



DEPARTMENT OF STATE

WRITTEN STATEMENT

OF

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DEPARTMENT OF STATE

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HEARING

ON

TOURISM IN AMERICA: MOVING OUR ECONOMY FORWARD

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Chairwoman Klobuchar, Ranking Member Blunt, and distinguished Members of the Subcommittee, it is a distinct honor to appear before you again to share the accomplishments of my colleagues in the Bureau of Consular Affairs, and our efforts to facilitate the legitimate travel of millions of tourists, business people, students, and other visitors to the United States.

Increasing Worldwide Demand for U.S. Visas

We at the Department of State are dedicated to the protection of our borders, and have no higher priority than the safety of our fellow citizens. At the same time, we are committed to facilitating legitimate travel, and providing prompt and courteous service. For the Bureau of Consular Affairs, the challenge is to meet the increasing worldwide demand for U.S. visas without compromising the security of our nation's borders. I am pleased to testify that we are meeting this challenge head on.

Consular officers adjudicated 8.8 million visa applications and issued more than 7.5 million U.S. visas in fiscal year 2011, an increase in issuances of more than 16 percent over the previous year, when 6.4 million visas were issued. We have experienced tremendous increases in demand for visas in some of the world's fastest-growing economies. We are issuing as many visas as we did in 2000, even though nine more countries have joined the Visa Waiver Program since then.

According to the Department of Commerce, last year international visitors contributed \$134 billion to the U.S. economy, supporting more than a million jobs. More international travel means more spending on airlines, tours, hotels, services, and export purchases, all of which mean more American jobs. Not only do

international tourists, business visitors, and students boost our economy, but these visitors also leave our country with a better understanding of American culture and values.

The greatest growth in travel comes from the world's fastest emerging economies, where we have seen demand for U.S. visas increase at a dramatic pace. We are taking steps to meet this growing demand. I would like to update you on the efforts we have undertaken since my last appearance before the subcommittee.

The role of security has not diminished

Security remains our primary mission, since every visa decision is a national security decision. 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, which shares data with other government agencies. We continue to work with the law enforcement and intelligence communities to ensure that our officers have the latest information on whether an applicant poses a threat. Around the world, at 222 visa-issuing embassies and consulates, a highly-trained corps of consular officers and support staff process millions of visa applications each year, facilitating legitimate travel while protecting our borders.

We instruct our staff that their highest priority must be to protect the United States and its citizens. The officers are also trained to be courteous, respectful, knowledgeable, and efficient. We ensure that these principles are core tenets of our training regimen for new consular officers and visa adjudicators. Our visa adjudication courses feature in-depth interviewing and name-checking technique

training, fraud prevention, and the use of automated systems. Throughout their careers, consular officers receive continuing instruction in all of these disciplines, to ensure they integrate the latest regulations and technologies into their visa adjudication decisions. Our aim is to keep the visa process efficient, simple and secure for all those who wish to visit our great nation.

Meeting Demand, Especially in Emerging Economies

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 40 percent 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.
- Some posts in China and Brazil are operating double shifts to maximize use of 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.

While we strive for maximum efficiency, our activity is unique and cannot be compared fairly with a standard “business model.” In fiscal year 2011, we processed more than a million visas in China, and more than 800,000 visas in Brazil. This represented a 34 percent increase in China over the previous fiscal year, and a 42 percent increase in Brazil during the same period, an accomplishment that would be hard to match even in the private sector. We issue visas to almost 90 percent of Chinese applicants, and to over 96 percent of Brazilian applicants.

Since 2005, consular officer staffing has doubled in Brazil. Since Fiscal Year 2008, we have sent more than 50 officers to Brazil on temporary assignments to meet short-term staffing needs, providing an additional 2,000 days of service. Our Brazil consular team has reduced the backlog of appointments by 15 percent in less than two months. Our consulate in Sao Paulo began extended interview hours in August, and other Brazilian posts are expected to follow. Sao Paulo increased from 2000 interviews per day to 3000 per day. The U.S. Consulate General in Rio increased from 1000 interviews per day to 2000 interviews per day. We hosted two “Super Saturday” events at consular posts across Brazil, adjudicating almost 8,000 visa applications in those two days. In October 2011, our consular offices in Brasilia, Recife, Rio, and Sao Paulo adjudicated 87,500 visas, an increase of 67 percent over October, 2010.

We are working to expand and remodel our consular facilities as permitted by the Chinese and Brazilian governments, so that we can interview more visa applicants on a daily basis. We are expanding our interviewing capacity by adding 22 new service windows in Guangzhou, 20 new windows in Shanghai, eight new windows in Chengdu and eight new windows in Beijing. For India, we are adding 17 new windows in Mumbai.

In addition, we are assessing the feasibility of establishing more visa-issuing locations in Brazil and China. In September, a team from the Department participated in a two-week site survey to improve and expand existing consular facilities in Brazil, and another team is in China this month.

The Department created the Limited Non-career Appointment (LNA) program to hire visa adjudicators with essential language skills in Mandarin or Portuguese. LNA hires meet the strict qualifications of Foreign Service Officers and can speak Mandarin or Portuguese at a level equivalent to other adjudicators. They are appointed for one-year periods for no more than five consecutive years, and would have the same privileges and responsibilities as other consular adjudicators. We plan to hire over 50 LNAs and Professional Adjudication Specialists (PAS) over the next two years. Each 10 LNA/PAS represents approximately 150,000 more visas adjudicated per year.

We also prioritize groups of travelers, such as students and business visitors. 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. All U.S. embassies and consulates have established procedures to expedite appointments for business travelers. U.S. officials work closely with American Chambers of Commerce in more than 100 countries to streamline the visa process for business travelers.

We use advanced technology to maximize efficiency and improve security-related screening. Our worldwide Global Support Strategy (GSS) contract, already in place in several countries, moves off-site some non-security-related consular functions in order to create additional capacity. GSS makes visa interview appointment scheduling transparent and consistent, and eliminates the user-pays scheduling programs in existence in many countries.

We have worked to reduce or eliminate paper from all aspects of visa processing, winning awards for our green initiatives. Our nonimmigrant visa application is now completed and submitted online, and we are piloting a web-based immigrant visa application.

Interviews and Reciprocity

The Immigration and Nationality Act requires our consular officers to interview in person all first-time visa applicants aged 14 through 79, with interview waivers possible for diplomatic and official applicants from foreign governments and, in limited circumstances, some repeat applicants.

We have begun the process of reviewing the criteria for visa interviews to determine whether efficiencies may be achieved that could allow us to reduce wait times and better serve visa applicants. We are working closely with the

Department of Homeland Security (DHS) to identify and evaluate options that remain consistent with our shared objectives of facilitating legitimate travel while combating fraud and safeguarding the security of the United States. If we are successful in developing proposals that meet these goals, we will discuss our findings with Congress.

The law also requires us to set visa validity based on the validity of visas issued to U.S. citizens. Right now, the Chinese only issue 12-month visas, at the most, to Americans. U.S. Ambassador to China Locke regularly addresses the issue of visa validity with the Chinese government, with the goal of extending visa validity for American travelers from 12 months to two or more years, so that we can reciprocate and issue longer validity visas for Chinese tourists and business travelers.

The Department does not act alone when it comes to decisions about visa validity; we must consult with DHS prior to increasing any period of visa validity.

In addition to granting reciprocal treatment to U.S. citizens seeking visas to visit China, we would like to see the Chinese government make significant progress in issuing travel documentation to thousands of Chinese nationals in the United States under final removal orders.

Finally, we are working with our U.S. Government partners to assist DHS as they consider additional countries for membership in the Visa Waiver Program (VWP). The specific requirements for VWP membership are set forth in law and are quite strict; these statutory requirements help to make VWP the secure program that it is.

Conclusion

We believe that U.S. interests in legitimate travel, trade promotion, and educational exchange are not in conflict with our border security agenda, but rather further that agenda in the long term.

Visa adjudication requires good judgment, insight into cultural practices, and knowledge of immigration law. Visa adjudication is not a mechanized process. It can never become a mechanized process, because we are protecting the safety of our citizens, legal permanent residents, and those who visit our country.

Our global presence, foreign policy mission, and personnel structure give us singular advantages in executing the visa function throughout the world. Our authorities and responsibilities enable us to provide a global perspective to the visa process and its impact on U.S. national interests. The issuance and refusal of visas has a direct impact on our foreign relations, as well as our economy. The Department of State is in a position to anticipate and weigh all those factors, while ensuring border security as our first priority. We will continue to staff up, build and innovate to ensure that America continues to be a secure and welcoming country.

This concludes my testimony today. I will be pleased to take your questions.