BORDER SECURITY

Improvements Needed to Reduce Time Taken to Adjudicate Visas for Science Students and Scholars

What GAO Found

State Department (State) cannot readily identify the time it takes for a science student or scholar to obtain a visa. State has not set specific criteria or time frames for how long the visa process should take, but its goal is to adjudicate visas as quickly as possible, consistent with immigration laws and homeland security objectives. GAO found that the time it takes to adjudicate a visa depends largely on whether an applicant must undergo an interagency security check known as Visas Mantis, which is designed to protect against sensitive technology transfers. Based on a random sample of Visas Mantis cases for science students and scholars sent from posts between April and June 2003, GAO found it took an average of 67 days for the security check to be processed and for State to notify the post. In addition, GAO’s visits to posts in China, India, and Russia in September 2003 showed that many Visas Mantis cases had been pending 60 days or more. GAO also found that the way in which Visas Mantis information was disseminated at headquarters level made it difficult to resolve some of these cases expeditiously. Furthermore, consular staff at posts GAO visited said they were unsure whether they were contributing to lengthy waits because they lacked clear guidance on when to apply Visas Mantis checks and did not receive feedback on whether they were providing enough information in their Visas Mantis requests. Another factor that may affect the time taken to adjudicate visas for science students and scholars is the wait for an interview.

Average Time Frames for Visas Mantis Adjudication Process, April to June 2003

Source: GAO analysis of State Department documents and visa operations.

While State and Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) officials acknowledged there have been lengthy waits for visas, they report having measures under way that they believe will improve the process and that they are collaborating to identify and resolve outstanding Visas Mantis cases. In addition, State officials told GAO they have invested about $1 million to upgrade the technology for sending Visas Mantis requests. According to State officials, the new system will help to reduce the time it takes to process Visas Mantis cases.