on hosting public events?

Answer: Limiting movements to essentials in the Diplomatic enclave. Meeting within the diplomatic enclave. Find areas safest to do your business. Own security planning matters most. Some meetings, if very important, talk to your AOR/COR. Business needs to continue. The Front Office will discuss with the Chief of Mission (COM) to decide. USAID Mission Director attended meetings within the Diplomatic Enclave.

Question: Is the USAID mission thinking of issuing any formal communication to the new interim government letting them know about development works USAID is currently doing in Bangladesh and seeking their support and cooperation?

Answer: First meeting with the ERD secretary next Sunday. USAID will have meetings with the interim govt when the time comes. Still observing who is the key advisor to Dr. Younus and will make a careful decision to meet. COM will first meet to establish a line of communication. We are working on talking points.

Question: What is the guidance on bringing in international STTA during the ordered departure? Upoma is planning for a number of upcoming evaluations.... what is the guidance for bringing in international STTA during the ordered departure?

Answer: USAID is not allowed to bring TDYers without prior clearance. For partners, use judgment and see your security plan.

Question: Since implementation of planned tasks are being impacted/ delayed to various extent, any plan for 'No cost extension' or 'reprogramming'?

Answer: Talk to your AOR/COR and find the opportunities and challenges. USAID is open to that.

Question: OD review after 30 days was mentioned. Can you share what date you will revisit OD?

Answer: On August 19, 2024, the OD status will be reviewed and a decision will be made whether OD will continue or not. Second review of OD will be done on September 18, 2024.

Question: Is teleworking approved for all staff who have evacuated?

Answer: Depends on the organization's policy.

Question: Private sector partners of all USAID activities are keen to get their businesses going again. If opportunities arise for an event in a safe site in Gulshan/Baridhara highlighting USAID support to a particular private sector partnership, are Mission staff open to attending, including Mission Director?

Answer: Yes. Within the diplomatic enclave. Even during shelter in place civil society and the private sector partners had the opportunity to meet with the Mission Director at his residence.

Question: At the grassroots level the minorities are at stake. What plan do you have to intimate the interim government to check this?

Answer: COM is working on talking points and will include this point to discuss.

Question from USAID Mission Director: Assuming some activities focussed on with the GOB. Trade policy/new reforms. Where do you think, you can continue to move on without many challenges or where do you see challenges?

Answer: Elderal: Private Sector, Host communities' activities are moving as planned. It is not accelerating. Work on the central bank about financing is also going smoothly with the technical staff.

Philip: Two areas: BD technical education board on hold. Discussion of Import taxes on bananas are on hold. Otherwise, things are moving normally.

Mokarram Hossain: Echo Fish: Some activities like meetings and training started on a small scale. Work with organizations like co-management group, conservation group: paused, observing situation. Approaching toward the end in nov. Consultants are also working. To finalize reports consultants, need to work.

Question: Is there any indication how the current situation affects funding for existing activities, especially those that have an obligation lasting for the next few months only?

Answer: IPs will not have any effect on the funding due to the current situation. Our FY 23 funds are in the process of being obligated in the DOAG. Even if it is delayed for some reason, we have alternate plans to secure our activity funding. Continue business as usual. If you anticipate anything special, talk to you AOR/COR.

Question: Is there any uncertainty to have new funds for what plan and documentation already submitted?

Answer: It has no relation with the incremental funding. If funds are needed, USAID will obligate.

Question: What is the stand on forecasted opportunities that are expected to release soon, the ones specially that needs to work closely with the Government (eg: system strengthening) - can we expect any delays?

Answer: This question will be answered during the next update of the procurement plan and Business Forecast.