



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](http://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

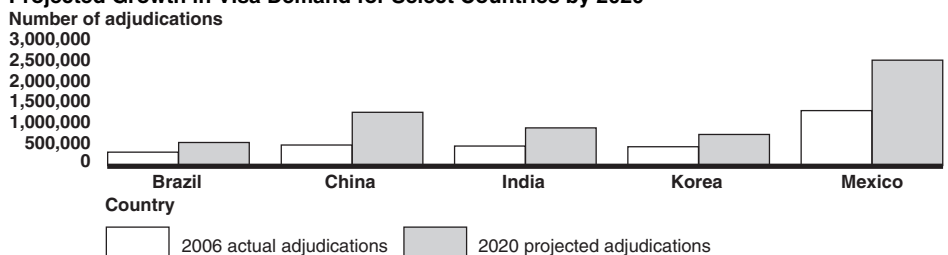
#### What GAO Found

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.