



Highlights of GAO-06-542T, a testimony before the Committee on Government Reform, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

In deciding to approve or deny a visa application, the Department of State's (State) consular officers are on the front line of defense in protecting the United States against those who seek to harm U.S. interests. To increase border security following the September 11 attacks, Congress, State, and the Department of Homeland Security initiated a series of changes to border security policies and procedures. These changes have added to the complexity of consular workload. But consular officers must balance this security responsibility against the need to facilitate legitimate travel. In recent years, GAO has issued a series of reports on the visa process. This statement discusses (1) wait times for visas, (2) factors that affect wait times, and (3) GAO's recent work on consular staffing.

What GAO Recommends

We recommended in October 2002 and again in September 2005 that State reassess its consular staffing requirements. In commenting on a draft of our September 2005 report, State disagreed with our recommendation that it prepare a plan to address consular requirements. In light of the increased workload due to additional border security requirements and ongoing staffing shortages and processing delays at some posts, we continue to urge State to fully assess its resource needs to ensure it has the right people at key posts.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-06-542T.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Jess Ford at (202) 512-4128 or fordj@gao.gov.

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BORDER SECURITY

Reassessment of Consular Resource Requirements Could Help Address Visa Delays

What GAO Found

As a result of changes since September 11, 2001, aimed at strengthening visa policies and procedures, applicants have faced extensive wait times for visas at some posts. According to consular officials, posts that consistently have wait times of 30 days or longer for interview appointments may have a resource problem. During a recent 6-month period, 97 of State's 211 visa-issuing posts reported maximum wait times of 30 or more days in at least one month; at 20 posts, the reported wait times were in excess of 30 days for this entire 6-month period. Further, in February 2006, 9 posts reported wait times in excess of 90 days.

Several factors have contributed to these delays at some consular posts. For example, Congress, State, and the Department of Homeland Security have initiated new policies and procedures since the September 11 attacks to strengthen the security of the visa process; however, these new requirements have increased consular workload and exacerbated delays. Additionally, some applicants have faced additional delays because of special security checks for national security concerns. Other factors, such as resurgence in visa demand and ongoing embassy facility limitations, could continue to affect wait times.

We recently reported that State had not conducted a worldwide, comprehensive assessment of staffing requirements for visa operations. While State has increased hiring of consular officers, there is a need for such an assessment to ensure that State has sufficient staff at key consular posts, particularly in light of the visa processing delays at some posts.

Consular Posts with Maximum Reported Wait Times for Temporary Business and Tourism Visa Interview Appointments in Excess of 90 Days, February 2006

| Post | Maximum Wait Time in Days |
|------------------------|---------------------------|
| Chennai, India | 168 |
| Ciudad Juarez, Mexico | 92 |
| Havana, Cuba | 129 |
| Mexico City, Mexico | 134 |
| Mumbai, India | 154 |
| New Delhi, India | 91 |
| Paris, France | 116 |
| Port Au Prince, Haiti | 167 |
| Rio de Janeiro, Brazil | 140 |

Source: Department of State

Note: These data are based on reports from overseas consular posts to the Consular Affairs Bureau in Washington, D.C. According to consular officials, in cases where posts report wait time data more than once in a given month, State's data are the maximum wait time reported that month.