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State Department Supports Global Travel Growth

Fact Sheet

Office of the Spokesperson

Washington, DC

October 24, 2011

The Department of State is dedicated to the protection of our borders, and has no higher priority than the safety of our citizens. The Department's Bureau of Consular Affairs is responsible for issuing visas to those international visitors to the United States who require them. Around the world at 222 visa-issuing embassies and consulates, a highly trained corps of consular officers and support staff adjudicate millions of visa applications each year.

Facilitating international travel is important to the U.S. economy, a vital national interest. Cultural exchange also promotes security and understanding in a globalized world. Focusing on these benefits, the Department of State is taking steps to keep pace with growing demand for U.S. visas.

Our primary mission is to uphold border security while facilitating legitimate travel. We have an intensive visa screening process incorporating personal interviews with multiple biographic and biometric checks, all supported by a sophisticated global information technology network. The Department prioritizes efficiency and customer service, and at our busiest posts, consular officers may interview more than 100 visa applicants a day.

Growing Demand

Preliminary numbers indicate that consular officers processed more than 9.6 million visa applications in fiscal year 2011. Of those, we issued more than 7.5 million U.S. visas, an increase of more than 17 percent over the previous fiscal year when 6.4 million visas were issued. We have seen tremendous increases in demand for visas in some of the world's fastest-growing economies. During the past five years, visa issuances have increased 234 percent in Brazil, 124 percent in China, 51 percent in India, and 24 percent in Mexico. In fiscal year 2011, consular officers processed more than one million visas in China, an increase of more than 35 percent over last year.

According to the Department of Commerce, sixty million visitors entered the United States in 2010, and 35 percent of those visitors entered using visas issued by the Department of State. International travel to the United States generated \$134 billion in revenue and supported 1.1 million U.S. jobs in 2010. The Department of Commerce estimates the number of potential visitors to the United States will increase six to nine percent annually for the next five years, and could reach 88 million visitors by 2016.

Meeting Demand

The Department of State is keeping pace with growing demand for visas, and continues to dedicate more personnel and resources to visa adjudication, focusing on embassies and consulates with the greatest resource needs. Specifically, we are committed to increasing visa adjudications by one-third in FY 2012 in both China and Brazil, two countries where we have seen the greatest increase in visa demand.

- The Department is adding 98 visa adjudicators this year and next in China and Brazil. A number of these new adjudicators are being hired through a pilot program that targets applicants who already speak Mandarin or Portuguese. We expect the first group of these special hires to arrive at posts in China and Brazil in the spring of 2012. A second group will follow in summer 2012.
- At some posts in China and Brazil we are operating with significantly extended hours to maximize use of existing facilities. Working bilaterally with host governments, the Department is also working to expand and improve our visa-processing facilities to allow for even more applicant interviews.
- The Department is using many different tools to expand capacity, including advanced technology to maximize efficiency and improve security-related screening. By consolidating some of the non-security-related consular functions, we are increasing capacity at our embassies and consulates.

Wait times for visa appointments can fluctuate significantly depending on seasonal demand. At most posts around the world, visa applicants wait less than one week for an interview appointment. We will continue to send temporary duty officers to manage seasonal spikes in demand.

Student Visa Facilitation

Wait times for student visa interview appointments worldwide are less than 15 days. We prioritize student visa appointments because of the tremendous intellectual, social, and economic benefits foreign students provide to the U.S. economy. According to the Department of Commerce, international students contributed nearly \$20 billion to the U.S. economy during the 2009-2010 academic year.

Business Visa Facilitation

U.S. embassies and consulates have established procedures to expedite interview appointments for urgent business travel. U.S. officials work closely with American Chambers of Commerce in more than 100 countries to streamline the visa process for business travelers.

The Department's Business Visa Center facilitates visa application procedures for U.S. companies and convention organizers who invite employees or current and prospective business clients to the United States. The Center handled nearly 3,500 requests in FY 2011. U.S.-based businesses may contact businessvisa@state.gov or call 202-663-3198 for more information.

PRN: 2011/1788

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