FOREIGN LANGUAGE CAPABILITIES
Departments of Homeland Security, Defense, and State Could Better Assess Their Foreign Language Needs and Capabilities and Address Shortfalls

What GAO Found
In June 2010, we reported that DHS had taken limited actions to assess its foreign language needs and existing capabilities, and to identify potential shortfalls. For example, while two of three DHS components included in GAO’s review had conducted foreign language assessments, these assessments were not comprehensive, as GAO’s prior work on strategic workforce planning recommends. In addition, while all three DHS components GAO reviewed had various lists of employees with foreign language capabilities, DHS had no systematic method for assessing its existing capabilities. In addition, DHS and its components had not taken actions to identify potential foreign language shortfalls. Further, DHS and its components established a variety of foreign language programs and activities, but had not assessed the extent to which these programs and activities address potential shortfalls. The Department’s ability to use them to address potential shortfalls varied and GAO recommended that DHS comprehensively assess its foreign language needs and capabilities, and any resulting shortfalls; and ensure these assessments are incorporated into future strategic planning. DHS generally concurred with these recommendations, and officials stated that the Department has actions planned to address them.

In April 2010, we reported that FEMA had developed a national needs assessment to identify its LEP customer base and how frequently it interacted with LEP persons. Using this assessment, FEMA officials reported that the agency had identified 13 of the most frequently encountered languages spoken by LEP communities. Locally, in response to a disaster, FEMA conducts a needs assessment to help ensure access to its services for LEP persons; and (3) DOD and State have developed comprehensive approaches to address their foreign language capability challenges.

What GAO Recommends
GAO is not making any new recommendations; however, GAO made recommendations in prior reports to help DHS, DOD, and State better assess their foreign language capabilities and address potential shortfalls. All three agencies generally concurred with GAO’s recommendations and have taken some actions.

View GAO-10-715T or key components. For more information, contact David C. Maurer at (202) 512-9627 or maurerd@gao.gov.