

November 25, 2009

Ambassador Nancy J. Powell  
Director General of the Foreign Service  
and Director of Human Resources  
U.S. Department of State

Dear Madam Ambassador,

We would like to congratulate you on your recent appointment as Director General of the Foreign Service and thank you for the commitment you have expressed to ensuring equitable employment policies and compensation practices for Locally Employed Staff (LES).

We are delighted that your taking office as Director General coincides with an exciting initiative by LES associations from around the world – the creation of an International Foreign Service Association (IFSA).

To date, over sixty LES associations from all geographic areas have endorsed IFSA's core principles. LES are enthusiastic about the establishment of an organization which speaks on their behalf on issues of common concern, and we are optimistic that by the end of the year nearly all known local LES associations will have become members. We are convinced that the entire foreign affairs community will benefit from the promotion of a more active exchange between Locally Employed Staff and Washington.

At virtually every diplomatic post, Locally Employed Staff significantly outnumber our Foreign Service and Civil Service colleagues. We are the State Department's largest group of employees with 38,000 positions compared to 11,000 Foreign Service and 9,000 Civil Service employees. Worldwide, over 56,000 LES serve the Department of State and other U.S. government agencies. And yet, as noted by the Office of the Inspector General, Locally Employed Staff are the only group that cannot turn to a body which represents them and speaks on their behalf in Washington. (OIG Report No. ISO-I-07-16 – May 2007).

We hope that in the future IFSA will play a representative and advocacy role for LES similar to that which AFSA provides for Foreign Service Officers. We realize that there are differences. We agree with the principle that LES compensation plans should be based on locally prevailing practice, and accept the resulting diversity in salaries and benefits around the world.

There are, however, a number of important management and structural issues related to overseas employment which are clearly of common concern to LES worldwide. LES seek a voice in decisions on global personnel policies and practices with a view to improving working conditions, increasing transparency, promoting FAM compliance and protecting basic rights in the workplace.

As a first step, IFSA looks forward to playing a constructive role in the implementation of two important recent OIG recommendations – the drafting of a bill of rights for LES employees, and the creation of a locally employed staff ombudsman position in Washington.

Over the longer term, IFSA hopes to open a permanent and effective channel of dialogue with Washington on management and personnel issues. Initial ideas proposed by our member associations include establishment of a small permanent office in Washington, staffed on rotation by LES from the field, and convening an annual assembly on LES related issues in Washington.

Although LES conferences have been organized in the past, participants in these meetings were generally selected by local HR departments, and not delegated as representatives by their peers. Locally Employed Staff (LES) of the United States Department of State are proud of the essential support we provide to U.S. diplomacy around the world. We work every day to ensure continuity of operations, facilitate interactions with the local community and to make the lives of diplomats easier as they represent the United States. We have a deep and abiding respect for the country we serve and the principles of transparency and representation which underlie American democracy.

IFSA and its member associations are truly excited about working with your office to formalize a constructive working relationship with the Department of State and other Foreign Affairs Agencies.

Yours sincerely,

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