

"OUT-OF-CHANNEL REQUESTS"

By

LIEUTENANT COLONEL DONALD A. DUBAY, USA
Assistant Professor
Defense Institute of Security Assistance Management

There recently has been surfacing a number of comments on the use of improper channels to obtain information or to seek action concerning security assistance programs. The nature of these misguided requests are quite diverse, indicating that there are problems with communications throughout the security assistance system, and not only with one or a few particular organizations.

Out-of-channel requests are, in fact, symptomatic of more basic problems encountered at all levels in all U.S. and customer organizations which work with security assistance programs. The organizations which seem to bear the brunt of the criticism for out-of-channel requests, however, are the overseas Security Assistance Organizations (SAOs) and the customers, or Host Countries (HCs); therefore, let us look at why these organizations occasionally resort to other than proper official channels, and suggest what corrective actions may be taken.

1. SAO and HC ignorance of the appropriate channels for requesting some action or seeking information.
2. SAO and HC frustration with seemingly unresponsive offices and agencies within official channels.
3. Desire on the part of SAO individuals to deal directly with friends and acquaintances, or a former parent office, in the mistaken view that such dealings will lead to speedier responses.
4. SAO and HC employment of a "shotgun approach," with requests to several offices in the hope that one will prove suitably responsive.
5. SAO desire to "impress" HC personnel by going to a higher, more authoritative source.
6. SAO and HC impatience with the official, established system.
7. Literal SAO response to statements made by visiting senior level U.S. personnel to SAO and/or HC personnel (e.g., "My office will personally handle that problem for you, General Ratan.")

8. SAO lack of communications with the HC regarding the activities of the HC's Washington based embassy personnel.

Obviously, the above are not the only reasons why SAOs and HC personnel abuse the security assistance communications system, but they serve as a good point of departure in discussing the problem.

The first reason -- that of ignorance of proper channels -- is due to a host of causes, which include lack of training; out-of-date DOD directives, regulations, and instructions; and service-unique procedures. Pending a rewrite of regulations and service reorganizations, the SAOs can assist themselves by:

1. Assuring that all incoming personnel, who will be involved with any phase of security assistance management, are scheduled to receive the proper training, both in CONUS and from the Unified Commands;
2. Assuring their message review process includes, as a matter of standard operating procedures, a check of message addresses as to appropriateness;
3. Preparing a quick reference list of CONUS and overseas organizations to contact for recurring information requirements (requisition and shipping status; P&R/P&A data requests; billing statement queries, etc.).

As to SAO and HC frustrations with what sometimes appears to be unresponsive offices and agencies, there is no universal solution for the requestor except to persist in asking for responses. One useful technique to consider before "elevating" the request is to ask for an acknowledgement of receipt of the message or letter request. Another is to contact directly by telephone the office or individual responsible for acting on the request.

To dissuade the use of personal relationships to expedite responses, and shotgun approaches to find the "right" office (the third and fourth causes cited above for resorting to out-of-channel requests), about all that can be said is that bypassing part or all of the official channels can result in unlawful, irregular, or incomplete responses which will not serve the interests of either the SAO or the HC. As for an individual in a SAO wanting to impress HC personnel by requesting data or action from a higher or more authoritative source than normal, experience will probably show that actors only peripherally involved in providing specific SA services tend to slow down and confuse the process, regardless of rank and position.

No doubt most, if not all, SAO's and foreign customers have been impatient at times with the length of time taken by CONUS organizations to respond to requests. In defense of the CONUS organizations, however, SAO's can curb most of this impatience by a better appreciation of the complex network of offices and agencies which may be

involved in processing a single request. Additionally, as some of this impatience may be the result of poor planning, the SAO can assist itself and the HC by programming known events over a set period of time as a common reference for use by both the SAO and the HC.

The seventh cause for the use of out-of-channel requests cited above (i.e., the visiting official's implied commitment) has no readily available cure, other than to grin and bear it, secure in the knowledge that once the visiting official departs, the SAO may have to work overtime to satisfy a newly formed HC perception of expedited responses to its requests.

The solution to the last cause, or reason, cited for out-of-channel requests (i.e., SAO/HC communications gaps) is self-evident, but not always easy to apply. Establishing and maintaining good communication with HC counterparts is a full-time job for SAO personnel. Of course, this may be dependent on some things over which the individuals assigned to a SAO may have little or no control, to include language training, sufficient time in-country to be accepted by HC personnel, and HC security precautions which may restrict access to local personnel. Persistence, patience, and cultural sensitivity will serve any SAO individual in good stead.

Besides the suggested solutions made to the SAO's and HC's to lessen the number of out-of-channel requests, CONUS organizations can take some actions to assist. Some of these include:

1. Providing clear, concise responses to requests. Above all, the action officer should not assume the SAO and/or HC has background information concerning the request beyond that of which he is personally aware. Also, only those references received by the SAO/HC requestor should be cited in a message or letter response.
2. Avoiding granting "one time exceptions." Often these exceptions become precedents in the eyes of HC personnel, with the SAO having to fend off related requests made in such forms as, "You've done this before for us, why can't you do (or try to do) it again?" These sorts of exceptional responses to HC requests can easily lead to the use of other than normal channels.
3. Establishing periodic telephonic contact with SAO's to clear up misunderstandings, to discuss background data not included in written traffic, and to develop a sense of each other's local operating environment.

Ideally, country desk officers should make a major effort to visit their countries of responsibility. While the initial travel costs may be high, the benefits accrued from such visits could be substantial. The desk officers would be able to acquire first-hand knowledge of the operating constraints of the SAO and the HC military

on such matters as available reference data bases and local and international communications means; furthermore, the desk officers also would have the opportunity to advise the SAO and HC personnel on the roles, responsibilities, and capabilities of their own offices and organizations.

To conclude, this has been a brief attempt to discuss a serious problem experienced by all users of the security assistance programs. Appropriate training and communications at all levels are essential to the proper functioning of the security assistance process. Additional comments from the security assistance community regarding this subject of out-of-channel requests, and recommendations for reducing the problems associated with this subject, are encouraged and will be reported in future issues of this Newsletter.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lieutenant Colonel Donald A. Dubay, USA, has been a member of the DISAM faculty since July 1979, and is the Director of Middle East Area Studies. He is a 1976 graduate of the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College (Master of Military Arts and Sciences) and also holds a Master of Arts degree from Florida State University (International Affairs, 1975). LTC Dubay has served previously in two overseas security assistance related positions: Army Programs Officer, U.S. Military Liaison Office, Tunis, Tunisia (1977-1979); and Foreign Area Officer, U.S. Embassy, Rabat, Morocco (1973-1974).