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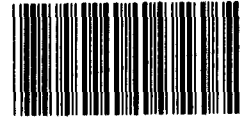
United States General Accounting Office

Report to the Subcommittee on Foreign  
Commerce and Tourism, Committee on  
Commerce, Science, and Transportation,  
U.S. Senate

April 1992

# STATE DEPARTMENT

## Backlogs of Tourist Visas at U.S. Consulates



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United States  
General Accounting Office  
Washington, D.C. 20548

National Security and  
International Affairs Division

B-247944

April 30, 1992

The Honorable John D. Rockefeller, IV  
Chairman  
The Honorable Conrad Burns  
Ranking Minority Member  
Subcommittee on Foreign Commerce  
and Tourism  
Committee on Commerce, Science,  
and Transportation  
United States Senate

As you requested, we reviewed the tourist visa processing function of State Department consulates overseas. You expressed concern about the problems experienced in June 1991 by the U.S. consulate in Sao Paulo, Brazil, resulting in processing delays for tourist visas for Brazilian citizens wishing to visit the United States. Specifically, you asked us to determine whether (1) other U.S. consulates had visa backlogs, (2) consulates had enough resources for visa processing, and (3) the promotion of tourism is a priority of the State Department. Appendix I discusses our scope and methodology.

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## Results in Brief

Twelve of 43 consulates we reviewed, including the one in Sao Paulo, Brazil, had nonimmigrant visa backlogs exceeding 1 week and ranging up to 2 months during 1991. These backlogs occurred primarily during peak tourist seasons, such as school vacations. Thirty consulates reported staffing problems, such as inadequate permanent staffing positions, position vacancies, or inadequate additional staff during peak tourist seasons.

The number of visa applications processed per consular officer varied widely among the 14 consulates we visited. The use of time-saving practices also varied among consulates. In some situations, tourists undergo considerable inconvenience to obtain visas. For example, some tourists had to wait in long lines in unprotected outside areas, including on the street.

Embassy officials have suggested that State should charge fees for nonimmigrant visas more extensively than it now does and obtain legislative authority to use fee collections for additional staffing and facilities.

Tourist promotion is not a priority of the State Department; its mandate is to facilitate travel rather than to promote tourism. The Commerce Department takes the lead role in promoting tourism. Of the 43 consulates we reviewed, 19 had tourist promotion activities. Participation by State officials varied from no participation to participation by consular officials and an ambassador. A number of consular officials and foreign travel industry representatives expressed the need for more communication between representatives of the consulate and the travel industry.

## Background

The U.S. Travel and Tourism Administration of the Department of Commerce estimated that foreign visitors spent \$59 billion in the United States in 1991. A study by Commerce's Foreign Commercial Service estimates that average expenditures by Latin American travelers in the United States are about \$2,600 per person.

The number of foreign visitors to the United States has increased 61 percent over the last 5 years. Foreign visitors from most countries must have a visa to enter the United States.<sup>1</sup> In 1990, about 20 percent of foreign tourists came from countries where visas were required; 15 of these countries had over 100,000 tourists each.<sup>2</sup>

Demand for nonimmigrant visas—tourist and other visas—worldwide has fluctuated significantly over the past decade, decreasing from about 7.9 million applications in 1981 to about 6.3 million in 1983 and then increasing to about 10.1 million in 1988. After the State Department waived the tourist visa requirement for some countries in 1988, demand decreased to about 7.7 million in 1991. State has indicated that the effect of the visa waiver has leveled out and estimated that applications would increase 5 to 7 percent per year beginning in 1991 (applications declined 2 percent in 1991).

Consulates' procedures for issuing nonimmigrant visas vary. An applicant submits an application and supporting documentation, if required, and depending upon the consulate, meets with a consular officer, who

<sup>1</sup>The United States has waived the tourist visa requirements for citizens of the following countries: Andorra, Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Iceland, Italy, Japan, Liechtenstein, Luxembourg, Monaco, New Zealand, Norway, San Marino, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, The Netherlands, and the United Kingdom.

<sup>2</sup>U.S. Travel and Tourism Administration statistics on tourists include visa holders for B-1 business, B-2 pleasure, F-1 students, and F-2 family members of students. The statistics in this report on nonimmigrant visa applications and work load include tourist and other kinds of nonimmigrant visa applications.

approves or denies the visa. The potential for nonimmigrant visa fraud is an important factor in a consulate's determination of its procedures and the intensity of its scrutiny of visa applicants. For example, interviewing each applicant may not be necessary in countries with low fraud potential. Also, inadequate facilities or staffing levels may be a factor in a consulate's use of appointment systems to control the daily work load. Although foreign national employees perform much of the administrative work, only a U.S. consular officer can approve or deny a visa. U.S. consulates also provide services to Americans and issue immigrant visas to foreigners for permanent residency in the United States. Consular staff may work in one or more of these functions.

## Consulates Use Different Techniques to Manage Work Loads

The Department's consular guidance provides that applicants should be provided visas the same day they apply, with as little waiting as possible. It does recognize that same-day service may not always be possible because of heavy demand and that consulates may limit the number of applications accepted each day.

Most consulates managed to cope with regular work loads, although some reported experiencing considerable stress because of increasing annual work loads. They normally provided visas within about 1 to 3 days. However, 12 of the 43 consulates we contacted had backlogs of 1 week or more during periods of high demand in 1991.

The 43 consulates processed 58 percent more applications in 1991 than in 1986. The work loads at some consulates we visited fluctuated, but the work loads in Brazil and Seoul, Korea, steadily increased over the past 5 years. Brazil had an 80-percent increase, and Korea had a 155-percent increase. The number of applications for the consulate in Sao Paulo increased 88 percent from 1986 to 1991 and 22 percent from 1990 to 1991. Consular staff processed between 4,400 and 12,800 visa applications a month from January through May 1991, 17,100 in June, and 18,700 in July. In May 1991, the consulate instituted a variation of an appointment system to manage the daily work load. By early June 1991, the consulate had a 2-week backlog, compared to its next-day service during earlier months.

The following examples illustrate the contrasting ways other consulates manage their daily work loads.

- The Santo Domingo consulate, with 118,000 applications in 1991, has used an appointment system for a number of years to manage its daily work

load. It schedules a specified number of appointments each day for the number of officers it expects will be on board. In late 1990 and early 1991, its appointments for visa interviews were backlogged about 2 months. Each applicant visits the consulate at least twice—once to make an appointment and again for an interview. When visa applications are approved, applicants return a third time to pick up their visas.

- The Mexico City consulate, with 318,000 visa applications in 1991, rotates people from other consular sections into the nonimmigrant visa section as necessary to provide same-day service. Consular officials are able to do this because of the large number of employees at the consulate.

The daily work load per consular officer and the average number of applications processed per staff hour varied widely among consulates. Some consular officers limited their work load from about 100 to 170 applications per day by using appointment systems, whereas other consular officers processed 250 or more applications per day. On an annual basis, 4 of the 14 consulates we visited processed about 8.6 applications per U.S. employee staff hour, whereas 6 other consulates processed 19 or more applications per U.S. employee staff hour. Department officials attributed the differences to local circumstances, such as the adequacy of facilities and prevalence of visa fraud.

The Department's Consular Management Handbook emphasizes that consulate officials should carefully review procedures limiting the number of applications processed each day to ensure that the number of applications accepted each day is not too low.

During our review, we noted the following time-saving techniques and procedures that are not discussed in the consular handbook. These procedures were used by consulates in countries with high fraud potential as well as other consulates. These included:

- separating for expedited visa processing highly qualified from less qualified applicants,
- encouraging tourists through media campaigns to apply for visas before the peak seasons,
- setting a minimum time limit that people could reapply after they were initially denied a visa (one consulate reported cutting its visa line by 26 percent by denying appointments to applicants with recent refusals), and
- using expedited procedures to process applications to renew previously issued visas (renewal rates vary; for example, one consulate estimated its

renewal rate is about 10 percent, whereas another one estimated its rate is 25 percent).

Downtime of the computer system used to perform name checks of all applicants also contributed to backlogs; 22 consulates reported automated equipment problems. These problems were usually attributed to telecommunications problems or overload of the central computer system in the United States used by consulates. When the system was not working, consulates had to check names against microfiche records, which is time-consuming. Consulates that issue visas readable by machine must use the central computer for name checks and must wait for the system to become operational to issue visas. In Guatemala, the State Department was testing a stand-alone name check system that alleviated the problems associated with the central computer system.

## Work Load Has Increased, but Staffing Has Not

In July 1990, the President instructed U.S. embassies to reduce overseas staff whenever possible. Further, the Secretary of State instructed embassies that (1) staffing increases should be avoided except under the most extraordinary circumstances and (2) a changing work load should be handled within existing staff levels, even if it means leaving lower priority tasks undone. Regarding the use of consulate staff, State Department guidance issued in January 1991 placed a lower priority on nonimmigrant visas than on services for American citizens and immigrant visas.

The Department's Bureau of Consular Affairs requested a total of 102 new officer positions for 1986 through 1992 but received only 18.<sup>3</sup> An additional 19 requested positions were authorized in 1992 to meet the demands of the Immigration Act of 1990. In 1990, the Department reprogrammed 17 consular positions in Western Europe, primarily as a result of the visa waiver program. Thirteen positions were reprogrammed to non-consular sections to meet Eastern Europe staffing needs—six to the State Department in Washington and seven to Moscow and locations in Eastern Europe. State officials do not expect any new positions to be authorized through fiscal year 1993. Consulates' staffing problems are aggravated by position vacancies caused by staff rotations, training, sickness, or leave.

- In June 1991, the U.S. Ambassador to Mexico reduced U.S. positions from seven to three in the visa unit at the consulate in Guadalajara and allocated about 35 to 45 percent of its nonimmigrant visa work load among

<sup>3</sup>Consular positions were requested as follows: 1986 - 0; 1987 - 13; 1988 - 0; 1989 - 18; 1990 - 10; 1991 - 16; 1992 - 45. Only the 18 positions requested in 1989 were authorized. Some requests may have been for positions previously requested and not received.

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other consulates. As of December 1991, two of the three authorized positions had been vacant for 5 months. After downsizing, Guadalajara introduced an appointment system to control its daily work load. In December 1991, it experienced a 1-week backlog, and not all of the applicants received visas in time for the Christmas vacation.

- The Buenos Aires consulate lost one officer position in 1988 after its work load dropped from prior years, but its 1991 work load was 135 percent greater than 1988 with no increase in staff. A consulate official said that work stress had resulted in low morale; the official expressed concern about early burnout of junior consular officers and the Department's ability to maintain future consular staffing. Another consular officer said that work stress had resulted in increased absences due to sickness.
- The Seoul consulate has had a 15-percent increase in consular officers since 1988, but its 1992 work load is estimated to be 157 percent greater than in 1988. In a January 1992 cable requesting additional staff, the consulate said that it had not been able to provide timely visa service and had instituted an appointment system to limit the daily work load. The growth in Korean tourism to the United States is now jeopardized, according to the consulate, by its inability to issue visas in a timely manner. Korean tourists spend about \$600 million a year in the United States, according to the consulate.

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## Sources of Temporary Staff

Permanent positions may be supplemented with part-time, intermittent, or temporary help. Such help, however, when available, does not fully meet staffing needs unless it is a consular officer who can approve or deny visas. For example, the Sao Paulo consulate received three temporary staff in early June 1991, but still had a 2-week backlog because of a shortage of officers. Officers from the consulate's other sections and other consulates in Brazil helped on a temporary basis. However, no help was provided until after the travel industry complained about difficulties in obtaining visas. The availability of assistance from other consular officers is subject to work priorities, language proficiency, and availability of funds for travel and per diem.

On occasion, State hires retired foreign service officers as temporary consular officers. In February 1992, about 12 retired officers were serving temporarily at various consulates. However, the program is constrained by budget limitations.

In December 1991, the Department approved a program whereby family members of foreign service officers and certain other American citizens



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may be appointed consular officers to approve or deny visas. However, this program may be constrained by State's requirement for consular training at the Foreign Service Institute as well as by limited funds. A number of consulates have applied for consular officer appointments under the program.

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## Problems With Inadequate Facilities

Inadequate waiting areas and long lines have created inconveniences for foreign tourists. Seventeen of the 43 consulates in our review reported inadequate facilities to accommodate visa applicants and consular staff. Also, in September 1991, State's Inspector General reported that 19 of the 50 public reception areas at consulates and embassies it reviewed were inadequate. A consular official in Rio de Janeiro told us that lines extended several blocks during peak seasons without any protection from the weather. During our visit in nonpeak time, applicants were lined up for about one-half block on the street in the rain. During a nonpeak season in Buenos Aires, applicants stood in line for about 2 hours to leave applications for next-day visas. If consular staff required an applicant to be interviewed before processing the application, the applicant may have to wait 5 hours to obtain a visa the same day. They spent time in lines in unprotected outside areas or in a waiting room with inadequate seating.

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## Proposal for Visa Fees to Alleviate Inconveniences for Visitors

Some consulates charge nonimmigrant visa fees that are deposited to the miscellaneous receipts account in the U.S. Treasury. However, U.S. consulates do not charge for tourist visas when a host country does not charge U.S. citizens.

In December 1991, 16 ambassadors requested State to charge an application fee for nonimmigrant visas and to seek legislation authorizing embassies to retain a portion of such funds for their own use.

State Department officials raised the issue with the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) of including language in the annual appropriations bill to permit State to retain a portion of consular fees and reduce the amount in the budget request by the same amount. However, this proposal would not have increased the Department's budgetary resources nor would it have provided additional funding for consular activities. We discussed the proposal with OMB officials, and they said that they did not support the suggested proposal, because OMB does not favor funding agencies' activities outside the scrutiny of the budget and appropriation process.

Imposing new fees for nonimmigrant visas raises a number of issues. First, a State Department official informed us that State has not reached a consensus on whether fees for nonimmigrant visas should be fixed strictly on a reciprocal basis. The United States sets fees on the basis of what other countries charge U.S. citizens. Second, specific statutory authority consistent with the pay-as-you-go requirements of the Budget Enforcement Act of 1990 would be necessary to allow the Department to spend the receipts from visa fees to provide necessary consular personnel and facilities. The collection and use of new fees may require additional cashier facilities and personnel as well as accounting and internal controls. Other considerations include determining how much the fee should be, and how and for what specific purposes fees would be used, such as hiring of part-time help to meet surges in visa demand.

In those countries we visited where no fees are charged, travel industry representatives endorsed the policy of charging new fees for nonimmigrant visas if the result were expedited visa processing. They said that tourists were accustomed to paying such fees for visas to other countries.

Some U.S. officials expressed concern, however, that if State were permitted to use fee collections, the funds would be diverted to areas other than nonimmigrant visa processing.

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## Commerce Takes Lead in Promoting Tourism

The Commerce Department takes the lead in promoting tourism to the United States. The State Department's role is to facilitate tourism. Tourist promotion is done through a VISIT USA Committee, which may include State and Commerce officials and representatives from the U.S. and host country travel industries. Activities include media campaigns, annual trade shows, and tours to the United States for members of the travel industry.

Of the 43 consulates in our review, 19 had promotion activities. These consulates were in countries identified by the U.S. Travel and Tourism Administration as having the greatest potential return for marketing expenditures. Consulate officials in Jamaica and the Dominican Republic said tourist promotion is not a priority due to the high incidence of visa fraud.

State Department participation in promotion activities varied by post. At one post, the ambassador was a member of the VISIT USA Committee, while at other posts commercial and consular officers were involved in

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tourist promotion. Mexico City had a visa committee, in addition to the VISIT USA Committee, consisting of consulate and industry representatives, which met monthly to discuss issues dealing only with visas. Committee members said these meetings were beneficial in maintaining excellent relations between the industry and the consulate.

The Consular Management Handbook suggests that circumstances may dictate a need for a consular outreach program to educate the consulates' clientele on the controversial and/or politically sensitive issues affecting consular operations.

Consular officers at most of the consulates we visited either had initiated regular contacts with the travel industry or expressed a need to do so. Officials in Recife, Brazil, had regular monthly meetings with the travel industry. A consular officer in Sao Paulo told us that she needed to communicate more effectively with the travel industry about changes in visa procedures during peak season surges so that the agents could alert their customers about them, thereby saving time for both the applicants and the consular officers. In Caracas, two consular officers told us that meetings with the travel industry would be beneficial to ensure expeditious processing of visas. In Rio de Janeiro, the chief of the consular section told us that he feels the need to establish a formal rapport with the travel industry so that there is no question about what is required to obtain a visa. Also, the commercial officer agreed that if visa officers had more contact with the travel industry, tourism would benefit as well as the effectiveness of consular operations. Travel industry representatives we interviewed agreed that regular discussions with consular officials were helpful.

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## Recommendations

Considering the difficulties some consulates have experienced with resources needed to efficiently process nonimmigrant tourist visas, the problems some tourists have experienced in obtaining visas, and the benefits that tourist trade has on the U.S. economy, we believe that the proposals for new nonimmigrant tourist visa fees to augment existing consular resources may have merit. However, additional analyses would be needed to address: (1) what additional costs may be involved, (2) how the funds would be used, (3) what controls would exist to ensure funds are used specifically for consular services, and (4) what internal controls would be established over the receipt of the funds. If these analyses indicate that the imposition of a new nonimmigrant tourist visa fee could result in funding for more cost-effective and efficient visa processing, we

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recommend that the Secretary of State seek legislative authority to implement a pilot program enabling consulates to use new nonimmigrant tourist visa fees to augment existing consular resources.

Because good communications with travel industry representatives and foreign commercial officers should help consulates handle increased visa work loads during peak tourist seasons, we further recommend that the Secretary of State direct that the next revision of the Consular Management Handbook emphasize that consular officers maintain regular communication with host country travel industry representatives in all countries.

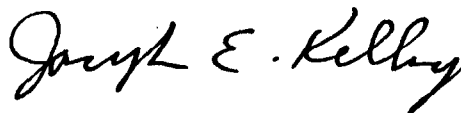
We also recommend that the handbook describe the time-saving techniques used by some consulates as discussed in this report.

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As you requested, we did not obtain agency comments on this report. However, we discussed a draft of this report with Department of State and U.S. Travel and Tourism Administration program officials and incorporated their comments where appropriate.

As arranged with your office, unless you publicly announce its contents earlier, we plan no further distribution of this report for 30 days after its issue date. At that time, we will send copies to the Secretary of State, the Under Secretary of the U.S. Travel and Tourism Administration, the Director of the Office of Management and Budget, and other interested parties. We will make copies available to others on request.

Please contact me on (202) 275-4128 if you or your staff have any questions concerning this report. Major contributors are listed in appendix II.



Joseph E. Kelley  
Director, Security and International  
Relations Issues



# Scope and Methodology

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We obtained information at the State Department and the Commerce Department's U.S. Travel and Tourism Administration and its regional office in Miami, Florida. We also obtained information and observed nonimmigrant visa processing and facilities at 14 consulates in 8 countries: Buenos Aires, Argentina; Brasilia, Porto Alegre, Recife, Rio de Janeiro, and Sao Paulo, Brazil; Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic; Guatemala City, Guatemala; Kingston, Jamaica; Seoul, Korea; Guadalajara, Mexico City, and Monterrey, Mexico; and Caracas, Venezuela. Ten of these consulates processed over 100,000 nonimmigrant visa applications a year and were in the top 20 tourist-generating countries in 1990. In the consular cities, we met with travel industry representatives.

We obtained information through a questionnaire from 29 other consulates where tourist visas are required. Each of these consulates processed 40,000 or more nonimmigrant visa applications in 1990. The 43 consulates we reviewed processed 4.1 million nonimmigrant visa applications in 1991, or 70 percent of total applications for countries where tourist visas are required.

We conducted our work between August 1991 and April 1992 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards.

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