

Trouble-Ready

OBO completes new facilities despite challenging conditions // By Jonathan Blyth

A key philosophy of the Bureau of Overseas Buildings Operations is that “We don’t pick the places where we build, we go everywhere.” During the past 12 months, that has meant the bureau has completed projects in some of the most difficult locations and under the most challenging circumstances. Whether hampered by military coups, drug cartel violence, impounded shipping containers, denied visas or the threat of terrorist attack, OBO has pushed these projects to completion.

For instance, in March, a new embassy compound opened in Khartoum, Sudan. Construction had begun in early 2006 and was scheduled to end in 2008. However, the contractor’s ability to execute the project was severely hindered from the outset due to the detaining of shipping containers and protracted visa approvals by the government of Sudan. As a result, construction was interrupted twice in 2007, and the contract was terminated in January 2008.

However, in June 2008, thanks to an improvement in bilateral relations and the involvement of Under Secretary for Management Patrick Kennedy, construction resumed. The contractor, working with Project Director Roger Reverezza, expedited ordering and shipping materials in a race against the clock, should diplomatic relations deteriorate. Everyone breathed a collective sigh of relief when the last shipping container arrived and the project was completed.

Preparing for Crisis

Meanwhile in Madagascar, a new embassy compound was rising in Antananarivo when political unrest in 2008 caused the embassy’s intermittent closure. Concerned about rioters overrunning the site, Project Director Eric Rumpf and Site Security Manager Vance Witmer developed a rapid shutdown plan.

The compound was 52 percent complete when the government was overthrown in March 2009 and an ordered departure was issued for most embassy personnel. However, OBO’s core management team remained on site, and the contractor, OBO and the post worked together to complete the project four and half months ahead of schedule.

Perhaps no foreign capital sounds more exotic than Ouagadougou, in the landlocked West Africa country of Burkina Faso. When ground was broken for a new chancery there in 2008, the country’s prime minister said the building’s façade did not reflect his country’s distinct architecture. Therefore, Ambassador Jeanine Jackson and the OBO team worked with the architectural firm and contractor to redesign the façade. That done, Project Director Dave Cates and the OBO team experienced a relatively easy construction project.

Earlier this year, an embassy employee, her husband and the family member of a Locally Employed Staff member were killed in Ciudad Juarez, Mexico, and an explosive device was thrown onto the U.S. Consulate in Nuevo Laredo, Mexico. Both attacks have been blamed on the drug cartel violence surging along the U.S.-Mexico border.

In Tijuana, the violence directly affected construction of new secure U.S. consulate when the contractor’s payroll was stolen. Nonetheless, Project Director Robert Dyer got the project finished. A new consulate was also built in Ciudad Juarez in 2008, and ground will be broken for one in Monterrey later this year.

Providing Security

Since the 1980s, the U.S. consulate in Karachi, Pakistan, has been the target of several terrorist attacks, resulting in significant

damage. Mission staff worked in overcrowded offices, lived in outdated quarters and faced dangerous commutes. In March 2006, OBO Facilities Manager David Foy and his driver were killed by a suicide bomber while traveling to the consulate, and 50 Pakistanis were injured. In the aftermath, the government of Pakistan made good on its promise to provide a site for a new consulate.

But construction faced challenges. Project Directors Mohammed Khan and Najib Mahmood confronted visa denials and material containers detained at port. They worked through these obstacles to complete the new consulate compound, which includes a new office building and secure living quarters for employees.

Unique challenges face any construction project in Jerusalem. In 2003, the United States planned to move its Jerusalem consular offices, and over the last seven years, Project Director Jerry Jay and his OBO staff worked diligently to address the daily construction issues to complete the project. The new facility offers 1,000 square meters of consular office space, a public area and a parking garage for 200 vehicles. In addition, the consular office building includes a roof garden which serves as an energy conservation feature.

These six projects show once again that there is nothing easy about diplomatic construction projects. While these project directors reflect on their accomplishments and pack their hardhats for their next assignments, OBO’s headquarters continues to monitor the other 34 capital security projects currently in design and construction, never quite sure where and when the next challenge will arise. ■

The author is director of external affairs at the Bureau of Overseas Buildings Operations.

The new compound of the U.S. consulate in Karachi was completed in the last 12 months.





Above: New consular offices were built in Jerusalem. **Below:** Construction has since finished on a new chancery in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso.

