

CRS Report for Congress

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The Peace Corps: USA Freedom Corps Initiative

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Summary

On January 29, 2002, President Bush proposed doubling the size of the Peace Corps from its current 7,000 volunteer level. He also proposed that volunteers be assigned to assist the reconstruction of Afghanistan and begin serving in other countries currently lacking a program, including more Islamic countries. As it considers the FY2003 Foreign Operations appropriations bill, Congress will debate the level of funding required to support these proposals. Major issues for Congress will be availability of funding *vis-à-vis* other aid priorities and the safety and security of volunteers assigned to Islamic countries. This report will be updated as events warrant.

In his State of the Union speech to Congress on January 29, 2002, President Bush announced the creation of the USA Freedom Corps to encourage and support American volunteer activities both at home and abroad. As the U.S. agency that provides volunteer skills internationally, the Peace Corps is a constituent part of the Administration's new initiative and would be significantly affected by it. The USA Freedom Corps proposal has several features that would affect the Peace Corps. It would:

- Double the size of the Peace Corps within five years from its current level of about 7,000, bringing it closer than it has been in decades to its 1966 peak level of 15,556. The Administration has requested a budget increase of \$42 million in FY2003 to pay for the first installment of this plan. By FY2007, the Peace Corps budget is expected to be more than \$200 million greater than the present \$275 million level.
- Place the Peace Corps under the inter-agency USA Freedom Corps umbrella, making the Director of the Peace Corps a member of the USA Freedom Corps Council, formally chaired by the President.
- Seek to deploy Peace Corps volunteers to assist the reconstruction of Afghanistan under its Crisis Corps program, consistent with safety and

security concerns. Prior to this action, an assessment team would be sent to Afghanistan to evaluate needs and opportunities for volunteer service.

- Launch new Peace Corps programs in countries lacking one, including more Islamic countries. Volunteers currently serve in 70 nations.

Background

Founded in 1961, the Peace Corps has sought to meet its legislative mandate of promoting world peace and friendship by sending American volunteers to serve at the grassroots level in villages and towns in all corners of the globe. Living and working with ordinary people, volunteers have contributed in a variety of capacities – such as teachers, foresters, health promoters, and small business advisers – to improving the lives of those they serve and helping others understand American culture. They also seek to share their understanding of other countries with Americans back home through efforts like the Paul D. Coverdell World Wise School program, which links serving volunteers with U.S. elementary school classrooms. To date, more than 165,000 Peace Corps volunteers have served in 135 countries.

In addition to its basic two-year tour of duty, the Peace Corps introduced in 1996 a Crisis Corps, drawing on former volunteers to provide short-term emergency and humanitarian assistance at the community level. Generally, assignments up to six months-long are made with nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), relief, and other development organizations. Peace Corps officials have said that the advantage of using these volunteers is that many already possess relevant technical skills, experience of living in rough conditions, and local language capabilities that would make them particularly effective in emergency situations. From the time the Peace Corps agrees to provide help, Crisis Corps volunteers can be put in the field in about three to eight weeks. To date, 458 Crisis Corps volunteers have served in 30 countries.

Issues for Congress

Although the Peace Corps is viewed positively by the public and is widely supported in Congress, the President's initiative raises a number of potential issues for policymakers.

Budget Issues. Doubling the size of the Peace Corps over five years to a level of roughly 14,000 volunteers would mean a significant increase in its budget over the same period, presumably to be maintained for years thereafter. To meet its goal, the Bush Administration has requested an appropriation of \$317 million for the first year, an increase of \$42 million over its regularly appropriated FY2002 level of \$275 million.¹ By FY2007, the Peace Corps appropriation is expected to be more than \$200 million greater than at present. While authority to increase the size and funding of the Peace Corps already exists for FY2003 – at \$365 million, the authorized level is well in excess of the request – Congress will have to weigh whether sufficient funds are available *vis-a-vis* other

¹ Beginning in FY2003, the Administration is requesting full costs for federal employee retirement pensions and health care benefits in accounts with administrative expenses under the discretionary budget. Including these costs, therefore, the Administration request in FY2003 for the Peace Corps is \$320 million; the comparable FY2002 level was \$278 million.

foreign aid priorities to warrant appropriating the amounts requested by the Administration. Despite the apparent popularity of the Peace Corps, recent history suggests that the initiative may face some challenges in this regard.

In 1985, Congress made it the policy of the United States and a purpose of the Peace Corps to maintain “consistent with programmatic and fiscal considerations,” a volunteer corps of at least 10,000 individuals (P.L. 99-83). In 1998, the Clinton Administration renewed the call for a 10,000 volunteer level, and, in 1999, Congress approved a Peace Corps Authorization (P.L. 106-30) that authorized sufficient funds to put the Peace Corps on a path to meet its 10,000 volunteer goal by the year 2003. While appropriators have approved modest annual increases, they have set funding well below the amounts required to bring the Agency near the 10,000 level. For example, the 10,000-track authorization for FY2002 was \$327 million, \$52 million greater than the actual appropriation. Appropriators specifically cited “budget pressures” among the reasons for limiting the Peace Corps during this period, but other, competing foreign aid interests which received substantial funding increases at the time included debt reduction, HIV/AIDS, and child survival.

Proposed Peace Corps Budget: FY2003-07

Fiscal Year	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007
Appropriation (\$ mil)	278 (actual)	320	362	404	446	488
Total Volunteers	7,000	8,200	10,000	12,000	13,600	14,000

Source: Peace Corps. Appropriation includes federal employee retirement pensions and health benefits. Total volunteers are number anticipated at end of the fiscal year.

Program and Management Issues. A large scale, rapid increase in the size of the Peace Corps might exacerbate existing weaknesses or create strains in its operations. As the Peace Corps expands, Congress may wish to pay particular attention to how the agency addresses recruitment, programming, and support of volunteers.

The recruitment of volunteers with appropriate skills and willingness to live in unfamiliar and sometimes uncomfortable conditions is essential to the overall mission of the Peace Corps. In FY2001, 94,463 people expressed an interest in the Peace Corps, 8,897 actually applied, and 3,191 became trainees.² Maintaining a high level of volunteer qualification standards while doubling the number accepted may require imaginative and strong measures to expand the applicant pool. A substantial spike in applicants and those expressing interest in applying since September 11 and the President’s State of the Union speech, if sustained, may make it easier for the Peace Corps to meet its recruitment goals.

The agency, while adept at recruiting generalists and providing them with sufficient training to carry out useful assignments, has not emphasized the provision of highly skilled professionals, such as doctors, agronomists, or engineers, which, many argue, more accurately reflects the current needs of developing countries. Weighed against this view is the belief that the Peace Corps is an agency of public diplomacy as much as it is a

² Entry of an additional 417 trainees was delayed to FY2002, due to the events of September 11.

development organization, and personal interaction and demonstration of U.S. values is as important as providing technical expertise. To accommodate more highly skilled personnel, the Peace Corps might have to change many existing practices, including methods of recruitment, training, programming, and perhaps even terms of service.

The Peace Corps has been criticized in the past for providing inadequate programming and support of volunteers. This view was reflected in a 1990 General Accounting Office investigation (*Peace Corps: Meeting the Challenges of the 1990s*, May 1990, NSIAD-90-122). It noted that some volunteers had little or nothing to do or had spent six or more months developing their own assignments, without benefit of site visits by Peace Corps staff. The GAO attributed the programming problem to a failure of planning, evaluation, and monitoring systems. Since then, the Peace Corps has maintained that it has addressed these weaknesses with systematic approaches to project development, annual project reviews, and increased opportunities for site visits and volunteer feedback. However, incidents suggesting poor programming and staff support still occur, although their frequency and depth is not known, and, one sign of volunteer dissatisfaction – the attrition rate – remains arguably high at 31% (1996-1998 average).

Country Presence. While the Peace Corps could double its size by simply expanding its numbers in countries it currently serves, the President has specifically announced the intention to enter new countries – Afghanistan, East Timor, Peru, Swaziland, Chad, Botswana, Azerbaijan, and Bosnia-Herzegovina, among them.

The decision of where to locate Peace Corps volunteers has been of continuing interest to Congress. In legislation or report language, Congress has generally favored U.S. strategic interests as a key criterion for determining country presence. A decade ago, Congress placed priority on the entry of the Peace Corps into Central Europe and the former Soviet Union. In the mid-1990s, the Senate Foreign Operations subcommittee encouraged a reevaluation of the location and levels of volunteers “to reflect the shifts in U.S. priorities and interests in the post-cold-war environment” (S. Rept. 105-35, June 24, 1997). An amendment adopted in the Senate version of the FY2002 foreign aid bill (deleted from the conference report) supports an increased Peace Corps presence in Muslim countries.

In deciding where to locate, the Peace Corps considers multiple factors, including the safety of volunteers (see below), the potential for the program to be effective – level of development, support of the host country, and proposed projects – and overhead costs. In addition, it must be responsive to meeting the various and competing views of the Peace Corps mission, including those of Congress.

Meeting all these demands has not always been feasible. To the extent that the Peace Corps mission is perceived as public diplomacy, it has been expected to maintain a global presence. To meet its development mission, it has been inclined to leave those countries which have “graduated” from USAID’s economic aid program in recent years and some it considers to have been poor “partners.” Reflecting U.S. foreign policy interests, it has sought a presence in countries of special interest, such as the former Soviet Union. One outcome of the President’s initiative and an increase in Peace Corps funding might be that these competing priorities will all be better satisfied.

Security Issues. Under the Administration's proposal, the Peace Corps is expected to enter Afghanistan and other Islamic countries where they do not currently serve. Many of these countries of U.S. foreign policy interest, however, might be considered unsafe for Americans over the foreseeable future. Despite the appeal of using Peace Corps volunteers to convey U.S. culture and values directly to the grassroots of Islamic countries, policymakers may be unable to meet policy needs without compromising on safety.

Congressional conferees on the FY2002 foreign operations bill, while supporting the concept of Peace Corps entry into Muslim countries, noted their key concern was volunteer safety. Although the Administration has announced that the goal "will be to deploy...volunteers to Afghanistan as quickly as possible," it also notes that all decisions regarding new country entry "will be made in a manner consistent with the safety and security of volunteers." Accordingly, the current plan envisions putting volunteers only in Kabul, but even a limited presence is uncertain until a pending assessment team returns with its findings.

The Peace Corps has traditionally given the safety and security of its volunteers the highest priority. Evacuations and closure of missions to insure the well-being of volunteers in cases of political instability and civil unrest have constrained the growth of the Peace Corps. In the past ten years, volunteers have been evacuated from 26 countries for these reasons (and two others due to natural disasters), including three attributed to the events of September 11 – Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and the Kyrgyz Republic.³

Currently, 23% of all volunteers serve in countries with Muslim populations of over 40%, including Jordan, Morocco, and Mali. In general, the Peace Corps has argued that the close interpersonal relationship between volunteers and members of their host country community helps to make them safe. But it has been particularly concerned in recent years with the threats of terrorism, crime, and civil strife, and has responded by upgrading communications, testing emergency action plans, and other security measures. Before establishing a new country program, the Peace Corps considers a number of criteria, including the presence of a stable government and effective law enforcement and the absence of anti-American acts of terror in the operational area. A more thorough investigation of these issues is undertaken for countries, like Afghanistan, that have been affected by conflict.

Role in the USA Freedom Corps. The Peace Corps is currently an independent agency. However, supporters of the Peace Corps, remembering the 1970s when it was subsumed with domestic volunteer agencies into the body of ACTION, may be concerned that its autonomy will be lost again under the USA Freedom Corps initiative.

The executive order that establishes the USA Freedom Corps, however, does not appear to impinge on the independence of the Peace Corps. It assures that the directors of the different agencies and departments of government that make up the USA Freedom Corps Council, which is chaired by the President, "shall remain responsible for overseeing the programs administered by their respective departments, agencies, and offices. Each

³ From the \$40 billion emergency supplemental (P.L. 107-38) that followed the September 11 attacks, the President allocated \$6.5 million to the Peace Corps for the evacuation of volunteers.

such department, agency, and office will retain its authority and responsibility to administer those programs according to law.” It also notes that “This order does not alter the existing authorities or roles of executive branch departments, agencies, or offices. Nothing in this order shall supersede any requirement made by or under law.”

What the order does suggest is a greater degree of presidential interest in the Peace Corps than may have been the case in the years since President Kennedy. A direct line of interest and concern toward the Peace Corps emanating from the White House could have a substantial positive or negative effect on the policy and management decisions of a Peace Corps director, depending on one’s point of view. Some observers are concerned that close identification of the Peace Corps with an Administration’s foreign policy may, in the words of former Peace Corps Director Mark Gearan, threaten its worldwide reputation and ability to present itself “as representing the best of the American people, not as official representatives of the U.S. government or its policies.”⁴

⁴ *Boston Globe*, February 10, 2002.