

GAO

Report to the Committee on Oversight
and Government Reform, House of
Representatives

July 2007

BORDER SECURITY

Long-term Strategy Needed to Keep Pace with Increasing Demand for Visas





Highlights of [GAO-07-847](#), a report to the Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

After the 9/11 terrorist attacks, Congress and the Department of State (State) initiated changes to the visa process to increase security, but these changes also increased the amount of time needed to adjudicate a visa. Although maintaining security is of paramount importance, State has acknowledged that long waits for visas may discourage legitimate travel to the United States, potentially costing the country billions of dollars in economic benefits over time, and adversely influencing foreign citizens' opinions of our nation. GAO testified in 2006 that a number of consular posts had long visa interview wait times. This report examines (1) State's data on visa interview wait times, (2) actions State has taken to address wait times, and (3) State's strategy for dealing with projected growth in visa demand.

What GAO Recommends

To improve State's oversight and management of visa-adjudicating posts—with the goal of facilitating legitimate travel while maintaining a high level of security to protect our borders—GAO is recommending that State (1) develop a strategy to address worldwide increases in visa demand, (2) improve the reliability and utility of visa waits data, and (3) identify and disseminate practices and procedures used by posts to manage workload and reduce wait times. State concurred with our recommendations.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-07-847.

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

BORDER SECURITY

Long-term Strategy Needed to Keep Pace with Increasing Demand for Visas

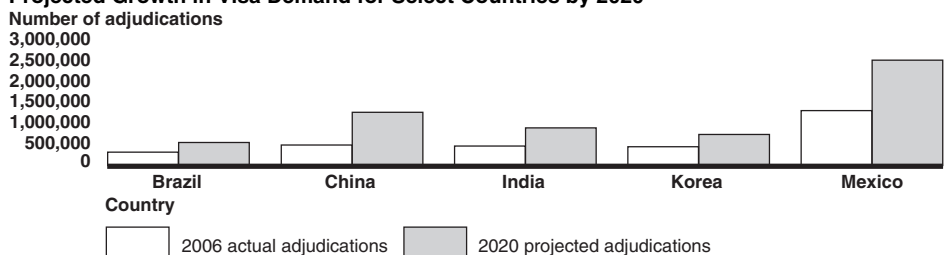
What GAO Found

According to State, the amount of time that applicants must wait for a visa interview has generally decreased over the last year; however, some applicants continue to face extensive delays. State's data showed that between September 2005 and February 2006, 97 consular posts reported maximum wait times of 30 or more days in at least 1 month, whereas 53 posts reported such waits for the same period 1 year later. However, despite recent improvements, at times during the past year, a number of posts reported long wait times, which could be expected to reoccur during future visa demand surges. In 2007, State announced a goal of providing applicants an interview within 30 days. Although State's data is sufficiently reliable to indicate that wait times continue to be a problem at some posts, GAO identified shortcomings in the way the data is developed that could mask the severity of the problem.

State has implemented steps to reduce wait times at several posts including using temporary duty employees to fill staffing gaps at some posts and repositioning some consular positions to better utilize its current workforce. However, these measures are not permanent or sustainable solutions and may not adequately address the increasing demand for visas worldwide. In addition, State has made improvements to several consular facilities and has identified plans for improvements at several other posts with high workload. Some posts have utilized procedures that enable them to process applications more efficiently. However, not all of these procedures are shared among posts in a systematic way and, therefore, not all posts are aware of them.

State has not determined how it will keep pace with growth in visa demand over the long-term. State contracted for a study of visa demand, in select countries, over a 15-year period beginning in 2005, which projected that visa demand will increase dramatically at several posts (see fig.). However, at some posts, demand has already surpassed the study's projected future demand levels. State has not developed a strategy that considers such factors as available resources and the need for maintaining national security in the visa process, along with its goal that visas are processed in a reasonable amount of time. Given dramatic increases in workload expected at many posts, without such a strategy State will be challenged in achieving its current goal for wait times.

Projected Growth in Visa Demand for Select Countries by 2020



Source: GAO analysis of State data from the Consular Affairs Futures Study.

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Abbreviations

DHS	Department of Homeland Security
NIV	nonimmigrant visa
SAO	Security Advisory Opinion
State	Department of State
US-VISIT	U.S. Visitor and Immigrant Status Indicator Technology

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United States Government Accountability Office
Washington, DC 20548

July 13, 2007

The Honorable Henry A. Waxman
Chairman
The Honorable Tom Davis
Ranking Minority Member
Committee on Oversight and Government Reform
House of Representatives

To increase the security of the visa process following the 9/11 terrorist attacks, Congress and the Department of State (State) initiated multiple changes to visa laws, policies, and procedures; however, these changes have also increased the amount of time needed to schedule and adjudicate a nonimmigrant visa (NIV).¹ Concurrently, annual worldwide demand for visas has increased for 3 years in a row with levels exceeding 8 million visa applications for 2006.² The increase in demand has made it difficult for some posts to manage workload without causing applicants to wait considerable time for an interview.³ In April 2006, we testified that visa applicants at some posts, including strategically important posts in India and China, were facing extensive waits in obtaining a visa interview.⁴ According to the visa wait times reported by State's consular posts, 97 of its posts had reported maximum wait times greater than 30 days in at least 1 month between September 2005 and February 2006.⁵ Although maintaining security of the visa process is of paramount importance and overall issuances of visas are on the rise, State has also acknowledged that long wait times may discourage legitimate travel to the United States, potentially costing the country billions of dollars in economic benefits

¹The United States also grants visas to people who intend to immigrate to the United States. In this report, we use the term "visa" to refer to nonimmigrant visas only.

²Applications for visas rose steadily in the 1990s to a peak of 10.4 million for fiscal year 2001. Following the 2001 economic recession and the precipitous decline in travel resulting from the 9/11 terrorist attacks, visa demand dropped.

³Wait time is broadly defined as the amount of time that a visa applicant must wait to obtain a visa interview.

⁴See GAO, *Border Security: Reassessment of Consular Resource Requirements Could Help Address Visa Delays*, [GAO-06-542T](#) (Washington, DC: Apr. 4, 2006).

⁵At the time we reported this figure in April 2006, State reporting having 211 visa-adjudicating consular posts. State currently reports that it has 219 such posts.

over time,⁶ and adversely influencing foreign citizens' impressions and opinions of our nation. Several groups, including the U.S. Travel and Tourism Advisory Board,⁷ have urged the administration to take action on this issue and have detailed the negative impact—in terms of revenue losses—that impediments to travel and tourism,⁸ including from visa processing delays, have on U.S. businesses and colleges and universities.

At your request, we reviewed (1) State data on the amount of time visa applicants were waiting to obtain a visa interview, (2) actions State has taken to address visa wait times, and (3) State's strategy for dealing with projected increases in visa demand. To accomplish our objectives, we interviewed officials from State's bureaus of Consular Affairs, Human Resources, and Overseas Buildings Operations. We also interviewed officials from the Department of Commerce's Office of Travel and Tourism Industries. In addition, we observed consular operations and interviewed U.S. government officials at 11 posts in eight countries—Brazil, China, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Honduras, India, South Korea, and the United Kingdom. We reviewed visa wait times data reported by posts since September 2005. We also reviewed consular reports and data from a total of 32 posts to identify factors contributing to wait times and potential solutions to reduce wait times. Our work was conducted in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Appendix I contains a more detailed description of our scope and methodology.

Results in Brief

According to State, the amount of time that visa applicants must wait for a visa interview has generally decreased over the last year; however, some applicants continue to face extensive delays⁹ for visa interviews. For example, for the period of September 2006 to February 2007, 53 of State's

⁶In March 2007, the Deputy Secretary of State for Visa Services testified that, according to Department of Commerce figures, foreign visitors accounted for \$107.4 billion in spending and other economic activity in the United States in 2006, and that international students contribute an additional \$13.5 billion each year to institutions they attend and the surrounding communities in which they live.

⁷The U.S. Travel and Tourism Advisory Board consists of 14 industry CEOs and was formed to advise the U.S. Secretary of Commerce on national tourism strategy.

⁸As defined by the Department of Commerce, travel and tourism includes leisure, business, conventions and meetings, and educational and medical travel.

⁹Believing the waits at some posts are excessive, earlier this year, State announced a goal of providing all applicants an interview within 30 days.

219 visa-issuing posts reported maximum wait times of 30 or more days in at least 1 month, which was 44 fewer posts than had reported this figure for the same period the previous year. State reported that a number of key posts in India, Mexico, and Brazil, among others, have reduced wait times. For example, in April 2007, all posts in India reported they reduced their waits for appointments to less than 2 weeks from highs that had exceeded 140 days as recently as August 2006. However, despite recent improvements, at times during the past year—especially during peak processing periods for the summer months—a number of posts reported long wait times. According to State officials, longer wait times are expected to reoccur seasonally at some posts but can also occur at others unexpectedly depending on factors such as the political or economic situation in a given country. In addition, we identified a number of shortcomings in the way State’s wait times data is developed. For example, some posts are not reporting weekly, as required, and some posts use different methods for determining wait times. These shortcomings could mask the severity of the visa wait problem at some posts. Moreover, they limit the extent to which State can monitor whether the visa wait problem has been addressed.

Since we last reported on visa delays in April 2006, State has taken a number of steps to adjust staffing, facilities, and consular procedures to reduce wait times at several overseas consular posts. State has used temporary duty employees to fill consular staffing gaps at some posts and is repositioning a number of consular positions at posts around the world to better utilize its current workforce—especially at posts experiencing large growth in workload. For example, because applicants in India were experiencing long waits for appointments, State took several actions, including sending a number of temporary duty officers to posts in India and utilizing nonconsular staff from other offices in the mission to assist with visa processing. In addition, the ambassador made the reduction of wait times the primary objective of all India posts. However, the use of temporary and other mission staff to reduce wait times is not a permanent or sustainable solution. Furthermore, State acknowledges that the repositioning of consular staff, while necessary, may not adequately address the increasing demand for visas worldwide. In addition, State has made improvements to several consular facilities and has identified plans for future facilities improvements at several posts with high workload. Although some improvements have been made, facilities at many consular sections face constraints that limit the number of visa officers that can be assigned there; moreover, it will take many years for State to complete all needed consular construction projects. State has also made some procedural changes to help posts better manage visa workload, and we

found that some posts have utilized procedures that enable them to process applications more efficiently—such as conducting workflow studies in order to identify obstructions to efficient applicant processing. However, we observed that not all of these procedures are shared among posts in a systematic way and, therefore, not all posts are aware of them.

Although State has taken some steps to address wait times at a number of overseas posts, including developing a plan to improve visa operations and establishing a goal to interview all visa applicants within 30 days, it has not determined how it will keep pace with continued growth in visa demand over the long-term. State contracted for a study of projected visa demand, in select countries over a 15-year period beginning in 2005, which found that significant growth in visa demand is estimated to occur in a number of countries including Argentina, Brazil, China, India, Mexico, and Saudi Arabia. However, at some posts, demand has already surpassed the study's projected future demand levels. State has not developed a strategy that balances such factors as available resources and the need for national security in the visa process against its goal that visas are processed in a reasonable amount of time. For example, it has neither estimated the resources necessary to meet future demand, nor proposed plans that would significantly reduce the workload of available officers or the amount of time needed to adjudicate a visa if such resources are not available. Given dramatic increases in workload expected at many visa-issuing posts, State will be challenged to obtain the staffing and facilities necessary to achieve its current goal for wait times.

To improve the Bureau of Consular Affairs' oversight and management of visa-adjudicating posts, we recommend that the Secretary of State

- Develop a strategy to address worldwide increases in visa demand that balances the security responsibility of protecting the United States from potential terrorists and individuals who would harm U.S. interests with the need to facilitate legitimate travel to the United States. In doing so, State should take into consideration relevant factors, such as the flow of visa applicants, the backlog of applicants, the availability of consular officers, and the time required to process each visa application. State's analysis should be informed by reliable data on the factors that influence wait times. State should update any plan annually to reflect new information on visa demand.
- Improve the reliability and utility of visa waits data by defining collection standards and ensuring that posts report the data according to the standards.

-
- Identify practices and procedures used by posts to manage workload and reduce wait times and encourage the dissemination and use of successful practices.

We provided a draft of this report to the Departments of State and Homeland Security (DHS). DHS did not comment on the report's message, but provided a technical comment. State concurred with our report's recommendations and said that any appropriate strategy to address worldwide increases in visa demand must address the need for resources to meet national security goals for both travel facilitation and border security. Furthermore, State said that any suggestion of trade-offs between these two goals would be inappropriate. Clearly we agree that in developing a strategy, State must maintain its security responsibilities while also facilitating legitimate travel to the United States. Our report does not suggest that one of these goals should be sacrificed at the expense of the other. State also provided a number of technical comments, which we have incorporated throughout the report, as appropriate.

Background

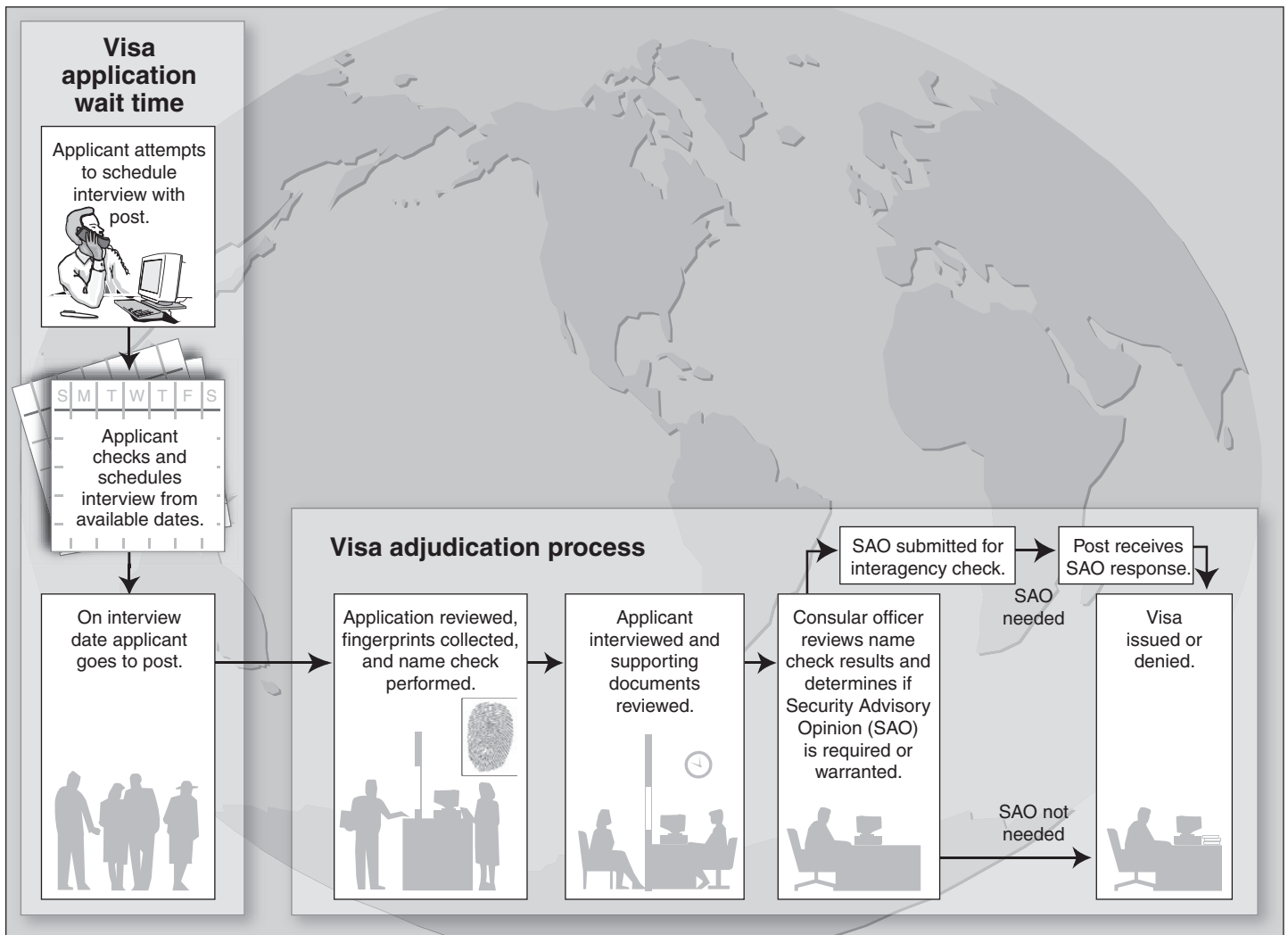
Foreign nationals who wish to come to the United States on a temporary basis must generally obtain an NIV¹⁰ to be admitted. State manages the visa process, as well as the consular officer corps and its functions, at 219 visa-issuing posts overseas.¹¹ The process for determining who will be issued or refused a visa contains several steps, including documentation reviews, in-person interviews, collection of biometrics¹² (fingerprints), and cross-referencing an applicant's name against the Consular Lookout and Support System—State's name-check database that posts use to access critical information for visa adjudication. In some cases, a consular officer may determine the need for a Security Advisory Opinion, which is a recommendation from Washington on whether to issue a visa to the applicant. Depending on a post's applicant pool and the number of visa applications that a post receives, each stage of the visa process varies in length. For an overview of the visa process see figure 1.

¹⁰Persons who may require NIVs include temporary business travelers and tourists.

¹¹The 1952 Immigration and Nationality Act, as amended, is the primary body of law governing immigration and visa operations (see Pub. L. No. 82-414, 8 U.S.C., 1101 et seq.) In addition, the Homeland Security Act of 2002 generally grants DHS exclusive authority to issue regulations on, administer, and enforce the Immigration and Nationality Act and all other immigration and nationality laws relating to the functions of U.S. consular officers in connection with the granting or denial of visas; however, State retains authority in certain circumstances (see Pub. L. No. 107-296.) A subsequent September 2003 Memorandum of Understanding between State and DHS further outlines the responsibilities of each agency with respect to visa issuance. According to the Memorandum of Understanding, DHS is responsible for establishing visa policy, reviewing implementation of the policy, and providing additional direction. State is in charge of managing the visa process, as well as the consular corps and its functions at 219 visa-issuing posts overseas.

¹²Biometrics includes a wide range of technologies that can be used to verify a person's identity by measuring and analyzing that person's physiological characteristics. For the purposes of this report, "biometric identifiers" refer to fingerprints. See GAO, *Technology Assessment: Using Biometrics for Border Security*, [GAO-03-174](#) (Washington, D.C.: Nov. 14 2002).

Figure 1: Visa Application Process



Sources: GAO; Nova Development Corp. (clip art).

Recent Visa Policy Actions Have Increased Time Needed to Adjudicate Visas

Congress, State, and DHS have initiated new policies and procedures since the 9/11 terrorist attacks to strengthen the security of the visa process. These changes have added to the complexity of consular workload and have increased the amount of time needed to adjudicate a visa. Such changes include the following:

-
- Beginning in fiscal year 2002, State began a 3-year transition to remove visa adjudication functions from consular associates.¹³ All NIVs must now be adjudicated by consular officers.¹⁴
 - Personal interviews are required by law for most foreign nationals seeking NIVs.¹⁵
 - As of October 2004, consular officers are required to scan visa applicants' right and left index fingers through the DHS Automated Biometric Identification System before an applicant can receive a visa.¹⁶ In 2005, the Secretary of Homeland Security announced that the U.S. government had adopted a 10-fingerscan standard for biometric collection of fingerprints. In February 2006, State reported that it would begin pilot testing and procuring 10-print equipment to ensure that all visa-issuing posts have collection capability by the end of fiscal year 2007.¹⁷

¹³Consular Associates are U.S. citizens and relatives of U.S. government direct-hire employees overseas who, following a successful completion of the required Basic Consular Course, are hired by the consular section at post. Up until September 30, 2005, consular associates at some posts were allowed to assist consular officers in adjudicating visas.

¹⁴The Intelligence Reform and Terrorism Prevention Act of 2004 further required that consular officers adjudicate visas. See Pub. L. No. 108-458. As defined by State, consular officers are generally active Foreign Service officers but may also include commissioned civil service employees or retirees of the Foreign Service.

¹⁵According to U.S. law (8 U.S.C. § 1202(h)), every alien applying for an NIV who is between the ages of 14 and 79 must submit to an in-person interview with a consular officer unless the interview is waived under certain circumstances by either the consular officer or the Secretary of State. See Pub. L. No. 108-458.

¹⁶The Automated Biometric Identification System is a DHS database that includes some 5 million people who may be ineligible to receive a visa. For example, the Automated Biometric Identification System data includes, among other records, Federal Bureau of Investigation information on all known and suspected terrorists, selected wanted persons, and previous criminal histories for individuals from high-risk countries. See GAO, *Border Security: State Department Rollout of Biometric Visas on Schedule, but Guidance Is Lagging*, GAO-04-1001 (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 9, 2004) and GAO, *Technology Assessment: Using Biometrics for Border Security*, GAO-03-174 (Washington, D.C.: Nov. 14, 2002).

¹⁷In January 2006, the director of the U.S. Visitor and Immigrant Status Indicator Technology (US-VISIT) program testified that moving to a 10-fingerscan standard from a 2-print standard would allow the United States to be able to identify visa applicants and visitors with even greater accuracy. US-VISIT is a governmentwide program to collect, maintain, and share information on foreign nationals and better control and monitor the entry, visa status, and exit of visitors. Under the program, most foreign visitors are required to submit to fingerprint scans of their right and left index fingers and have a digital photograph taken upon arrival at U.S. ports of entry.

-
- According to State, consular officers face increased requirements to consult with headquarters and other U.S. agencies prior to visa issuance in the form of Security Advisory Opinions.
 - According to State, as a result of the Patriot Act, consular officers have access to, and are required to consult, far greater amounts of interagency data regarding potential terrorists and individuals who would harm U.S. interests.

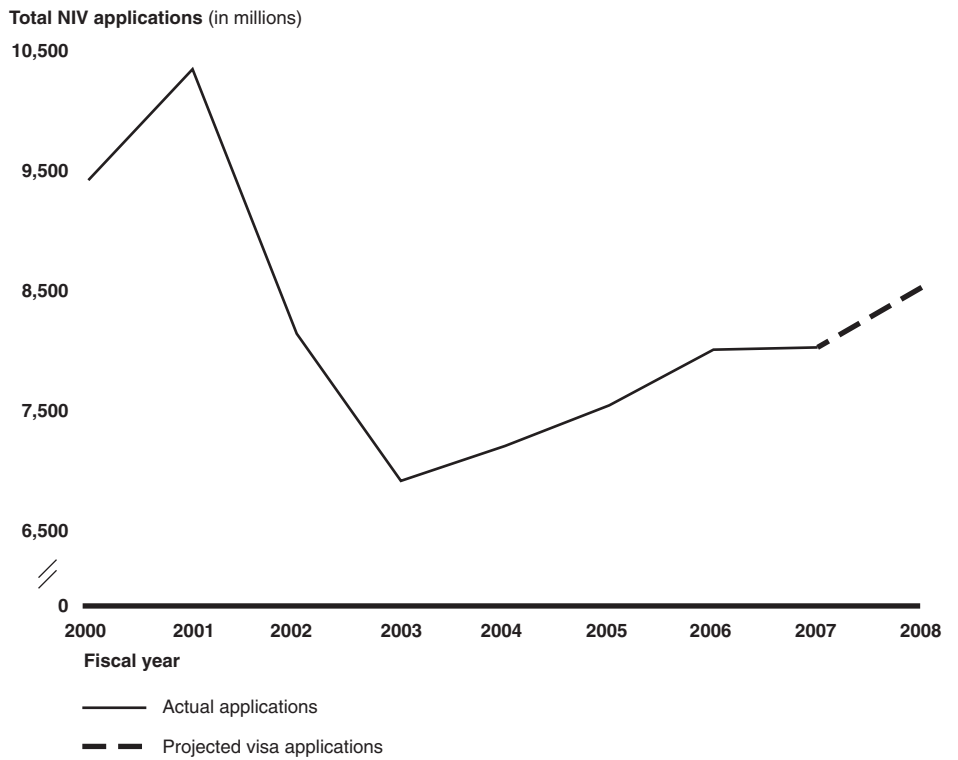
Factors Impacting Visa Delays

A number of potential factors can contribute to delays for visa interview appointments at consular posts. For example, increased consular officer workload at posts, which can be caused by factors such as increased security screening procedures or increased visa demand, can exacerbate delays because there are more work requirements for each available officer to complete. Other factors such as staffing gaps and ongoing consular facility limitations could also affect waits because they may limit the number of applicants that can be seen for an interview in a given day.

Visa Application Trends

Following the 9/11 terrorist attacks, applications for visas declined from a high of over 10.4 million in fiscal year 2001 to a low of approximately 7 million in 2003. For fiscal years 2004 through 2006, the number of visa applications increased, according to State's data (see fig. 2). State anticipates that 8.1 million visas applications will be received in fiscal year 2007 and 8.6 million in 2008.

Figure 2: Applications for Nonimmigrant Visas, Fiscal Years 2000-2008



Source: State.

State's visa workload increased by almost 16 percent between 2004 and 2006. In addition, several countries and posts have seen large growth in visa demand, and State has projected these trends to continue well into the future.¹⁸ Following are examples of these trends:

- India had an 18 percent increase in visa adjudications between 2002 and 2006.
- Posts in China reported that their visa adjudication volume increased between 18 and 21 percent last year alone, and growth is expected to continue.

¹⁸See Change Navigators, Inc., *State Department/Consular Affairs Futures Study* (Washington, D.C.: July-September 2005).

Long Waits for Visa Interviews Have Previously Challenged a Number of Overseas Consular Posts

We have previously reported on visa delays at overseas posts. In particular, we have reported on the following delays in Brazil, China, India, and Mexico:

- In March 1998, we reported that the post in Sao Paulo, Brazil, was facing extensive delays due to staffing and facilities constraints.¹⁹
- In February 2004, we reported delays at consular posts in India and China. For example, in September 2003, applicants at one post we visited in China were facing waits of about 5 to 6 weeks. Also, we reported that, in summer 2003, applicants in Chennai, India, faced waits as long as 12 weeks.²⁰
- In April 2006, we testified that, of nine posts with waits in excess of 90 days in February 2006, six were in Mexico, India, and Brazil.²¹

State's Recent Data Show Wait Time Trends Have Improved, but Some Applicants Continue to Face Extensive Delays for Visa Interviews

According to State, wait times for visa interviews have improved at many overseas consular posts in the past year. However, despite recent improvements—such as those at posts in India, Mexico, and Brazil—a number of posts reported long waits at times during the past year. Believing the waits at some posts are excessive, in February of this year, State announced its goal of providing all applicants an interview within 30 days. We identified a number of shortcomings in the way in which State's visa waits data is developed, which could mask the severity of the delays for visa interviews at some posts and limit the extent to which State can monitor whether the visa wait problem has been addressed. To better understand and manage post workload, State has begun to develop a measure of applicant backlog.

¹⁹See GAO, *State Department: Tourist Visa Processing Backlogs Still Persist at U.S. Consulates*, [GAO/NSIAD-98-69](#) (Washington, D.C.: Mar. 13, 1998).

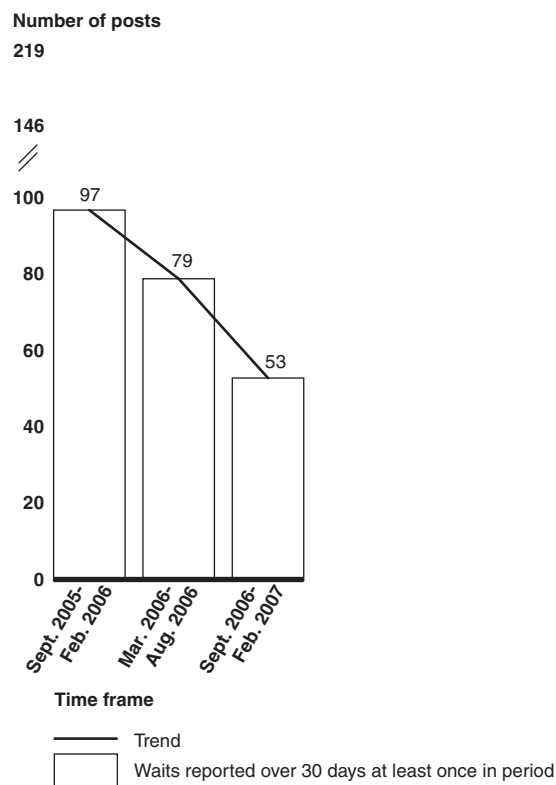
²⁰See GAO, *Border Security: Improvements Needed to Reduce Time Taken to Adjudicate Visas for Science Students and Scholars*, [GAO-04-371](#) (Washington, D.C.: Feb. 25, 2004).

²¹[GAO-06-542T](#).

State Has Reported Improvements in Visa Wait Times

In recent months, reported wait times for visa appointments have generally improved. For example, in reviewing visa waits data provided to us by the Bureau of Consular Affairs for the period of September 2006 to February 2007, we found that 53 of State's 219 visa-issuing posts had reported maximum wait times of 30 or more days in at least 1 month—44 fewer posts than had reported this figure when we reviewed the same period during the previous year (see fig. 3).²²

Figure 3: Posts Occasionally Experiencing Waits Over 30 Days, September 2005–February 2007



Source: GAO analysis of State data.

²²See [GAO-06-542T](#). We reported that, during the period September 2005–February 2006, 97 of State's visa-issuing posts (211 at the time) had reported maximum waits of 30 or more days in at least 1 month, and 20 posts had reported waits in excess of 30 days for an entire 6-month period.

Furthermore, wait times reported by several consular posts have improved during the past year, including for a number of high volume posts in India, Brazil, and Mexico that had previously reported extensive delays.²³ In April 2007, wait times at all posts in India were under 2 weeks, down from previous waits that exceeded 140 days at four key posts, as recently as August 2006, in most cases. For example, Mumbai reported a reduction in wait times from a high of 186 days in September 2006 to 10 days as of April 9, 2007. Reported wait times at some key posts in Mexico also significantly declined,²⁴ as have wait times for several posts in Brazil in the past year. Furthermore, an additional number of posts with delays experienced large reductions in wait times over a recent 12 month period.

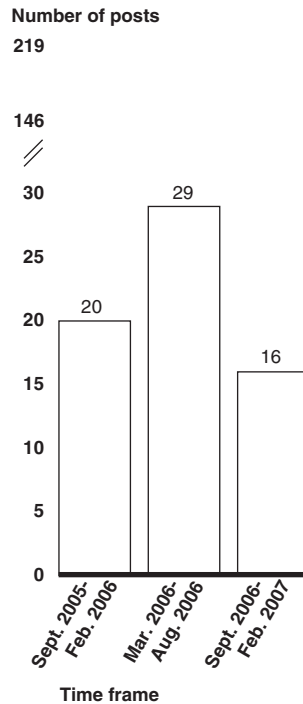
Some Posts Continue to Face Long Delays

Despite recent improvements in wait times at a number of consular posts, at times during the past year, especially during peak processing periods, a number of visa adjudicating posts have faced challenges in reporting wait times of less than 30 days. For example, during typical peak demand season, 29 posts reported maximum monthly waits exceeding 30 days over the entire 6-month period of March through August 2006 (see fig. 4).

²³In April 2006, we testified that waits over 90 days occurred at the following posts in India, Mexico and Brazil: Mumbai, India—154 days; Chennai, India—168 days; New Delhi, India—91 days; Ciudad Juarez, Mexico—92 days; Mexico City, Mexico—34 days; and Rio de Janeiro, Brazil—140 days.

²⁴Rio de Janeiro reported its wait times were reduced to 48 days in February 2007 from a high of 149 days in October 2006. Mexico City reported its wait times were reduced to 19 days from a high of 160 days in January 2006.

Figure 4: Posts Consistently Experiencing Waits Over 30 Days, September 2005–February 2007



Source: GAO analysis of State data.

We observed that long waits had occurred over the summer months in Tegucigalpa, Honduras; San Jose, Costa Rica; and several posts in India. Furthermore, some posts we reviewed developed increased wait times. For example, in Caracas, the reported visa waits significantly increased—from 34 days in February 2006 to 116 days in April 2007. In addition, several other posts, including Sao Paolo, Brazil; Monterrey, Mexico; Tel Aviv, Israel; and Kingston, Jamaica; have experienced increases in wait times since February 2006.²⁵ Moreover, 20 posts reported experiencing maximum monthly wait times in excess of 90 days at least once over the past year.

²⁵Wait times, as of May 16, 2007 are as follows: Sao Paolo—59 days; Monterrey—60 days; Tel Aviv—66 days; and Kingston—55 days.

New Performance Standard for Visa Waits Implemented

In February 2007, State's Bureau of Consular Affairs distributed guidance setting a global standard that all visa applicants should receive an appointment for a visa interview within 30 days.²⁶ Previously, State had not set a formal performance standard for visa waits but had set a requirement that posts report their wait times on a weekly basis and make this information publicly available through post Web sites. In setting the 30-day standard for visa waits, officials acknowledged that wait times are not only a measure of customer service but also help posts to better manage their workload and visa demand. Furthermore, State identified that such a standard allows it to better track post performance, helps with resource allocation, and provides transparency in consular operations. Consular officials explained to us that posts that consistently have wait times for visa interview appointments of 30 days or longer may have a resource or management problem.

In setting its 30-day performance benchmark, State also distributed information to posts on how wait times data is to be used by Bureau of Consular Affairs management. For example, State indicated it will review all posts that have reported waits over 20 days to determine if remedial measures are needed.

Post Reporting of Visa Waits Data Needs Further Improvement

State has provided guidance indicating that posts are required to report wait times on a weekly basis, even if the times have not changed from the previous week. However, we found posts are not reporting waits data consistently, which impacts the reliability of State's visa waits figures. In September 2005, our analysis of State's data on reported wait times revealed significant numbers of posts that did not report this information on a weekly basis during the 6-month period we reviewed. In reviewing data over the past year, we again found that a large number of posts were not consistently reporting waits data on a weekly basis, as required by State.²⁷ For example, post reporting of wait times from January 2006 to February 2007 showed that, while a large number of posts (about 79 percent) had reported waits at least monthly, only 21 posts (about 10

²⁶In addition, State set a performance indicator that student visas and U.S.-interest business applicants should receive an appointment for a visa within 15 days or less. Furthermore, State clarified that those applicants found eligible to receive a visa should expect their visa to be issued within 2 or 3 days after their interview.

²⁷Select small posts are allowed to report less frequently but are required to do so at least once per month.

percent) reported waits at least weekly. Inconsistencies among posts in the reporting of visa waits data impacts the reliability of visa waits figures and limits State's ability to assess whether the problem has been addressed by posts. However, State does not appear to be enforcing its weekly reporting requirement. State acknowledges that it has had difficulties in getting all 219 consular posts to report this data consistently.

According to cables provided to us by State, posts are directed to provide the "typical" appointment wait time applicable to the majority of applicants applying for a given category of visas on a given day.²⁸ Several of the posts we visited calculated wait times based on the first appointment available to the next applicant in a given visa category; however, other posts we reviewed calculated waits differently. For example, one post we visited computed wait times by taking the average of several available appointment slots.²⁹ In addition, several consular officials we spoke with overseas said that they are still unclear on the exact method posts are to use to calculate wait times, and some managers were unsure if they were calculating wait times correctly. Additionally, we observed that some posts artificially limit wait times by tightly controlling the availability of future appointment slots—such as by not making appointments available beyond a certain date, which can make appointment scheduling burdensome for the applicant who must continually check for new openings. State officials admitted that posts should not be controlling the availability of appointment slots to artificially limit wait times but, to date, there has not been specific guidance distributed to posts on this issue.

We determined that State's data are sufficiently reliable for providing a broad indication of posts that have had problems with wait times over a period of time and for general trends in the number of posts that have had problems with wait times over the period we reviewed; however, the data were not sufficiently reliable to determine the exact magnitude of the delays because the exact number of posts with a wait of 30 days or more at any given time could not be determined. Until State updates and

²⁸One cable, in particular, directs posts not to compute a mathematical average but to ask the question "on what date will the majority of visa applicants seeking an appointment be scheduled for an interview?" According to State, the number of calendar days between that date and the calendar date is the typical wait time.

²⁹A new post appointment system was recently implemented that provided applicants the option to choose from available appointments at either 3 or 6 weeks into the future.

enforces its collection standards for visa waits data, precise determinations about the extent to which posts face visa delays cannot be made. State officials acknowledge that current wait times data is of limited reliability. State officials have also said that visa waits data was not originally designed for the purpose of performance measurement but to provide applicants with information on interview availability. According to State, a current goal of the Bureau of Consular Affairs is to refine collection standards for wait times information to provide more uniform and transparent information to applicants and management; however, the bureau has not yet done so.

Measure of Applicant Backlog under Development

State's reported wait time data generally reflect the wait, at a moment in time, for new applicants, and do not reflect the actual wait time for an average applicant at a given post. Furthermore, wait times generally do not provide a sense of applicant backlog, which is the number of people who are waiting to be scheduled for an appointment or the number of people who have an appointment but have yet to be seen.³⁰ To better understand and manage post workload, State officials we spoke with said that they were in the process of developing a measure of applicant backlog. Although State has not yet developed the measure of backlog, officials we spoke with said that they expect to begin testing methods for measuring applicant backlog by the end of 2007.

³⁰ Appointment cancellations and other variables, such as increases in the number of post staff or visa processing windows, can allow for immediate appointment openings. When new appointments become available, posts in some cases can reschedule applicants for earlier appointments; however, we observed posts can fill the new slots with new applicants. Therefore, applicants with prior appointments can continue to face long waits although the post may be reporting low wait times due to new appointment availability.

State Has Taken Steps to Improve Processing Capacity at Posts Experiencing Long Waits, but Several Are Not Sustainable

State has implemented a number of measures to increase productivity and better manage visa workload, as well as measures to address shortcomings in staffing and facilities for a number of consular posts experiencing visa delays. State has provided temporary duty staff to assist in adjudicating visas at several locations with long wait times, particularly at posts in India, and recently developed a plan to relocate consular positions to locations where large disparities in staff and visa demand were apparent. In addition, State has continued to upgrade embassies and consulates overseas to aid in processing visa applicants. Furthermore, State has implemented some procedures and policies to maximize efficiency and better manage visa workload. However, despite the measures State has taken to address staffing, facilities, and other constraints at some posts, State's current efforts are generally temporary, nonsustainable, and are insufficient to meet the expected increases in demand at some posts.

State Has Used Temporary Duty Staff and Repositioned Consular Staff to Address Staffing Shortfalls Contributing to Visa Delays

State has recently taken action at several posts to address current staffing gaps to minimize the impact on visa wait times. State has deployed temporary duty staff from other consular posts and from headquarters to help process and adjudicate visa applicants.³¹ For example, State deployed 166 officials to staff consular sections in fiscal year 2006 and through April of fiscal year 2007. In addition, at the order of the Ambassador to India, beginning in 2006, posts in India utilized consular-commissioned officials from other offices in the embassy and consulates to assist the consular section in handling its workload, including fingerprinting applicants and interviewing some applicants, which helped reduce the wait times at posts.³² According to consular officials, the additional assistance in India was necessary as posts there did not have enough permanent consular staff to handle the demand and reduce wait times.

In addition, in February 2007, State completed a review of consular officer positions that examined the disparity between visa workload and the

³¹These temporary duty staff include when-actually-employed personnel, which is defined as employment where the workweek schedule is determined by post management on an as-needed basis. These officials are typically retired foreign service officers.

³²The ambassador made the reduction of wait times the primary objective of all posts in India.

number of consular officers at posts.³³ As a result of this study, State will transfer consular positions from certain posts that are capable of handling the workload without reporting long visa waits to posts where there has not been adequate staff to handle the visa workload. The majority of the positions are being transferred from posts in the European and Eurasian Affairs Bureau to posts in the Western Hemisphere, East Asia and Pacific, and South and Central Asian bureaus. Of these transferred and newly created consular officer positions, the majority will be located in Brazil, China, India, and Mexico—posts with a history of long wait times and high demand for visas. State acknowledges that the repositioning of consular staff, while necessary, may not adequately address the increasing demand for visas worldwide.

Despite the measures State has taken to address the staffing issues at some posts, State's current consular staffing efforts are generally temporary, nonsustainable, and insufficient to meet the expected increases in demand at some posts. First, when-actually-employed staff are only allowed to work 1,040 hours per year due to federal regulations. Second, posts are typically required to cover the housing costs of assigned temporary staff, which is not always feasible if posts are facing budget constraints.³⁴ Third, embassy or consulate officials that were temporarily assigned to support consular operations indicated that their new duties negatively affected their ability to perform their regular assignments, as they were spending time performing consular duties instead of their typical functions at post. Fourth, although temporary staff have helped to improve wait times at select posts, current efforts—and some recent temporary assignments, such as over the past 7 months in India—have been undertaken during a period of lower applicant volume. It is unknown whether State will be able to maintain the improved wait times during the summer of 2007, as the period between May and August is typically when posts have the largest influx of visa applicants and, in turn, longer waits. For example, one post in India recently reported wait times now exceed 30 days.³⁵ Moreover, the temporary staff assisting with visa adjudications

³³State officials indicated that the review considered NIV, immigrant visa, and American Citizen Services workload and staffing levels, and also considered other factors including future demand projections.

³⁴According to State officials, the Bureau of Consular Affairs was providing posts in India with funding for temporary duty staff in order to reduce the wait times at all posts in India. According to officials, this was an exemption from State's policy and was only provided for posts in India.

³⁵As of May 16, 2007, wait times in Mumbai were reported at 46 days.

during our visit to posts in India was expected to leave by the end of May 2007. According to State's Assistant Deputy Secretary for Visa Services, surges in temporary duty staff, such as the ones State employed for India, can be useful in tackling short-term situations but are not a viable long-term solution in places with high visa demand.

Furthermore, consular staffing gaps are a long-standing problem for State and have been caused by such factors as State's annual staffing process, low hiring levels for entry-level junior officer positions, and insufficient numbers of midlevel consular officers.³⁶ We have previously reported that factors such as staffing shortages have contributed to long wait times for visas at some posts. A number of State's visa-adjudicating posts reported shortages in consular staff for 2006, and we observed gaps that contributed to visa wait times at several posts overseas. Furthermore, we reviewed reports for 32 select consular posts abroad to assess visa workload, consular staffing and facilities, as well as other issues affecting visa wait times.³⁷ We found that of the 32 posts, 19 posts (or about 60 percent) indicated the need for additional consular staff to address increasing workload.³⁸

State Has Implemented Consular Facilities Improvements at Many Overseas Posts

State has improved a number of consular sections at embassies and consulates worldwide.³⁹ According to the Bureau of Overseas Buildings Operations, since September 2001, State has improved almost 100 embassies and consulates, improving the consular section facilities at a number of these locations. For example, between fiscal years 2003 and 2005, State obligated \$26.9 million to fund consular workspace

³⁶Foreign Service officers are assigned a grade, which ranges from FS-06 to FS-01, corresponding from entry-level to midlevel, respectively. According to State, officers between grades 6 through 4 are classified as junior officers, while grades 3 through 1 are midlevel officers.

³⁷We selected posts that had either (1) recently reported wait times of 60 days or more, (2) had previously experienced longstanding wait time problems, (3) were projected to experience a large future volume of visa adjudications, or (4) were able to process a large volume of visas with little or no wait for applicant interviews. The analysis was not intended to be representative of all posts.

³⁸For the purpose of this report, consular staff includes both Foreign Service consular officers and locally engaged staff working in the consular section.

³⁹In 2003, Congress directed the Bureau of Overseas Buildings Operations to improve the overall working environment for consular officers through the Consular Workspace Improvement Initiative.

improvement projects at 101 posts. Although these improvement projects have been completed, according to the Bureau of Consular Affairs, most were designed as temporary solutions that may require additional construction in the future. Moreover, although some consular improvement projects were recently completed or were under way when we visited Mumbai and Chennai, India, these posts did not have adequate office, waiting room, security screening, or window space to accommodate the volume of visa applicants. State's construction project in Chennai to add windows and additional processing areas was expected to be completed by May 2007, and State has begun construction on a new consulate in Mumbai that will be completed in 2008 and will add more space for additional consular staff and 26 more windows for interviewing. In addition, State is planning new consulate and embassy construction projects for New Delhi and Hyderabad, India,⁴⁰ as well as at a number of other posts.

We also found that a number of posts we reviewed currently face facility constraints, which limit the number of visa interviews that can take place in a given day and, in some cases, prevent posts from keeping pace with the current or expected future demand for visas. For example, 21 of 32 posts reported, in their consular packages, that limitations to their facilities affected their ability to increase the number of applicants they could interview, which can contribute to longer wait times.

Although State has taken steps to improve consular facilities and has plans to rebuild a number of posts, it is unclear whether the facilities will be adequate to handle the future demand. Two posts that we reviewed are already predicting that future increased demand will outstrip visa processing capacities given existing facilities constraints. For example, in Seoul, South Korea, post officials report that, despite recent improvements to the facility, the post will soon have no additional space to accommodate future applicant growth. Moreover, there is no current viable option to build a new facility due to continuing land negotiations between the U.S. and South Korean governments. In addition, a number of State's recent facilities projects have not incorporated planned projections of increased workload growth and are expected to soon face challenges meeting demand. For example, even though a new embassy construction project is currently under way in Beijing, China, State officials indicated that the number of planned interviewing windows and space in the new facility will

⁴⁰The new consulate in Hyderabad, India, is expected to be operational by fiscal year 2008.

be insufficient to allow for future increases in visa demand.⁴¹ In addition, in Shanghai, China, even though the consular section was moved to an off-site location to process visa applications, the post has indicated that it already has reached visa-adjudicating capacity because it cannot add any more interviewing windows in the current space, and construction on a new consulate will not begin until 2009. According to the Director and Chief Operating Officer of the Bureau of Overseas Buildings Operations, the bureau designs and constructs consular facilities with input from Consular Affairs; therefore, Consular Affairs needs to provide more defined assessments of future needs at a facility. The director stated that proper planning and stronger estimates of future needs will help in building facilities that can better address wait times at post over the long term.

Some Visa Processing and Workload Management Practices Established but Not Widely Shared Among Posts

Since the 9/11 terrorist attacks, Congress, State, and DHS have initiated a series of changes to visa policies and procedures, which have added to the complexity of consular officers' workload and, in turn, exacerbated State's consular staffing and facilities constraints. For example, most visa applicants are required to be interviewed by a consular officer at post, and applicants' fingerprints must be scanned. Furthermore, additional procedural changes are expected, including the expansion of the electronic fingerprinting program to the 10-fingerscan standard, which could further increase the workload of officers and the amount of time needed to adjudicate an application. For example, consular officers in London, which is one of the posts piloting the 10-fingerprint scanners, indicated that the 10-fingerscan standard would significantly affect other posts' operations given that they had experienced about a 13 percent reduction in the number of applicants processed in a day. However, as each post faces slightly different circumstances, it is unclear whether this reduction would take place at all posts.

To lessen the increase in wait times caused by of some of these legislative and policy changes, State has promoted some initiatives to aid posts in processing legitimate travelers. For example, State has urged all posts to establish business and student facilitation programs intended to expedite the interviews of legitimate travelers. State also continues to use Consular

⁴¹The new embassy compound in Beijing is scheduled to open in the summer of 2008. According to Beijing reports, the new facility will meet consular section needs when it first opens, but the post expects to quickly outgrow the new space as workload will soon require an additional six interview windows.

Management Assistance Teams to conduct management reviews of consular sections worldwide, which have provided guidance to posts on standard operating procedures, as well as other areas where consular services could become more efficient. In addition, according to State officials, State has developed a Two-Year Plan, an overall visa processing strategy to coordinate changes to the visa process that will ensure consular officers focus on tasks that can only be accomplished overseas, and is also contemplating other changes to reduce the burden placed on applicants and consular officers. These changes include the following:

- the deployment of a worldwide appointment system,
- use of a domestic office to verify information on visa petitions,
- a revalidation of fingerprints for applicants who have already completed the 10-fingerprint scan, and
- the implementation of an entirely paperless visa application process⁴² and remote or off-site interviewing of visa applicants.

Furthermore, some posts have taken action to reduce their increased workload. For example, the following actions have been taken:

- The consular sections in South Korea and Brazil have established expedited appointment systems for certain applicant groups, including students.
- Consular officers in Manila, Philippines, redesigned the flow of applicants through the facility to ease congestion and utilized space designated to the immigrant visa unit to add three new visa processing stations.

⁴²State introduced an electronic visa application form and mandated its use at consulates worldwide in November 2006. Use of the application form reduces data entry errors, eliminates duplicative data entries, and increases the number of applicants consular staff can interview daily. Building on its recent implementation of this application form, State anticipates moving to an entirely paperless, electronic visa application process by the end of 2007.

-
- Posts in Brazil have waived interviews for applicants who were renewing valid U.S. visas that were expiring within 12 months and had met additional criteria under the law.⁴³
 - The embassy in Seoul, South Korea, implemented a ticketing system that tracks applicants through the various stages of processing and provides notification to consular section management if backups are occurring. The system will also automatically assign applicants to the first available interviewing window in order to balance the workload of applicant interviews between all available interviewing windows.
 - The embassies in El Salvador and South Korea have conducted workflow studies in order to identify obstructions to efficient applicant processing.

Although State has recently implemented a number of policy and procedural changes to address increased consular workload and is considering additional adjustments, more could be done to assist posts in their workload management. Moreover, the effective practices and procedures implemented by individual posts that help manage workload and assist in improving applicant wait times are not consistently shared with the other consular posts. While recognizing that not all the policies and procedures used by posts to help manage visa workload are transferable to other posts, State officials indicated that, although there is currently not a forum available for consular officers to share such ideas, State is in the process of developing some online capabilities for posts to share visa practices and procedures.

⁴³The personal appearance requirement can generally be waived under the following circumstances: (1) if the alien is applying at a post in his resident country, the applicant has complied with U.S. immigration laws and regulations, the prior visa expired less than 12 months ago, and the alien is applying for the same visa classification; (2) if the alien is applying for a visa as a foreign government official or an official to an international organization; (3) if the alien is applying for a NATO visa; (4) if the alien is granted a diplomatic or official visa on a diplomatic or official passport; (5) if the alien is applying as a foreign government official or member of the immediate family, attendant, servant, or personal employee, in transit; or (6) if the Secretary of State determines that the waiver is either in U.S. national interest or is necessary as a result of unusual or emergent circumstances. Regardless of the circumstances mentioned above, there are also certain circumstances under which the interview cannot be waived.

State Lacks a Strategy to Address Projected Long-term Growth in Visa Demand

With worldwide nonimmigrant visa demand rising closer to pre-9/11 levels, and current projections showing a dramatic increase in demand over time, State will continue to face challenges in managing its visa workload and maintaining its goal of keeping interview wait times under 30 days at all posts. State has not developed a strategy for addressing increasing visa demand that balances such factors as available resources and the need for national security in the visa process against its goal that visas are processed in a reasonable amount of time.

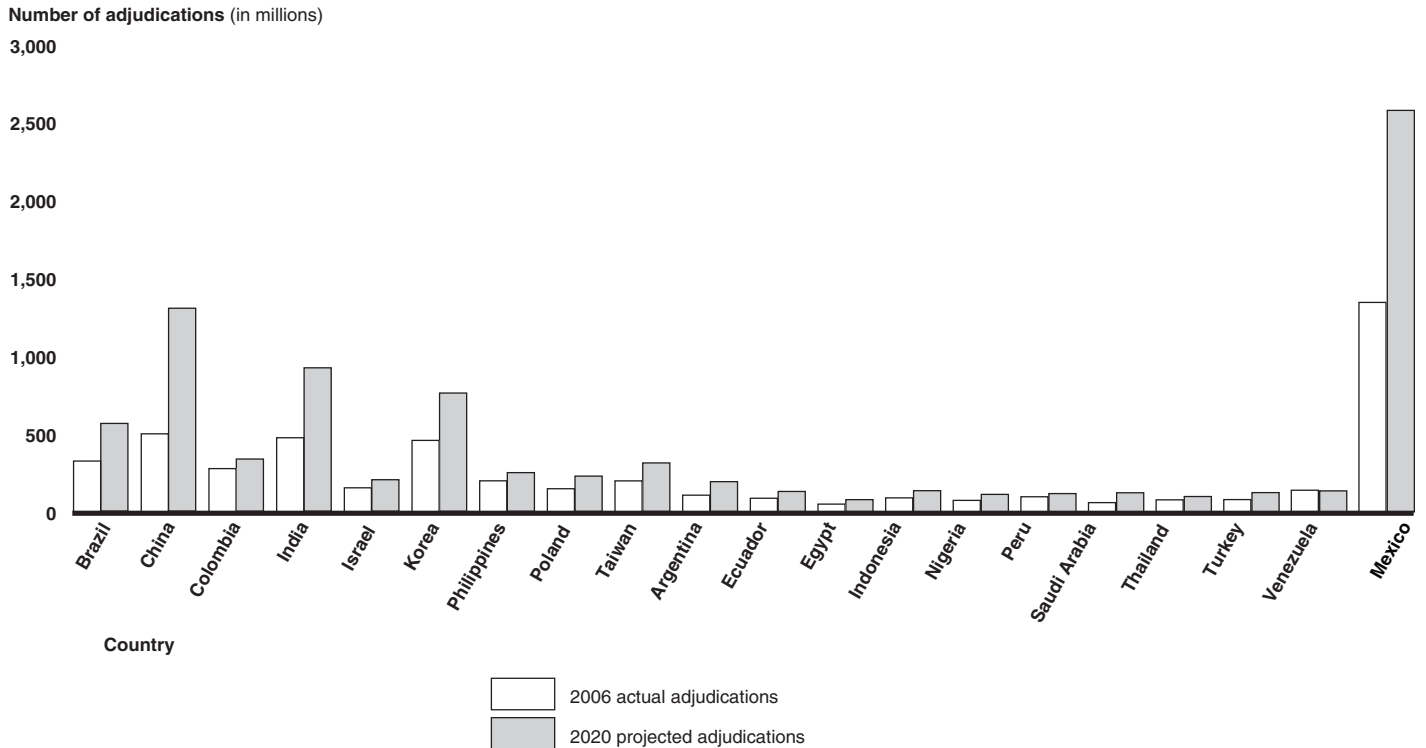
Dramatic Increase in Visa Demand Is Expected and Will Continue to Impact Visa Wait Times

In 2005, State contracted with an independent consulting firm to analyze several factors to help predict future visa demand in 20 select countries, which, according to State officials, constituted approximately 75 percent of the visa workload at the time.⁴⁴ The consulting firm identified some demographic, economic, political, commercial, and other factors that it believed would affect visa demand over a 15-year period, beginning in 2005, and estimated a likely rate of growth in demand in those select countries. The study predicted the growth in demand in these countries would range between 8 percent and 232 percent, with Argentina, Brazil, China, India, Mexico, and Saudi Arabia all projected to experience significant growth of more than 90 percent (see fig. 5).⁴⁵ State officials indicated that they used the futures study to assist in determining consular resource allocations and in the repositioning of consular staff in State's review of consular positions in February 2007. However, State has not analyzed the 5-, 10-, or 20-year future staffing and other resource needs based on the demand projections found in the study.

⁴⁴The study was conducted by Change Navigators, Inc., between July and September 2005.

⁴⁵The projected growth is: Argentina–96 percent, Brazil–196 percent, China–232 percent, India–109 percent, Mexico–99 percent, and Saudi Arabia–136 percent.

Figure 5: Actual 2006 Visa Adjudications and Projected Growth in Applicant Volume for 2020 from State's Consular Futures Study



Source: GAO analysis of State data from the Consular Affairs Futures Study.

Although officials indicated that State continues to use the visa demand projections in the Consular Affairs Futures Study to assist in making staffing and resource decisions, some of the study's projections have already been proven to underestimate growth in demand. In addition, State has not taken action to update the study to reflect changes in visa workload since 2005. More than half of the countries reviewed are already facing surges in visa demand greater than the levels predicted in the Consular Affairs Futures Study for fiscal year 2006 and beyond. For example, Brazil adjudicated more visas in 2006 than the volume of applications the study projected for Brazil for 2010. In addition, Mexico adjudicated approximately 126,000 more visas in 2006 than the study projected. Also, the Ambassador to India recently stated that all posts in India would process over 800,000 applications in 2007, which exceeds the study's forecasts for India's demand in 2016.

State's Plans Do Not Fully Address Future Visa Demand

The Deputy Assistant Secretary for Visa Services testified to Congress in March 2007 of the need to consider and implement viable long-term solutions for posts with high visa demand and indicated that State needed to ensure it aligns consular assets to meet the demand. In November 2006, State developed a plan for improving the visa process that details several steps it intends to implement, or pilot, by 2009.⁴⁶ Although the visa improvement plan can assist State in improving the visa process, and State has taken some steps to address wait times at a number of overseas posts, State has not determined how it will keep pace with continued growth in visa demand over the long term. For example, the strategies in the plan do not identify the resources State would need to increase staff or construct adequate facilities to handle the projected demand increases. Moreover, State has not proposed plans to significantly reduce the workload of available officers or the amount of time needed to adjudicate a visa if such resources are not available. Without a long-term plan to address increasing demand, State does not have a tool to make decisions that will maximize efficiency, minimize wait times, and strengthen its ability to support and sustain its funding needs.

In order to develop a strategy addressing future visa demand, State may want to make use of operations research methods and optimization modeling techniques. These approaches can allow State to develop a long-term plan that takes into account various factors—such as State's security standards for visas, its policies and procedures to maximize efficiency and minimize waits, and available resources. Researchers have developed statistical techniques to analyze and minimize wait times in a wide variety of situations, such as when cars queue to cross toll bridges or customers call service centers. These techniques consider the key variables that influence wait times, such as the likely demand, the number of people already waiting, the number of staff that can provide the service required, the time it takes to process each person, and the cost of each transaction; consider a range of scenarios; and provide options to minimize wait times, bearing in mind the relevant factors. The analyses can, for instance, provide quantitative data on the extent to which wait times could be

⁴⁶The plan calls for State to implement a number of steps, including the following: (1) worldwide appointment scheduling system, which would make more management information on visa demand available; (2) electronic visa applications that can be reviewed prior to the interview; (3) remote interviewing of applicants, where applicable, for potential cost savings; and (4) visa "surge teams," or temporary duty staff, to assist posts that face problems with wait times exceeding 30 days.

reduced if more staff were assigned or the time for each transaction were decreased.

For example, State could determine the approximate number of additional resources it would need in order to meet its stated goal of providing an appointment to all applicants within 30 days despite increased visa demand. Such a response would either require State to provide additional staff through new hires or by using other staffing methods, such as utilizing civil servants to adjudicate visas overseas. Alternatively, State could require consular officers to process applicants more efficiently and quickly. State may require multiple new facilities to support an increase in the number of Foreign Service officers and allow posts to process more applicants daily. However, if State were to determine that a significant increase in resources for staffing and facilities is not feasible, then State would have to evaluate the efficacy of its 30-day standard for visa appointments or consider requesting Congress to allow for changes in the adjudication process, such as allowing additional flexibility in the personal appearance requirement for visa applicants. It is dependent upon State to determine the specific techniques and appropriate variables or factors required to optimize its capability to address the demand for visas.

Conclusions

Expediting the adjudication of NIV applications is important to U.S. national interests because legitimate travelers forced to wait long periods of time for a visa interview may be discouraged from visiting the country, potentially costing the United States billions of dollars in travel and tourism revenues over time. Moreover, State officials have previously testified that long waits for visa appointments can negatively impact our image as a nation that openly welcomes foreign visitors. Given projected increases in visa demand, State should develop a strategy that identifies the possible actions that will allow it to maintain the security of the visa process and its interest in facilitating legitimate travel in a timely manner. The development of such a plan will strengthen State's ability to manage visa demand, support and sustain its funding needs, encourage dialogue with relevant congressional committees on the challenges to addressing waits, and promote consensus by decision makers on funding levels and expectations for eliminating visa delays. Furthermore, there are several measures State could take in the short run to improve the wait times for interviews of NIV applicants and the reliability of visa waits information for management purposes.

Recommendations for Executive Action

To improve the Bureau of Consular Affairs' oversight and management of visa-adjudicating posts, we recommend that the Secretary of State take the following actions:

- Develop a strategy to address worldwide increases in visa demand that balances the security responsibility of protecting the United States from potential terrorists and individuals who would harm U.S. interests with the need to facilitate legitimate travel to the United States. In doing so, State should take into consideration relevant factors, such as the flow of visa applicants, the backlog of applicants, the availability of consular officers, and the time required to process each visa application. State's analysis should be informed by reliable data on the factors that influence wait times. State should update any plan annually to reflect new information on visa demand.
- Improve the reliability and utility of visa waits data by defining collection standards and ensuring that posts report the data according to the standards.
- Identify practices and procedures used by posts to manage workload and reduce wait times and encourage the dissemination and use of successful practices.

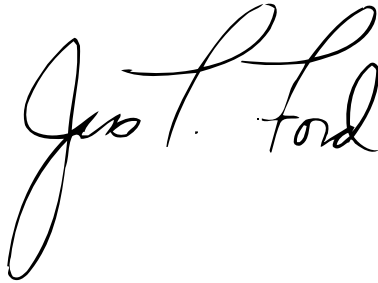
Agency Comments and Our Evaluation

We provided a draft of this report to the Departments of State and Homeland Security. The Department of Homeland Security did not comment on the draft but provided a technical comment. State provided written comments on the draft that are reprinted with our comments in appendix II of this report.

State concurred with our recommendations to enhance methods of disseminating effective management techniques, to improve the reliability and utility of visa waits data, and to develop a strategy to address increases in visa demand. State noted that any appropriate strategy to address worldwide increases in visa demand must address the need for resources to meet national security goals for both travel facilitation and border security. Furthermore, State said that any suggestion of trade-offs between these two goals would be inappropriate. Clearly we agree that in developing a strategy, State must maintain its security responsibilities while also facilitating legitimate travel to the United States. Our report does not suggest that one of these goals should be sacrificed at the expense of the other. State also provided a number of technical comments, which we have incorporated throughout the report, as appropriate.

As agreed with your office, unless you publicly announce the contents of this report earlier, we plan no further distribution until 30 days from the report date. At that time, we will send copies of this report to interested congressional committees. We will also send copies to the Secretary of State and the Secretary of Homeland Security. We also will make copies available to others upon request. In addition, the report will be available at no charge on the GAO Web site at <http://www.gao.gov>.

If you or your staff has any questions about this report, please contact me at (202) 512-4128 or fordj@gao.gov. Contact points for our Offices of Congressional Relations and Public Affairs may be found on the last page of this report. GAO staff who made key contributions are listed in appendix III.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jess T. Ford". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, looping initial "J".

Jess T. Ford
Director, International Affairs and Trade

Appendix I: Scope and Methodology

We reviewed (1) Department of State (State) data on the amount of time visa applicants were waiting to obtain a visa interview, (2) actions State has taken to address visa wait times, and (3) State's strategy for dealing with projected increases in visa demand. To accomplish our objectives, we interviewed officials from State's bureaus of Consular Affairs, Human Resources, and Overseas Buildings Operations. We also interviewed officials from the Department of Commerce's Office of Travel and Tourism Industries. In addition, we observed consular operations and interviewed U.S. government officials at 11 posts in eight countries—Brazil, China, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Honduras, India, South Korea, and the United Kingdom. For our site visits, we selected posts that had either (1) recently reported wait times of 60 days or more, (2) had previously experienced long-standing wait time problems, (3) were projected to experience a large future volume of visa adjudications, or (4) were able to process a large volume of visas with little or no wait for applicant interviews. During these visits, we observed visa operations; interviewed consular staff and embassy management about visa adjudication policies, procedures, and resources; and reviewed documents and data. In addition, to obtain a broader view of visa workload, consular staffing and facilities, as well as other issues affecting visa wait times in consular sections, we selected an additional 21 posts for a document review based on the same selection criteria we used for selecting our site visits.¹ Our selection of posts was not intended to provide a generalizable sample but allowed us to observe consular operations under a wide range of conditions.

To determine the amount of time visa applicants were waiting to obtain a visa interview, we analyzed interview wait times data for applicants applying for visas for temporary business or tourism purposes, but not for other types of visas, including student visas. Specifically, the data provided to us showed the minimum and maximum wait times for visa-issuing posts for the period January 2006-February 2007. Data were also provided for the same period that indicated the number of posts that reported maximum wait times of 30 or more days in at least 1 month and the number that reported wait times in excess of 30 days for this entire 6-

¹We reviewed consular reports and data from a total of 32 posts including: New Delhi, Calcutta, Chennai, Mumbai, Beijing, Shanghai, Shenyang, Chengdu, Guangzhou, Bogotá, Cairo, Seoul, Rio de Janeiro, Sao Paolo, Manila, Tel Aviv, Jerusalem, Islamabad, Monterrey, Mexico City, Guadalajara, Ciudad Juarez, London, Santo Domingo, Tegucigalpa, San Jose, San Salvador, Riyadh, Quito, Paris, Port au Prince, and Johannesburg.

month period.² In addition, at various points-in-time, we received information on the most recently reported wait times for visa-issuing posts and the date of last entry. To determine the reliability of State's data on wait times for applicant interviews, we reviewed the department's procedures for capturing these data, interviewed the officials in Washington who monitor and use these data, and examined data that was provided to us electronically. In addition, we interviewed the corresponding officials from our visits to select posts overseas and in Washington, who input and use the visa waits data. We found that data was missing throughout the 13-month period because posts were not reporting each week. Based on our analysis, we determined that the data were not sufficiently reliable to determine the exact magnitude of the delays because the exact number of posts with a wait of 30 days or more at any given time could not be determined. Consular officials who manage consular sections overseas acknowledged that many posts are not reporting on a weekly basis. However, we determined that the data are sufficiently reliable for providing a broad indication of posts that have had problems with wait times over a period of time and for general trends in the number of posts that have had problems with wait times over the 13 months we reviewed.

To determine the actions State has taken to address visa wait times and its strategy for addressing waits, we analyzed consular policies and procedures cables and staffing and facilities plans developed by the department. In addition, we analyzed consular workload and staffing data. We also reviewed the methodology for the Change Navigations Study and found it to be one of a number of fairly standard approaches that are available for a forecasting exercise of this nature. However, we did not attempt to replicate the methodology or test alternative models that relied on different techniques, data, or assumptions.

We conducted our work from August 2006 through May 2007 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards.

²According 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.

Appendix II: Comments from the Department of State

Note: GAO comments supplementing those in the report text appear at the end of this appendix.



United States Department of State

*Assistant Secretary for Resource Management
and Chief Financial Officer*

Washington, D.C. 20520

Ms. Jacquelyn Williams-Bridgers
Managing Director
International Affairs and Trade
Government Accountability Office
441 G Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20548-0001

JUN 25 2007

Dear Ms. Williams-Bridgers:

We appreciate the opportunity to review your draft report, "BORDER SECURITY: Long-term Strategy Needed to Keep Pace with Increasing Demand for Visas," GAO Job Code 320441.

The enclosed Department of State comments are provided for incorporation with this letter as an appendix to the final report.

If you have any questions concerning this response, please contact June Kunsman, Managing Director, Bureau of Consular Affairs, at (202) 663-1153.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Bradford R. Higgins", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Bradford R. Higgins

cc: GAO – Melissa Pickworth
CA – Maura Harty
State/OIG – Mark Duda

Department of State Comments on GAO Draft Report

BORDER SECURITY: Long-Term Strategy Needed to Keep Pace with Increasing Demand for Visas
(GAO-07-847, GAO Code 320441)

Thank you for the opportunity to review and comment on the Government Accountability Office draft report entitled, “*BORDER SECURITY: Long-Term Strategy Needed to Keep Pace with Increasing Demand for Visas.*” The Department offers the following comments:

p. 3 (Letter to Waxman): “Although maintaining security of the visa process is of paramount importance, State has also acknowledged that long wait time may discourage legitimate travel to the United States, potentially costing the country billions of dollars in economic benefits.”

See comment 1.

Comment: Although State recognizes that travel to the United States results in billions of dollars of economic activity and State acknowledges that long wait times for visas may discourage some travel to the United States, it is misleading to say that visa wait times are “potentially costing the country billions of dollars in economic benefits.” There is no meaningful way to correlate visa wait times with travel or tourism revenues for the United States, as we do not know how many applicants would actually be issued visas and travel to the United States. It should be noted that in the same period covered by the study, visa issuances have been steadily rising, thus producing steady year over year increases in travel and tourism revenues. Moreover, other studies have found the greatest drop in travel to the United States to be from Visa Waiver countries.

p. 5 “However, despite recent improvements, at times during the past year – especially during peak summer-month processing periods – a number of posts reported long wait times.”

See comment 2.

Comment: State acknowledges that this is accurate, but believes inadequate explanation is offered regarding the cyclical phenomena that cause longer wait times during summer months. State also notes that the report simplistically equates this transient, recurring phenomenon with a more fundamental issue regarding resources needed to meet overall visa demand now and in the future. The variations and events described below often defy

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otherwise sound projections of demand. Factors that cause this cyclical rise in backlogs include the following:

- The cost of overseas personnel and the infrastructure to support them requires “right-sized” staffing for average annual workload.
- The timing of the personnel transfer cycle is set in part by external factors that cannot be changed, such as the start and end of the school year. This produces staffing gaps in the summer months. The perennial fact that international travel increases in the summer months guarantees that demand will peak as human resources remain static or are actually reduced.
- Long lead times required for construction of facilities and security requirements make expansion and larger numbers of admissions to facilities a lengthy process.
- Currency exchange rates, inflation cycles, and general prosperity, wages, and credit vary country by country.
- Political changes impact the perception of current and future stability or economic security country by country.
- Natural disasters, coups, or violence require officers to turn their full efforts to assisting American citizens immediately and may have significant longer-term impacts upon economic conditions.

State believes it is misleading to equate this cyclical problem and the modalities for addressing it with the underlying question of chronic backlogs. By definition, posts that experience purely cyclical increases in wait times normally reduce these backlogs within established standards during off-peak seasons.

p. 5 “State has used temporary duty employees to fill consular staffing gaps at some posts, and is repositioning a number of consular positions at posts around the world to better maximize its current workforce – especially at posts experiencing large growth in workload. ... Furthermore, State acknowledges that the repositioning of consular staff, while necessary, may not adequately address the increasing demand for visas worldwide.”

Comment: CA acknowledges that repositioning alone may not resolve the issue and suggests that it should be noted in this report that the best way to adequately address the increasing demand for visas worldwide, in

See comment 3.

conjunction with efforts to improve capacity and efficiency of facilities and consular procedures, is to permanently increase staffing levels at State.

p. 5 "... we found that some posts have utilized procedures that permit them to process applications more efficiently – such as conducting workflow studies in order to identify obstructions to efficient applicant processing. However, we observed that these procedures are not shared among posts in any systematic way, and, therefore, not all posts are aware of them."

See comment 4.

Comment: Acknowledging that improvements can be made in information sharing tools, which GAO notes in the report, State does not believe there is any significant information gap between the Department and the field on the basic methods for achieving efficiency in consular operations. Workflow analysis, queue management, appointment system and demand management, team approaches to processing, and even shift work are all widely known techniques. While noting that improvements can be made, in State's view, sharing at this level already exists in the form of guidance on the Consular Affairs Intranet, cables to the field on standard operating procedures including outsourcing and concession agreement options, and inclusion of these methods in formal consular training courses and in the directed guidance offered by Consular Management Assistance Teams. The annual Consular Workload and Support Statistics specifically address key workload management and customer service concerns and require posts to report and evaluate their use of those. Post-specific procedures are less sharable than management principles, given the differences in physical configuration, host country conditions, and other resource factors among posts.

p. 6: "For example, it has neither estimated the resources necessary to meet future demand, nor proposed plans that would significantly reduce the workload of available officers or the amount of time needed to adjudicate a visa if such resources are not available."

See comment 5.

Comment: This comment does not acknowledge steps CA has taken. CA planning for workload and resources includes regular projections of future workload done post by post as part of the regular reporting in the annual "consular package," the future study conducted by contractors in 2005, and the CA global repositioning exercise in 2006 that balanced consular officer staffing and workload among overseas posts worldwide.

p. 6: "Develop a strategy to address worldwide increases in visa demand that balances the security responsibility of protecting the United States from potential terrorists and individuals who would harm U.S. interests with the need to facilitate legitimate travel to the United States."

See comment 6.

Comment: We have to challenge the selection of the word "balances." State's border security responsibilities as a matter of public policy and law do not lend themselves to a "balancing" process, with facilitation of legitimate travel on one side of the scale and security on the other. We must do both with equal efficacy and this has been the fundamental challenge set by the "Secure Borders, Open Doors" agenda and the Rice-Chertoff Joint Vision. State questions the appropriateness of any suggestion that meeting increasing visa demand be approached in this way. In particular, State questions the assumption that "time required to process each visa application" is a significant factor in wait times and there is nothing in this report to suggest that it is. The duration of a visa interview at high volume posts is only a few minutes and 97 percent of visas are processed to completion within two days of the visa interview.

p. 8: "These changes have added to the complexity of consular workload and have increased the amount of time needed to adjudicate a visa. Such changes include the following:..."

See comment 7.

Comment: State recommends the inclusion of two additional very significant factors:

- Consular officers have increased requirements to consult with headquarters, both within State and at other USG agencies, prior to visa issuance in the form of Security Advisory Opinions.
- As a result of the Patriot Act, consular officers have access to, and are required to consult, far greater amounts of interagency data regarding potential terrorists and individuals who would harm U.S. interests.

p. 14: "We observed that long waits had occurred over the summer months..."

See comment 2.

Comment: As noted above, the report fails to give adequate context to cyclical/seasonal factors that have made delays in peak season a persistent phenomenon.

p. 14: "For example, in Caracas the reported visa waits significantly increased – from 34 days in February 2006 to 116 days in April 2007."

See comment 8.

Comment: State would like to point out once again that changes in the political situation in Venezuela fueled this extraordinary demand. The type of long-term planning which GAO rightly suggests is needed to address the visa demand would not and could not address this type of unpredictable political factor.

p. 16: "Several of the posts we visited calculated wait times based on the first appointment available to the next applicant in a given visa category; however, other posts we reviewed calculated waits differently."

Comment: As GAO is aware, variations in appointment systems make calculation of wait times based on the next available appointment inherently problematic. In fact, GAO pointed out this issue after their early analysis of wait time data recorded by posts in India using this method. The data were extremely volatile and had limited value. As noted in the report, State is working on better measures to capture both wait time and demand. As we transition to global on-line application, appointment, and payment systems, it will at some point no longer be necessary for managers to provide wait time information because it will be built into the global systems.

p. 18: "...State will transfer 32 consular positions from posts that have more staff than is needed to posts where there has not been adequate staff to handle the visa workload."

See comment 9.

Comment: State notes that no post or consular section has more staff than is needed. The repositioning exercise simply moved staff from posts that were understaffed to a lesser degree to posts that were understaffed to a greater degree.

p. 22: "...the bureau designs and constructs consular facilities with input from Consular Affairs; therefore, they told us, Consular Affairs needs to provide more defined assessments of future needs at a facility. The director stated that proper planning and stronger estimates of future needs will help in building facilities that can better address wait times at post over the long-term."

Comment: The Bureau of Consular Affairs is not included in the formal design approval process, although they do provide input informally to the designers at the working level or intervene at higher levels once issues come to their attention. Only State's regional bureaus have a formal role in design approval. Recent efforts have generated a CA-OBO Working Group, which has discussed upcoming projects and responded to all requests for assessments of future needs.

p. 22: "Consular officers in London...indicated that the 10-fingerprint requirement would significantly affect other posts' operations given that it experienced about a 13 percent reduction in the number of applicants an officer can interview in a day."

See comment 10.

Comment: The officer time required per case hasn't changed in London, where officers do not do the fingerprint enrollment. State acknowledges there may be a reduction in total applicants processed as a result of the additional time required for 10-print enrollment in a high-volume operation, but the constraints would be at the intake/enrollment processes, which would not be done by officers in high-volume posts such as London.

p. 23: "State is contemplating additional changes to the visa process, including reducing the burden placed on applicants and consular officers."

See comment 11.

Comment: In line with the general principles of good government, State is continuously reviewing visa processing procedures to make the most effective use of existing resources. The Visa Office's Two Year Plan is an overall visa processing strategy to coordinate changes to the visa process that will ensure consular officers abroad focus on those tasks that can only be accomplished overseas. For example, the plan envisions using the Kentucky Consular Center (KCC) to verify information on non-immigrant visa (NIV) petitions. Demands in other parts of the consular section, such as the increased demand for passports resulting from the Western Hemisphere Travel Initiative or a high proportion of inadequately prepared Immigrant Visa (IV) applicants, also use up resources that could be diverted to NIV processing. Other elements of the Two Year Plan, such as using the National Visa Center (NVC) to relieve posts of the task of collecting documents from IV applicants, will make consular sections overall more efficient and potentially free up resources and space.

p. 27: "In order to develop a strategy addressing future visa demand, State may want to make use of operations research methods and optimization modeling techniques."

See comment 12.

Comment: State is aware of and encourages the use of "lean management," ISO 9001 certification methodology, queue management techniques, and value stream mapping techniques in visa and consular processing that employ the methodologies cited in the GAO report. While acknowledging the analytic insight these tools can sometimes provide, it would be inappropriate to reduce visa processing to an analog of a "call center operation," or "cars crossing a bridge," as the report suggests. It would be highly inappropriate if consular interviews were considered only a variable in "transaction time." Our experience in consulting with businesses indicates that private sector, *e.g.*, call center, staffing models have limited applicability to State overseas operations. The border security function must be supported and not diminished by changes in administrative procedures aimed at reducing process time.

p. 28: "...or would require consular officer(s) to process applicants more efficiently and quickly."

See comment 12.

Comment: To reiterate points made above, State finds the emphasis on making officers act more quickly to be misplaced and contrary to post-9/11 mandates. While State acknowledges that more resources and enhanced resource planning will be needed to meet the challenge of growing visa demand, State finds the either/or formulation in the report that either more resources are needed or officers will need to be faster an unacceptable trade-off inconsistent with significant post-9/11 concerns and legislative requirements.

p. 29: Recommendations for Executive Action

See comment 12.

Comment: State concurs with the need for a long term strategy to address worldwide increases in visa demand. At the same time State notes that an appropriate strategy must address the needs for resources to meet national goals for both travel facilitation and border security. An approach that suggests trade-offs or "balancing" of the two goals is inappropriate. The Bureau of Consular Affairs can and does update annually information on visa demand and information on personnel resources, but this cannot be translated into an effective planning tool without concerted action by several

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Bureaus and shared priorities on allocation of resources to meet these demands.

State concurs with the recommendation to improve the reliability and utility of visa waits data. Better data will become available as State migrates to global appointment systems for visas. State also concurs with the recommendation to enhance methods of disseminating effective management techniques.

The following are GAO's comments on the Department of State's letter dated June 25, 2007.

GAO Comments

1. State's Deputy Assistant Secretary for Visa Services has acknowledged that visa applicants may be deterred from visiting the United States by long appointment wait times and that this could have negative economic consequences and could adversely affect foreign opinions of our country. The Department of Commerce points out that foreign visitors bring economic benefits to our country in excess of \$100 billion each year. We agree that it is difficult to correlate visa wait times with specific dollar value losses in travel and tourism revenues. However, given that wait times for interviews are very high at a number of posts, we believe that the loss in economic benefits to our country over time could potentially be significant.

Our report acknowledges that visa issuances have increased over the last several years.

2. We believe our report, as well as past GAO reports, shows that long waits for visa interviews have been a long-standing problem for the department. Furthermore, State's data show that there have been long waits at some posts during peak and nonpeak periods (see fig. 2) and that long waits are not solely cyclical in nature. State acknowledges a number of cyclical factors that affect visa demand and resource availability, such as staffing gaps and the personnel transfer cycle. We believe these and other factors can contribute to chronic as well as cyclical backlogs. In addition, we have modified the draft to acknowledge the fact that wait times may reoccur cyclically as well as unexpectedly. However, the report points toward the need for a strategy for addressing such delays, which State has not developed to address either cyclical or chronic visa waits.
3. We agree that increasing consular staff levels may ultimately be necessary to address increasing visa demand. This is why we recommended that State develop a strategy to address wait times and that, in doing so, identify its resource needs. Such actions could promote consensus by decision makers on funding levels and expectations for eliminating visa delays.
4. We agree that State has taken a number of actions to share information with posts on reducing wait times. However, as noted in the report, during our fieldwork, we found that there were instances where posts were not aware of certain practices and procedures implemented by

other posts to help manage workload and assist in improving applicant wait times. We understand that all practices may not be transferable to all posts, but we believe that all posts would benefit from knowing the options that are available for more efficient operations.

5. Our report discusses State's efforts to estimate visa demand and gives ample credit to the 2006 repositioning exercise to shift some consular staffing to posts with the greatest need. Furthermore, neither the annual consular package exercise nor the Consular Affairs Future Study estimated the resources needed to meet long-term future demand. Our point is that State has not estimated what resources will be required to keep up with the increase in future demand that State forecasts. Because these resources could be substantial, we think it is incumbent on State to develop a long-term strategy now.
6. We based our statements on the testimony of State's Deputy Assistant Secretary for Visa Services before Congress in March 2007, where he stated, "we strive to constantly strike the right balance between protecting America's borders and preserving America's welcome to international visitors." We acknowledge that in striking this balance security is the primary concern. Clearly the time it takes to process an application affects how many applications an officer can process in a given day. We are not suggesting that State sacrifice security in order to avoid visa waits, but rather that State develop a plan for how it will cope with rising demand, taking these various circumstances and responsibilities into consideration.
7. We agree that these are important factors and have modified the text accordingly.
8. We understand that there are spikes in visa demand for various reasons, some of which are difficult to predict. However, State is aware that such spikes in visa demand can occur. We believe that State needs a strategy to address growing visa demand that includes consideration of how it will meet unanticipated spikes in demand. The development of such a plan would allow State to use its visa surge teams of temporary duty staff to deal with unanticipated spikes, rather than using them to handle the anticipated increasing demand.
9. We have modified language in the report. State's comment reinforces our belief that it is time for State to develop a strategy for addressing long-term visa demand. If State determines it needs more staff to handle projected demand, then it should detail these needs in its strategy.

10. We based our comment on a cable prepared by the U.S. Embassy in London. State acknowledges that the 10-fingerprint requirement could reduce the number of applicants processed. Applicants are not interviewed until after their fingerprints are taken, so a reduction in the number of applicants processed would subsequently result in a reduction of applicants interviewed. We have modified language in the draft to clarify our point.
11. We have incorporated information on the Visa Office's Two-Year Plan into the report.
12. State does not have a plan that outlines how it will cope with growing visa demand, which is why we recommend that State develop a strategy that identifies the actions it will take to address increasing demand. We believe that there may be opportunities to achieve efficiencies at some posts and that more resources may be needed. The short-term, temporary measures that State is currently taking to address visa demand are not adequate to handle the projected visa demand. We suggest that State take advantage of available analytical tools in order to identify options for the development of an overall strategy that will address the projected increase in visa demand worldwide. A wide range of sophisticated techniques are available to help manage customer waiting times in many areas of government operations, such as testing drivers at departments of motor vehicles and treating patients at public health clinics. Our report does not recommend that State reduce the processing time at the expense of security. We agree that State must maintain its security responsibilities while facilitating legitimate travel to the United States.

Appendix III: GAO Contact and Staff Acknowledgments

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Staff Acknowledgments

In addition to the individual named above, John Brummet, Assistant Director; Joe Brown; Joe Carney; Martin de Alteriis; Jeff Miller; Mary Moutsos; and Melissa Pickworth made key contributions to this report.

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