

**Statement of Rep. Henry A. Waxman, Ranking Minority Member  
Committee on Government Reform  
Hearing on “A Symphony in F Minor: The Impact of  
Visa Processing Delays on the Arts,  
Education, and American Innovation”**

**April 4, 2006**

The openness of American society is one of our nation’s greatest strengths. Unfortunately, as the 9/11 hijackers demonstrated, our openness can sometimes be used as a weapon against us. In today’s hearing, we will examine whether our visa policy is striking the right balance between openness to culture and innovation and protecting national security. I fear that we are not.

Since 9/11, Congress and the State Department have mandated that nearly all applicants be fingerprinted and appear for a face-to-face interview before a visa can be issued. These requirements create a burden for applicants, who often have to travel great distances to the nearest U.S. consulate. The requirements were also a challenge for the State Department, which initially lacked – and may still lack – the consular officers and physical space to conduct large numbers of interviews in a timely way.

As a result of these new policies, delays in visa processing exist in our embassies and consulates throughout the world. GAO will testify today that applicants in India can expect to wait nearly six months between submitting an application and appearing in person for an interview. This is simply not acceptable.

The long delay in processing visas is the result of efforts to protect out national security. But in fact, it can have the opposite effect. In the long run, our security is enhanced – not diminished – by the exchange of people and ideas.

There are also economic consequences to the delays in visas. In my district in Los Angeles, both the entertainment and technology industries rely on the inflow of ideas from overseas to ensure that we remain at the forefront of innovation and competitiveness. Unfortunately, as we’ll hear from our witnesses today, new security requirements that Congress

mandated after September 11 have created a backlog in visa processing that is hindering the timely exchange of ideas and commerce through cultural events, education, and trade.

Today we will hear from the State Department about why it is taking so long to reduce the backlog of visa applications. And we will start the process of considering whether there are steps Congress should take to streamline the application and interview process.

I appreciate the appearance of our special guest, Yo-Yo Ma, who will testify about the effect of the visa delays on the performing arts, and our other witnesses, who will testify about the impact on business and technology innovation.