



**United States Department of State**

*Washington, D.C. 20520*

April 9, 2020

Dear Foreign Mission Community,

Spring is the most beautiful part of the year in Washington and this year is no different. However, I am confident that none of us will ever forget how rapidly the world changed during the spring of 2020 to combat the global spread of COVID-19.

The Office of Foreign Missions (OFM) is committed to being there whenever our community is in need. With the spread of COVID-19 in the United States over the past two months, OFM has been called upon more than ever to be there for the foreign mission community.

I understand that at least 250 embassies, consular posts, and international organizations throughout the United States have implemented efforts to maximize their use of telework to stop the spread of COVID-19. I applaud and encourage all such efforts.

Over 90% of OFM's staff are now working from home. If you are also teleworking, I am sure you will appreciate that each day brings a new operational challenge that requires a solution. I have been inspired by the way the OFM team is collaborating and sharing ideas and discoveries with their colleagues to identify such solutions. We are grateful for your patience and understanding as we all navigate our way through such issues. With minor exceptions, OFM continues to provide our full range of services and benefits to the foreign mission community. A detailed outline of our current operational plan is available at <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/2020-04-03-Update-OFM-Operational-Changes-COVID-19.pdf>.

Despite the unprecedented operational challenges we are all facing, since the beginning of the pandemic, OFM has directly addressed more than 800 inquiries associated with COVID-19 from foreign missions community. This accomplishment would not have been possible if the foreign mission community had not complied with our request that all such inquiries be transmitted using [OFM-EmergencyMgt@state.gov](mailto:OFM-EmergencyMgt@state.gov). It remains of the utmost importance that all foreign missions continue to comply with this request. Failing to do so puts undue stress on the internal systems and procedures the Department has in place for managing such matters and jeopardizes the ability of the associated mission to receive a timely and accurate response.

Many of the referenced inquiries have been focused on issues related to foreign nationals aboard cruise ships. The situations involving these ships were unprecedented and required extensive coordination not only between various elements of the federal, state, and local governments, but also with various corporate entities. Throughout each situation, OFM was there:

- Our San Francisco regional office directly helped the foreign missions who had nationals on board the cruise ship *Grand Princess* as it arrived at the Port of Oakland on March 9<sup>th</sup>.

We coordinated with federal, state, and local officials to relay verifiable, timely information to help repatriate 2500 U.S. and foreign passengers and crews. Our team in San Francisco met with affected consul generals and negotiated with the State of California to extend the State deadline on incoming overseas flights for those missions who had arranged for repatriation flights.

- As *Holland America's* cruise ships the *Rotterdam* and *Zaandam* approached Port Everglades, our Miami regional office coordinated with port authorities and state officials for their entry to port. Our Miami team was on the scene to assist foreign missions with matters related to their nationals on board the ships. Hours later the *Coral Princess* arrived in Port Miami where our assistance continues.

Please also note that OFM has established a new webpage to serve as a one-stop compilation of all formal communications sent to the foreign mission community concerning the impact of COVID-19 on their operations in the United States. This new site is available at: <https://www.state.gov/office-of-foreign-missions-coronavirus-disease-2019-covid-19-information-and-resources/>. We also encourage foreign mission members to follow OFM on *Facebook* @OFMDC and on *Twitter* @OFM\_Ambassador, as another means to receive information on a range of topics important to your mission and its members.

Covid-19 is a challenge we all face together and together we will persevere. Please stay safe and healthy.

Sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Stephen Akard". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Stephen" and last name "Akard" clearly distinguishable.

Ambassador Stephen J. Akard  
Director