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Hiring Window Is Open at the Foreign Service

By EILENE ZIMMERMAN

A RARE bright spot has appeared in a job landscape dominated by layoffs: the Foreign Service.

For the last several years, hiring in the United States Foreign Service was minimal because of a lack of Congressional funding. In addition, war has created an urgent need for diplomatic personnel in Iraq and Afghanistan, and as officers have moved to these countries their previous jobs have remained unfilled.

So, in the last several months — with a new president on the horizon and new funding from Congress — both the State Department and the United States Agency for International Development, or Usaid, are ramping back up.

A supplemental war funding bill, which became law in June, has provided money for Foreign Service hiring. And President-elect [Barack Obama](#) “has talked explicitly about the need to increase the Foreign Service and we hope he will make that a priority,” said John Naland, president of the American Foreign Service Association, the professional association and labor union representing career diplomats.

The State Department has asked for funding for 1,500 new positions for the current fiscal year. Of these, roughly 800 are Foreign Service and 700 civil service, said Luis Arreaga, director of recruitment, examination and employment at the department. Many of those positions are being filled because of attrition but about 160 are new. “We consider that a down payment,” said Mr. Arreaga.

Felix Salazar, hired as a junior officer by the State Department in September, said that during the interview process he felt “a sense of urgency, that they were actively hiring and really valued my experience.” Mr. Salazar, who spent three years in the [Peace Corps](#), leaves in February for his first posting, in South Africa.

Not everyone is cut out for Foreign Service work, which can be stressful and highly demanding. About two-thirds of a diplomat’s career is spent overseas; officers usually move every two to four years and can be exposed to dangers like disease and war. The State Department offers a suitability quiz for prospective applicants on its [Web site](#).

Yet career diplomats like Ronald E. Neumann, a former ambassador to Afghanistan who now heads the American Academy of Diplomacy, called it the best job in the world. “I enjoy what I’m doing now but it’s nothing like working on foreign policy,” he said. “In my 37 years of service I may have gone home tired or frustrated with how a decision came out, but I never went home and asked myself if what I was working on was worthwhile.”

Applying for a job with the State Department involves written and oral examinations. Those who pass the oral exam become conditional officers and receive a ranking score based on oral-exam performance and language skills. The higher the rank, the sooner they will be assigned.

Of the 12,000 to 15,000 people who register annually for the written exam, about 450 officers are hired, said Frank J. Coulter, management officer with the Foreign Service and a member of the State Department’s board of examiners.

The first time he took the written exam, Mr. Salazar failed, after running out of time during the essay portion. He was so determined to pass that he spent the next year writing an essay in 30 minutes every day. "When I took it the second time and got my results, it actually sent chills down my spine," he said.

New Foreign Service officers at the State Department choose one of five career tracks: consular affairs, economic affairs, management affairs, political affairs or diplomacy. No matter the track, all entry-level officers spend their first several years working in a consulate, interviewing applicants for United States visas and working with American citizens who need their help.

The State Department also hires Foreign Service specialists, who provide technical, security and administrative support overseas or in Washington. Specialists must pass an oral assessment but not a written exam, and start in a specialty like medicine, information technology or law enforcement, Mr. Coulter said. All newly hired officers and specialists are trained at the Foreign Service Institute in Washington.

Each of the first two postings overseas last two years; after that, it is generally a three-year posting in each country. One-year hardship postings — in a region too dangerous to allow an officer's spouse and children to accompany him or her — are required at least twice in the course of a career. After two assignments, Foreign Service personnel can bid on postings — requesting particular countries or Washington — but everyone is expected to serve in a variety of assignments, Mr. Arreaga said.

Usaid's entry-level Foreign Service officers must have a master's degree in an appropriate technical area, like economics, agriculture, public health or education. The average Usaid entry-level officer has four years of relevant experience; many come from the Peace Corps, but others have worked for nongovernmental organizations, in private industry or the military.

Thousands apply to Usaid each year and about 1 in 20 will be called for an interview, said Susan Riley, Usaid's chief of Foreign Service personnel.

Foreign Service officers with Usaid work on a range of projects, like assisting farmers in developing countries or working in programs to reduce the prevalence of diseases like AIDS, malaria and tuberculosis.

Last year, the agency kicked off its Development Leadership Initiative, a recruitment effort to hire more than 1,000 Foreign Service officers in the next two years. "This is the most that we've planned to hire above attrition in 15 years," Ms. Riley said.

THE base salary for entry-level Foreign Service officers ranges from about \$40,000 to \$72,000 annually, but compensation can increase depending on the danger level of the posting and on a region's cost of living.

For Foreign Service specialists, the salary range is anywhere from about \$26,500 to more than \$100,000; for civil service employees at Usaid, the salary ranges from \$16,500 to over \$100,000. Overseas benefits include housing and private school for dependent children.

Many of those choosing Foreign Service work do so out of a dedication to public service and see it as not just a career, but also a way of life.

Salman Khalil, hired in May, took a 50 percent cut in take-home pay to join the Foreign Service after a decade in the I.T. industry. Any day now he will leave for his first assignment, in India. "In my I.T. profession I was helping big companies make more money and it wasn't satisfying for me," he said. "What

I wanted to do was serve in a capacity where I could directly help people.”

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