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Audit finds USAID workers improperly flying first class

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Most Americans know that their tax dollars are seemingly flying out of their wallets, but what they might not have known is that federal employees are taking off with them, traveling in first class.

A new audit report released this week revealed that the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) could not justify millions of dollars worth of first- and business-class trips it authorized for its employees.

Between Dec. 1, 2012, and Nov. 30, 2014, USAID spent \$3.1 million on 245 premium-class trips. Auditors found that 76 percent of those trips did not meet agency requirements to qualify for premium-class tickets.

A USAID traveler may be qualified to upgrade to business class if their trip — by the shortest feasible route including reasonable layovers — exceeds 14 hours, if their work/scheduling demands will not allow for the traveler to leave earlier and take a rest stop, or if the traveler must work on the day of arrival.

Out of 46 trips that auditors examined, 36 did not meet these requirements, costing tens of thousands of dollars.

For example, one employee took a premium class trip costing more than \$18,500 because the travel time was in excess of 14 hours and the employee was required to report to work on the day of arrival. But auditors noted that the return flight landed at 2:05 p.m. making it unnecessary for the employee to report directly to work.

“It is not reasonable for a traveler who landed at that time to collect luggage, go to the office, and do enough work to justify flying business class,” auditors wrote in the report. The same trip would have cost less than \$4,500 if the traveler had flown coach.

In another case, a traveler took a business class trip costing \$15,186 in addition to taking a rest stop, which is not allowed. A coach ticket for that trip would have cost roughly \$3,049, according to the report.

For inappropriately upgrading its employees to cushy, premium-class seats at a cost of countless tens of thousands of dollars to U.S. taxpayers, USAID wins this week's Golden Hammer; a weekly distinction awarded by The Washington Times highlighting the most egregious examples of wasteful federal spending.

The audit has spending watchdogs exasperated, once again, with Washington's culture of wasteful spending caused by a complete disregard for simple oversight practices and in spite of previous warnings from federal auditors.

“‘The Terminal’ was an art-imitates-life movie about a man trapped at an airport. For their part, taxpayers seem trapped in a decade-long snarl of potentially unnecessary travel costs, inconsistent oversight, and unclear rules. And it's not as if managers had no clues to finding a way out — GAO, GSA, and other agencies have all sorts of handy advice and guidelines on how to keep watch over tax dollars,” said Pete Sepp, president of the National Taxpayers Union.

“Taxpayers could forgive many mistakes by government if only those mistakes weren't repeated like a nightmare version of another film, ‘Groundhog Day,’” he added.

Curtis Kalin, a spokesman for Citizens Against Government Waste, said this type of ticketing “perfectly illustrates the arrogance of many bureaucrats as they spend taxpayer money. Americans understand the necessity of travel, but I doubt they would accept spending their money on excessive and unnecessary upgrades.”

“Every taxpayer dollar should be treated as sacrosanct and not spent flippantly indulging the lavish tastes of public officials. Frugality, not luxury, should rule the day when taxpayer dollars are involved,” he added.

In its response to the audit report, USAID management said it would review each of the selected trips and determine whether the costs were allowable and recover any payments that were not.

Spending experts say that the report highlights a major problem with U.S. foreign aid spending, a large chunk of the funds appropriated for aid never make it to foreign projects, but instead are used for administration.

“It may surprise taxpayers, but much of the \$24 billion the federal government spends annually on foreign aid is consumed by U.S. consultants and officials jetting around and attending conferences and writing reports — it doesn't actually get to the foreign people in need,” said Chris Edwards, a budget analyst at the Cato Institute.

And this isn't the first time federal workers have been cited for wasting money on premium air fare. A 2007 report from the Government Accountability Office revealed that poor management across the entire federal bureaucracy resulted in hundreds of millions of wasted dollars.

“Breakdowns in internal controls and a weak control environment resulted in at least \$146 million in improper first and business class travel governmentwide,” the report said.

“Unfortunately, even as Congress tried to tighten the spending belts many of the permanent bureaucracy simply don't care, knowing that no one in the Executive Branch would hold them

accountable for flying in luxury class on the average working stiff's dime," said Rick Manning, president of Americans for Limited Government, a conservative spending watchdog.

"We are in the new age where taxpayer money is thrown at guaranteed to fail projects like Solyndra or USAID's disastrous Haitian housing boondoggle on a regular basis," he continued. "Given the profligate waste all around them, it would be stunning if bureaucrats didn't abuse the first-class flight rules for their own comfort, that is the example being set by the Obama team that is supposed to lead them."