



DEPARTMENT OF STATE

WRITTEN STATEMENT

OF

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DEPARTMENT OF STATE

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**“BALANCING PROSPERITY AND SECURITY: CHALLENGES FOR U.S.
AIR TRAVEL IN A 21ST CENTURY GLOBAL ECONOMY”**

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Chairman Landrieu, Ranking Member Coats, and distinguished Members of the Subcommittee, it is a distinct honor to appear before you to share the accomplishments of my colleagues in the Department of State's 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.

The Department of State's Role in Travel and Tourism Promotion

The nonimmigrant visa application process is a small but important component of the combined effort to attract more overseas travelers to the United States. In FY 2011, more than 62 million international visitors entered the United States, according to the Department of Commerce. Around 60 to 65 percent enter legally without visas (Canadians and Visa Waiver Program travellers); most others enter with multiple entry nonimmigrant visas issued in prior years. Only about 12 percent of travellers obtained new nonimmigrant visas just before travel.

Streamlining access to U.S. visa services will complement the Administration's effort to capture a greater share of the global travel and tourism market, a multifaceted effort extending far beyond improving our visa adjudication capacity.

In partnership with the Task Force on Travel and Competitiveness and the Corporation for Travel Promotion, the Department of State is playing a key role in promoting increased international travel to the United States. In addition to our ongoing efforts to streamline the nonimmigrant application process, we actively promote travel to the United States through our cadre of more than 1,200 economic and commercial officers working to establish and maintain new patterns of international economic cooperation. We promote America as a destination for overseas visitors through our public and cultural affairs officers who are

identifying key audiences and ensuring that messages about travel to the United States reach them in the most appropriate contexts, formats, and languages.

The Department of State looks forward to working with the Tourism Policy Council and the Corporation for Travel Promotion to encourage new and repeat travelers to the United States.

Responding to 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 nonimmigrant visa applications and issued more than 7.5 million U.S. visas in fiscal year 2011, an increase of more than 16 percent over the previous 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. 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, international visitors contributed \$134 billion to the U.S. economy in 2010, 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 growing economies, including China and Brazil, where we have seen demand for U.S. visas increase at a dramatic pace. In fiscal year 2011, we processed approximately one million nonimmigrant visas in China, and more than 800,000 nonimmigrant visas in Brazil. This represented a 34 percent increase in processing for China over the previous fiscal year, and a 42 percent increase in processing for Brazil during the same period, an accomplishment in meeting workload demand that would be hard to match, even in the private sector. And, we issue nonimmigrant visas to almost 90 percent of Chinese applicants, and to over 96 percent of Brazilian applicants.

In the first four months of FY 2012 alone, consular officers in China processed 33 percent more nonimmigrant visa applications, and consular officers in Brazil handled 62 percent more over the same time period in FY 2011. Although we have taken several steps to meet this growing demand since 2010, we are continuing to implement additional measures to streamline the nonimmigrant visa application process. In fact, we recently submitted a plan to President Obama outlining the steps we will take in 2012 to increase our capacity in Brazil and China by 40 percent, and to ensure that consular officers interview 80 percent of nonimmigrant applicants worldwide within three weeks of submitting their applications – goals the President directed us to achieve through Executive Order 13597. I would like to update you on the details of these efforts.

Meeting Demand, Especially in China and Brazil

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 nonimmigrant visa adjudication capacity by 40 percent in 2012 in both China and Brazil, two countries where we have seen the greatest increase in visa demand:

- The Department is adding over 100 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 by April 2012. A second group will follow in summer 2012.
- Some posts in China and Brazil are operating double shifts to maximize use of the facilities. Working bilaterally with host governments, the Department is also working to physically expand and improve our visa-processing facilities to allow for even more visa 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.

The results of these efforts are already evident. The staffing increases and internal efficiency measures have all but eliminated backlogs in China, and have significantly reduced the backlog of cases in Brazil, where wait times have come down well below the previous highs of more than 100 days, to as low as a week or less at some posts. As of today, average interview wait times for nonimmigrant visas at our Embassy and our consulates in Brazil are below 30 days, and a week or less at our posts in China.

Since 2005, consular officer staffing has doubled in Brazil. Since Fiscal Year 2008, we have sent more than 185 officers and 57 support staff to Brazil on temporary assignments to meet short-term staffing needs, providing an additional 5,702 days of service. Our consulate in Sao Paulo began extended interview hours in August, and other Brazilian posts are expected to follow. Sao Paulo increased from 2,000 interviews per day to 3,000 per day. The U.S. Consulate General in Rio increased from 1,000 interviews per day to 2,000 interviews per day. We hosted two “Super Saturday” events at consular posts across Brazil, adjudicating almost 8,000 visa applications in those two days, and consular officers in Brasilia adjudicated hundreds of visas during two Brazilian holidays in November.

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. 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 traveled to China in January 2012. We are adding a total of 48 new interview windows throughout China and 19 in Brazil. This expansion, which will extend into 2013, will increase capacity by more than 60 percent in China and more than 30 percent in Brazil.

In addition, we are assessing the feasibility of establishing more visa-issuing locations in Brazil and China.

The Department is utilizing Limited Non-career Appointments (LNA) to hire visa adjudicators with essential language skills in Mandarin or Portuguese. LNA hires meet the strict qualifications of Foreign Service Officers, including security and background checks. They enter service speaking fluent Mandarin or Portuguese, allowing them to begin work as soon as they have completed our intensive consular training program. They are appointed for one-year periods for a total of no more than five consecutive years, and have the same privileges and responsibilities as other consular adjudicators. We plan to hire over 50 LNAs over the next two years. Every 10 LNAs could potentially adjudicate 150,000 more visas 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 makes

interview appointment scheduling transparent and consistent. It also eliminates the user-pay scheduling programs that exist in many countries. In order to create additional capacity, GSS moves some non-security-related consular functions off-site. By shifting non-security functions out of the consular section, it frees our staff to pay more attention to security concerns. GSS is already in place 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.

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 U.S. government national security agencies in real time. 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 secure, efficient, and as simple as possible for all those who wish to visit our great nation.

Interviews

The Immigration and Nationality Act (INA) generally requires our consular officers to interview in person all first-time visa applicants aged 14 through 79, but gives consular officers authority to waive interviews for diplomatic and official applicants from foreign governments and, in limited circumstances, some repeat applicants. The INA also allows the Secretary of State to waive interviews in certain situations.

Among the provisions in the Department's FY 2012 budget was a request that the Department explore alternative measures to meet the personal interview requirement, such as video visa interviewing. We appreciate Senator Landrieu's interest in this topic, which we have also explored at length. We concluded that video visa interviewing is simply not a viable option. We have piloted this technology and have found it does not meet our strict security requirements, is costly, and is less efficient than in-person interviews. Use of this technology requires off-site facilities manned by American personnel with security clearances, and therefore subject to costly physical security and data-protection requirements.

Permission to open such facilities and the legal status of employees could be an issue in some countries. We found that moving applicants to and from the camera location, and limiting the length of the interview, is more challenging at an off-site video facility, thereby reducing the overall number of interviews conducted.

Consular officers are trained to use all of their senses to spot potential fraud or threats that might not be as readily observable over a two-dimensional video link. Much like the final in-person interview before hiring a new employee, if there is any concern about a visa applicant, an in-person interview is the best way to resolve the case.

We are continually looking for more efficient ways to improve the applicant's experience, without compromising security, particularly since a trip to the Embassy is often a foreign visitor's first impression of the United States. One way to accomplish this, among other things, is to decrease the number of people in the waiting room. Enhanced security screening in effect since September 11 makes it possible to eliminate interviews for certain very limited categories of applicants, without compromising border security requirements.

With DHS concurrence, on January 19, 2012, the Departments of State and Homeland Security initiated a two-year pilot program to streamline visa processing for low-risk applicants, based on terms and conditions agreed between our agencies and implemented in accordance with INA requirements. Under the pilot program, consular officers may waive interviews for certain categories of qualified nonimmigrant visa applicants worldwide who are renewing their visas within 48 months of the expiration of their previously held visa, and within the same classification as the previous visa (i.e., a B1/B2 applicant must apply for another B1/B2 visa). Consular officers also may waive the interview and fingerprint

collection requirement for certain qualified nonimmigrant visa applicants holding Brazilian passports worldwide who are younger than 16 years old or 66 years of age and older, so long as the required thorough screening against biographic-based, immigration, law enforcement, and intelligence databases raises no concerns.

Officers will only exercise this waiver authority after a careful review of the application, and a thorough screening of the applicant against inter-agency databases, and in alignment with appropriate programmatic quality control measures.

This new policy will make it much easier for many tourists, particularly Chinese travelers, to renew their visas, helping to free up over 100,000 interview appointments for travelers applying for visas for the first time. That increase in tourism could support as many as 1,500 travel and tourism-related jobs. For Brazilian applicants, the program will permit consular officers to more effectively spend their time and resources evaluating higher-risk visa applicants and other applicants who require interviews. The pilot program has been implemented in China and is in the process of being implemented at some of our busiest overseas posts, including Brazil, Mexico, India and Russia.

Reciprocity

The Immigration and Nationality Act also requires us to set visa validity based on the validity of visas issued to U.S. citizens. We coordinate these decisions with the Department of Homeland Security. Right now, the Chinese generally issue Americans visas valid for one year or less. 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 leisure and business travelers.

The Department does not act alone when it comes to decisions about visa validity; we must obtain approval from the Department of Homeland Security prior to increasing any period of visa validity.

In addition to granting reciprocal treatment to U.S. citizens seeking visas to visit China, it has been the Administration's position that the Chinese government also must make significant progress in issuing travel documentation to thousands of Chinese nationals in the United States under final deportation orders.

Visa Waiver Program

We are working with our partners in the U.S. government to consider additional countries for membership in the Visa Waiver Program (VWP), which is administered by the Department of Homeland Security. 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. The Secretary of State recently nominated Taiwan to join the VWP and the Department of Homeland Security has begun the review process for its admission to the program. We support S.2046, the Visa Waiver Program Enhanced Security and Reform Act, currently being considered in the Senate, which would enhance and strengthen the VWP.

Conclusion

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

Visa adjudication requires good judgment, insight into cultural practices, and knowledge of immigration law. Visa adjudication is essential to 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.

At the same time, as President Obama has said, “We will always protect our borders and our shores and our tourist destinations from people who want to do us harm. But we also want to get more international tourists coming to America. And there’s no reason why we can’t do both.” The Department of State is firmly committed to supporting the President’s travel and tourism initiatives, opening the door to new jobs and exports. More international visitors to America means more revenue for our cities and states, and we are making it easier for tourists from other countries to experience all that America has to offer. We have made it a priority to increase our capacity while maintaining our strict security standards, and we will

continue to reduce wait times and facilitate increasing numbers of legitimate travelers to the United States.

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