

GAO

Report to the Honorable
Bob Graham and the Honorable
Ernest F. Hollings, U.S. Senate

March 1998

STATE DEPARTMENT

Tourist Visa Processing Backlogs Persist at U.S. Consulates



**National Security and
International Affairs Division**

B-279006

March 13, 1998

The Honorable Bob Graham
The Honorable Ernest F. Hollings
United States Senate

As you requested, we reviewed how State Department consulates process visas for visitors (nonimmigrants) to the United States. Your letter to us expressed particular concern about delays in visa processing for Brazilian citizens wishing to visit the United States. As you know, our prior work had identified problems with visa processing. In 1992, we issued a report¹ that indicated that a number of consulates, including the one in Sao Paulo, Brazil, had visa processing backlogs. The report also noted that a number of consulates had inadequate staffing, equipment, and facilities. This report (1) identifies the extent and nature of visa processing backlogs in Sao Paulo and at other consulates, (2) outlines factors affecting consulates' ability to process nonimmigrant visas in a timely manner, and (3) discusses the activities planned or under way to improve nonimmigrant visa processing.

To address these matters, we obtained information on visa processing during 1997 from 26 U.S. posts in 20 countries and directly observed visa operations in Rio de Janeiro and Sao Paulo, Brazil, and in Caracas, Venezuela. We selected these posts based on visa issuance volumes and geographical locations. Although State does not have a formal definition of what constitutes a delay or backlog in processing visas, based on discussions with State's Deputy Assistant Secretary for Visa Services, we considered a backlog to exist at posts where the total turnaround time for processing visas exceeded 7 business days. Appendix I discusses our scope and methodology in further detail.

Results in Brief

Visa processing backlogs are a problem for some consulates, including the one in Sao Paulo, Brazil. The visa backlogs at the consulates we reviewed varied widely, ranging from 8 to 52 days. The longest delays occurred during peak travel periods such as the summer months and winter holiday season.

Factors that affected consulates' ability to process nonimmigrant visas in a timely manner included inadequate consular staffing and other staffing-related issues as well as inadequate computer systems, facilities,

¹State Department: Backlogs of Tourist Visas at U.S. Consulates ([GAO/NSIAD-92-185](#), Apr. 30, 1992).

and other equipment. An increased emphasis on preventing the entry of illegal immigrants, terrorists, and other criminals also contributed to delays.

The State Department has initiatives under way to address staffing problems, upgrade equipment, and identify and implement practices that could improve visa processing at overseas posts. However, it does not systematically gather data on visa processing turnaround times and has not yet set specific timeliness standards to help guide its improvement program.

Background

Consular officers issued about 6.2 million nonimmigrant visas in 1996—an increase of approximately 16 percent over the number issued in 1992. The total budget for consular relations activities has also increased significantly in recent years. The budget grew from about \$259 million in fiscal year 1992 to an estimated \$470 million in fiscal year 1998. The State Department’s Bureau of Consular Affairs Program Plan for fiscal years 1998-99 (an annually updated planning document containing strategies for executing the Bureau’s mission) notes that the greatest demand for visas is in advanced developing countries such as Brazil and South Korea, among others. Table 1 shows the numbers of nonimmigrant visas issued at the top five nonimmigrant visa-issuing posts in fiscal year 1996.²

Table 1: Top Five U.S. Visa-Issuing Posts in Fiscal Year 1996

Post	Visas issued
Seoul, South Korea	515,315
Hong Kong ^a (Taiwan residents)	359,685
Sao Paulo, Brazil	297,814
Rio de Janeiro, Brazil	206,653
Mexico City, Mexico	203,506

^aThe figure listed for Hong Kong represents the number of visas issued under the auspices of the Consulate General in Hong Kong to residents of Taiwan. Visa processing is largely handled by the American Institute in Taiwan. Visas issued to residents of Hong Kong are counted separately.

Source: State Department.

Foreign visitors traveling to the United States are a significant source of revenue for U.S. businesses. According to the Department of Commerce’s International Trade Administration Tourism Industries Office, foreign visitors spent close to \$70 billion in the United States in 1996. The office’s

²This is the latest year for which State has compiled worldwide visa processing statistics .

figures indicate that Brazilian visitors spent over \$2.6 billion in the United States, or more than \$2,900 per visit, during the same period.

In order to safeguard U.S. borders and control the entry of foreign visitors into the country, U.S. immigration laws require foreign visitors from most countries to have a visa to enter the United States. However, the United States currently waives the requirement for visitor visas for citizens of 26 countries considered to pose little risk for immigration and security purposes.³ According to a consular official, Brazil does not currently qualify for visa waivers primarily because the refusal rate for Brazilian visa applications exceeds the allowable limit of less than 2.5 percent in each of the previous 2 years and less than a 2 percent average over the previous 2 years.

The Department of State has primary responsibility abroad for administering U.S. immigration laws. Consular officers at overseas posts are responsible for providing expeditious visa processing for qualified applicants while preventing the entry of those that are a danger to U.S. security interests or are likely to remain in the United States illegally. State's Bureau of Consular Affairs develops policies and manages programs needed to administer and support visa-processing operations at overseas posts and has direct responsibility for U.S.-based consular personnel. State's geographic bureaus, which are organized along regional lines (such as the Bureau of Inter-American Affairs), have direct responsibility for the staffing and funding of overseas consular positions.

The process for handling nonimmigrant visas varies among overseas posts. Among the methods used to serve visa applicants, posts (1) receive applicants on a "first-come, first-served" basis, (2) operate appointment systems to schedule specific dates and times for applying, (3) employ travel agencies to act as intermediaries between applicants and the consulate, and (4) use "drop boxes" for collecting certain types of visa applications. Individual posts may use one or various combinations of these approaches. In addition to submitting a written application and supporting documentation, an applicant must be interviewed by a consular

³Under the Visa Waiver Pilot Program, citizens of participant countries may visit the United States for up to 90 days without obtaining a visitor visa. Criteria for a country's participation in the program include a very low rate of refusals of visitor visa applications, reciprocal treatment of U.S. nationals, a program for issuance of machine-readable passports, and the U.S. Attorney General's determination that a country's participation would not damage U.S. law enforcement interests. Countries currently part of the Visa Waiver Pilot Program include Andorra, Argentina, Australia, Austria, Belgium, Brunei, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Japan, Liechtenstein, Luxembourg, Monaco, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, San Marino, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom.

officer, unless the interview is waived. Consular officers may request additional documentation to validate the applicant's intention to return home or confirm that sufficient financial resources are available for the trip. Consular officers are also responsible for deterring the entry of aliens who may have links to terrorism, narcotics trafficking, or organized crime.

Backlogs Exist at Some Consulates

Nine of the 26 consulates we reviewed, including the one in Sao Paulo, experienced backlogs in processing nonimmigrant visas to the United States in fiscal year 1997. The backlogs ranged from 8 to 52 days and occurred primarily during peak travel seasons for tourists. State does not systematically compile information on visa processing turnaround times at overseas posts nor has it established a time standard for processing visas. However, the Deputy Assistant Secretary for Visa Services indicated that a maximum wait of 1 week (5 business days) for an appointment to apply for a nonimmigrant visa is desirable. She also told us that an additional 1 or 2 days are generally needed to process the visa after the appointment occurs. Thus, we concluded that a maximum desirable total turnaround time for appointment system cases would generally be 7 business days. Since the total turnaround times for other processing methods are generally shorter than for appointment systems, we used 7 business days as a cutoff point beyond which we considered a backlog to exist for all processing methods.

Turnaround Times Vary Widely

Although consulates often manage to process nonimmigrant visa applications within 7 business days during periods of low demand, turnaround times⁴ lengthen significantly at some consulates when demand is high. Peak periods generally occur during the summer months or winter holiday season. Of the nine posts that had peak-season backlogs exceeding 7 business days, four had turnaround times that were less than 15 business days and five had turnaround times that were 15 business days or more. These figures represent the highest turnaround times that posts reported among the various application methods that they use. Table 2 lists the total turnaround times for processing visas during peak periods at the five posts that had backlogs that were 15 business days or more in fiscal year 1997.

⁴We considered the total turnaround period to begin on the first day of a consulate's involvement and to end when a consulate either issued or denied the visa.

Table 2: Peak-Season Visa-Processing Times at Surveyed U.S. Posts With Backlogs of 15 Business Days or More in Fiscal Year 1997

Post	Turnaround time
Bogota, Colombia	52 Days
Warsaw, Poland	30 Days
Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic	25 Days
Sao Paulo, Brazil	20 Days
Seoul, South Korea	15 Days

Source: State Department.

Sao Paulo Visa Processing Backlogs

At the consulate in Sao Paulo, Brazil, turnaround times varied depending on the visa processing method involved. In fiscal year 1997, about 63 percent of the consulate's nonimmigrant visa applications were submitted through travel agents, and about 27 percent were handled through the consulate's appointment system. The remaining 10 percent were processed using other methods such as a "drop box." Visa applications submitted through travel agents were subject to a total turnaround period of 10 business days during periods of high demand and less than 5 business days during periods of low demand. Turnaround times for those who requested an appointment to apply for a visa reached as long as 20 days during busy periods—twice the length we noted in our 1992 report on visa-processing backlogs. In nonpeak periods, the turnaround time for those who requested appointments was 9 business days. For fiscal year 1997, approximately 86,000 applicants used the consulate's appointment system. Consulate officials told us that the turnaround time for applications received through the "drop-box" method is generally kept within 5 business days during both peak and nonpeak periods.

State pointed out that, while the Sao Paulo consulate's turnaround times have increased since 1992, the volume of nonimmigrant visa applications processed in Sao Paulo has also increased from 150,088 in fiscal year 1992 to 319,341 in fiscal year 1997. State reported that the Sao Paulo consulate processed an average of 1,250 nonimmigrant visas per day in fiscal year 1997. During the same period, the number of consular section foreign service officer positions increased from four to seven.

In 1995, the Sao Paulo consulate established an appointment system to alleviate long lines outside the consulate that were causing complaints from neighbors and negative reports in the local press. The consulate also began employing appointment delays as a disincentive to applying in

person and to encourage applicants to apply for visas through the consulate's travel agency program—a technique that it considered to be more efficient. As part of this approach, the consulate initiated a practice of not scheduling any appointments on Wednesdays, so that consular officers could concentrate on processing travel agency cases that day. Sao Paulo consular officials told us that this approach had been successful in reducing the length of applicant lines, increasing the use of the consulate's travel agency program, and improving productivity. On the other hand, the total turnaround time increased for those applying for visas in person through the appointment system. According to the Consul General in Brasilia, the Sao Paulo consulate's appointment system and its practice of closing to the public on Wednesdays unfairly penalizes applicants that apply in person. He said that the consulate should develop an approach that enables it to provide high levels of service for all application methods.

Officials in State's Bureau of Inter-American Affairs told us that the Brazil Desk received an average of one complaint per week from U.S. companies concerning difficulties that their Brazilian business associates were having in obtaining visas in Sao Paulo. The Consul General in Brasilia said that as many as 10 visa applicants from the Sao Paulo consular district underwent the inconvenience of traveling to and applying for visas in Brasilia each day rather than in Sao Paulo because they had encountered delays and other difficulties in Sao Paulo. He added that an additional unknown number travel to the consulate in Rio de Janeiro each day or simply elect not to travel to the United States at all. Representatives of the travel industry in Brazil told us that, while there have been substantial improvements in reducing visa backlogs and long lines at the Sao Paulo consulate in recent years, they still receive complaints about the length of time that it takes to obtain a U.S. visa in Sao Paulo. A representative of the American Chamber of Commerce in Brazil agreed that there had been improvements in recent years but said that the process remains particularly troublesome for Brazilian business executives who sometimes need to obtain visas on an emergency basis for unexpected business trips to the United States.

Barriers to Timely Processing of Visas

Consular officers face a number of obstacles to providing expeditious service in processing visas. Inadequate consular staffing at overseas posts and other staffing-related issues were identified as barriers to timely processing of visas by the majority of posts that we reviewed. Other impediments to efficient processing include inadequate computer systems, equipment, and consular facilities. Increased attention devoted to

preventing suspect applicants from entering the United States has also led to delays.

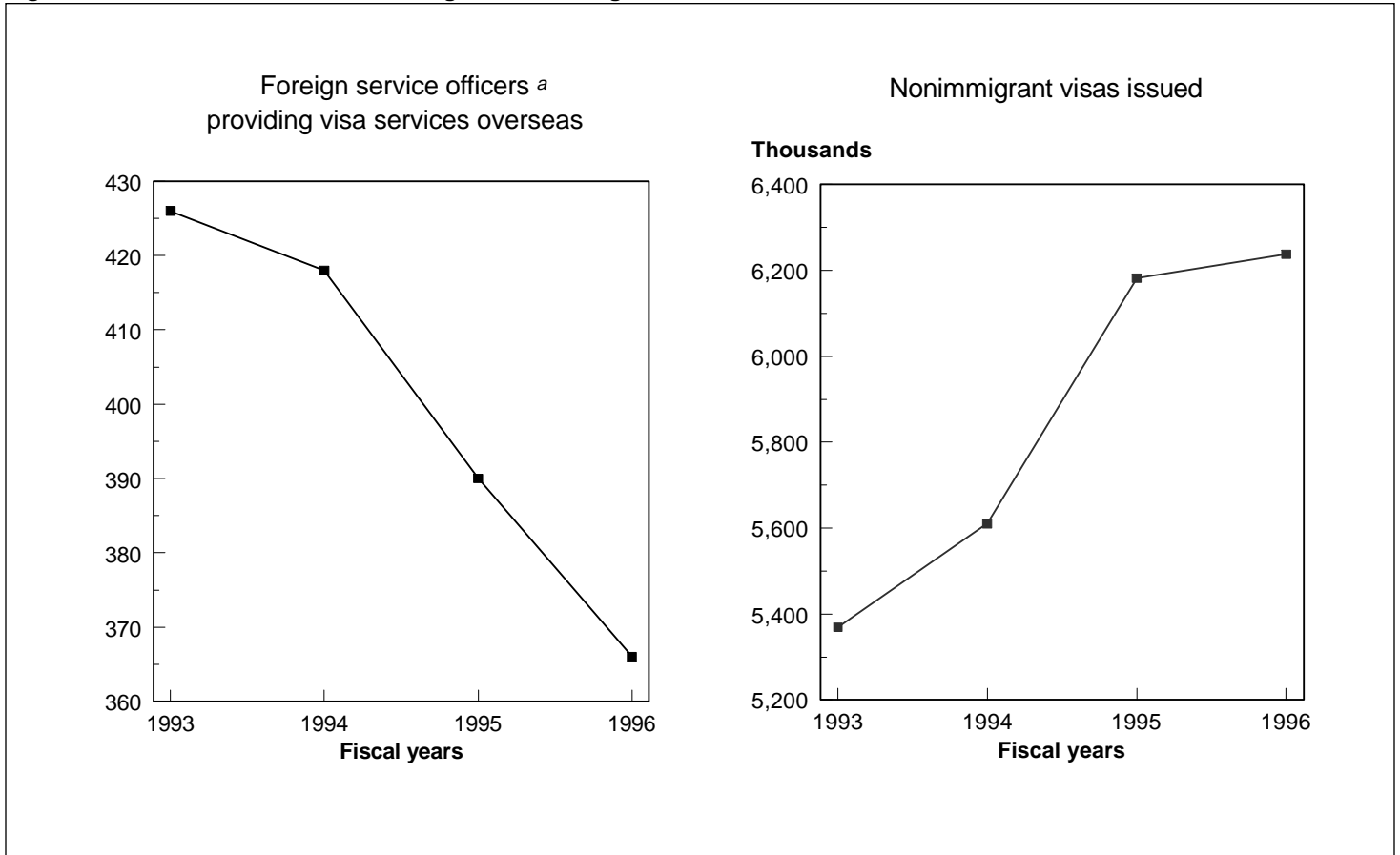
Staffing Problems

Similar to what we reported in 1992, consular personnel cited staffing problems as some of the most persistent barriers to processing visas efficiently. Nineteen of the 26 consulates we reviewed reported staffing problems, such as staffing gaps due to transfers of foreign service officers during peak periods or inadequate permanent staffing positions.

Of particular concern were staffing gaps that occurred during peak seasons. Since the summer months are among the busiest periods for processing nonimmigrant visas at many posts, consular sections should be operating at full capacity during these periods. However, according to consular officials, they often are not because State's annual personnel reassignments take place then. A consular official in Bogota told us that the lengthy wait for appointments there was due in large part to extended staffing gaps. Officials in the Bureau of Consular Affairs said that State's system of mass employee transfers during the summer months is intended to promote fairness in the assignment bidding process and convenience for officers with school-age children, even though it does not result in optimal staff coverage during peak periods.

Some consulates reported that, even when all of their authorized positions are filled, staffing levels are inadequate, particularly at posts that have experienced significant increases in visa demand. Figure 1 depicts overseas foreign service officer staffing for visa services and nonimmigrant visa work load trends from fiscal years 1993 through 1996.

Figure 1: Overseas Visa Services Staffing and Nonimmigrant Visa Work Load Trends, Fiscal Years 1993-96



^aAlthough overseas visa services staff process both immigrant and nonimmigrant visas, nonimmigrant visas are the majority issued.

Source: State Department budget documents and 1996 Report of the Visa Office.

According to a senior consular official, the hiring of junior officers—the primary source of consular staff support—has not kept pace with foreign service officer attrition over the last several years. This has resulted in staffing shortages in consular sections at many overseas posts. The Bureau of Consular Affairs Program Plan for fiscal years 1998-99 stated that the shortage of consular officers had seriously undermined efforts to meet the increasing demand for consular services.

Another staffing issue that consular officials raised concerned State's process for allocating staff at overseas posts. The Bureau of Consular Affairs does not control assignments of consular positions at overseas posts; rather, State's geographic bureaus are in charge of these positions. Consular officials said that this arrangement causes delays in reallocating positions to correspond with shifting work loads at various posts. Such reallocations are particularly troublesome when they involve moving positions from one geographic bureau to another. For example, if a U.S. consulate in a Latin American country encountered a significant increase in consular work load while a consulate in East Asia experienced a corresponding decline, the Bureau of Consular Affairs would not have the authority to shift one or more consular positions from one consulate to the other. Rather, it would have to convince the Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs to relinquish the positions and the associated funding, while persuading the Bureau of Inter-American Affairs to accept them. A senior consular official told us that the Bureau of Consular Affairs had recently proposed to the Under Secretary for Management that the Bureau be given greater control over the staffing and funding of overseas consular positions. The official said that the Under Secretary for Management is still considering the proposal.

Sao Paulo Consular Section Staffing

With regard to the adequacy of staffing in Sao Paulo in particular, consulate officials there told us that consular section staffing is insufficient to meet the high demand for nonimmigrant visas. The officials said that, due to transfers of foreign service officers and other factors, the unit had been staffed with a full contingent of authorized positions for only 6 months in the last 2 years. In addition, even when the section is fully staffed, the number of authorized positions is inadequate. At the time of our recent visit to Sao Paulo, the nonimmigrant visa section had seven foreign service officer positions,⁵ one of which was vacant. The unit also had 19 foreign national employee positions, including a receptionist, and 4 U.S. family member positions, 1 of which was vacant. Consular section officials said that, to reduce visa backlogs to within 7 working days, they would need two additional foreign service officers, five additional foreign national employees, and two additional U.S. family member employees.

The Sao Paulo consular section sometimes employs additional U.S. family members to provide assistance on a temporary basis but has experienced problems securing such staff in time to optimize their help during peak periods. Consulate officials told us that the complexities of the various

⁵This figure includes the head of the nonimmigrant visa unit, who has management responsibilities in addition to helping process visas. The number does not include the chief of the consular section, who oversees both the nonimmigrant visa and American citizen services units.

funding and hiring mechanisms for obtaining temporary staff make it difficult to quickly hire them. The officials added that the low salaries for family member staff also make it hard to attract applicants among the few eligible family members at the post.

According to a senior consular official, there are no current plans to address staffing shortages specifically at the consulate in Sao Paulo. The official said that State has staffing shortages worldwide and that it plans to hire new foreign service officers to help deal with the shortages. Sao Paulo's permanent position staffing needs will be considered along with the needs of other posts as part of the normal resource allocation process. The official added that State has also taken measures to temporarily fill peak season staffing gaps in overseas consular sections.

Inadequate Computer Equipment, Consular Facilities, and Other Resources

Consular officials pointed to inadequate computer and other equipment as further barriers to efficient visa processing. Fourteen of the 26 consulates we reviewed reported to us that they had such problems. One consulate noted that the vast majority of delays in processing visas were caused by computer equipment and systems failures. Another consulate reported in its "consular package" (an annual report to the Bureau of Consular Affairs on each post's consular operations) that frequent and prolonged breakdowns in the system for performing name checks on visa applicants had hindered visa processing during the peak summer season. Consular officials told us that there is a need for additional and better auxiliary equipment such as high-capacity fax machines and telephone answering machines.

Inadequate physical facilities also impede efficient visa processing at some consulates—a problem noted in our 1992 report as well. Thirteen of the 26 consulates we reviewed identified poor work space or inadequate physical structures as a major impediment to efficient processing. For example, Sao Paulo consular officials said that inadequate space limited their options for dealing with increased demand for visas. To illustrate this problem, the consulate had been able to offer a relatively short turnaround time for former visa holders who dropped off their applications for renewal near the entrance to the consulate grounds; there, a foreign national employee provided information, determined whether the applicant qualified for this method, and checked the applications for completeness. However, there is insufficient physical space to expand the use of this method at this location. Consulate officials told us that they

could explore the use of an offsite location for collecting “drop-box” applications.

Increased Vigilance Over Border Security Adds to Delays

As a result of heightened concerns about terrorism and illegal immigration in recent years, the U.S. government launched a number of initiatives to strengthen U.S. border security. These efforts included financing new technology for providing consular officers with comprehensive information on persons who may represent a threat to U.S. security. Consular officials noted that, although the enhanced systems helped bolster border security, they sometimes resulted in increased visa-processing times. For example, name-check systems now identify many more applicants as potential suspects; therefore, consular officers must take additional time to review these cases in determining eligibility for visas.

Achieving an appropriate balance between the competing objectives of facilitating the travel of eligible foreign nationals to the United States and preventing the travel of those considered ineligible poses a difficult challenge for consular officers. Consular officers told us that a renewed emphasis on holding them personally accountable for visa decisions on suspect applicants had led to greater cautiousness and an increase in the number of requests for security advisories from Washington. As a result, while same-day processing of visas used to be commonplace, consular officials told us that greater requirements related to border security had made same-day service more the exception than the rule.

Improvements in State’s Visa-Issuing Process

State has made a number of changes in an effort to improve its visa-processing operations in recent years, and some of these initiatives could help in overcoming barriers to timely visa issuance. It has devised methods for handling staffing problems and developed a model to better plan for future resource needs at consulates abroad. State has improved computer and telecommunications systems and has other equipment upgrades underway, some of which will help address visa-processing problems. In addition, State has undertaken an initiative to identify and implement better work load management practices for visa processing at overseas posts. However, State has yet to define and integrate time standards as part of its strategy to improve the processing of nonimmigrant visas. Establishing such standards could help in identifying visa-processing backlogs, better equipping State to determine the corrective measures and resources needed.

Approaches to Overcoming Staffing Problems

According to a senior consular official, State plans to hire over 200 new foreign service officers in fiscal year 1998 to help solve staffing shortages created by gaps between hiring and attrition levels in recent years. State has also begun experimenting with a number of approaches to fill peak-season staffing gaps at overseas consular sections. For example, the Bureau of Consular Affairs recently established a cooperative program with American University, located in Washington, D.C., to hire and train university students to work in consular positions in Washington, thus allowing the consular personnel that hold these positions to temporarily fill summer staffing gaps overseas. The Bureau also recruits retired foreign service officers to fill overseas consular staffing gaps on a temporary basis and is developing a “consular fellows” pilot program to fill vacant entry-level consular positions. The fellows program involves hiring temporary employees with foreign language skills to serve as consular staff on a short-term basis.

State has also expanded the use of temporary employment of U.S. foreign service family members at overseas posts in recent years. Family members often perform administrative and procedural tasks in support of consular officers. Officials at one post told us that extended staffing gaps and shortages had caused them to rely on family member employees to perform a wider range of duties than they had in the past. The officials said that doing so enabled the post to keep its nonimmigrant visa-processing turnaround time under 7 business days.

State has developed a consular staffing model based on visa work load and related information that it plans to use to help determine adequate consular staffing and to help identify personnel from surplus areas that could be moved to understaffed ones. The current model does not include foreign national employees—an important element of overall consular staffing at overseas posts. Also, according to one consular official, the model may be based on outdated data that does not take into account the increased visa demand and other changes in some countries. State is refining and updating the model to address these limitations and to factor in the impact of other visa-processing improvement efforts.

Equipment Upgrades

State made major investments in computer and telecommunications infrastructure in recent years and has other equipment upgrades under way for overseas posts that issue visas. For example, every visa-issuing post now has a machine-readable visa system and automated name-check capability. State has also begun installing second generation upgrades to

the machine-readable visa system at posts. State plans to install the necessary hardware and software to run this upgraded system at 100 posts in fiscal year 1998 and to have the system in all visa-issuing posts by the end of fiscal year 1999.

The equipment upgrades have resulted in significant improvements in some aspects of visa processing. For example, improvements in some backup systems for name checks now allow visa processing to continue when on-line connections with Washington are not operating. In the past, such disruptions resulted in significant delays in processing visas. More importantly, according to consular officials, the upgrades have resulted in better and more comprehensive information about applicants who might pose a security threat, thus contributing to higher quality decision-making with respect to visa applications.

Work Load Management Techniques

In an effort to identify and implement better work load management practices for visa processing, State established a Consular Workload Management Group in November 1996. Although the effort is still ongoing, the group has already identified a number of practices. Among them were the following:

- Recorded General Information. This system allows the applicant to get information about the application process without tying up staff resources. A 900-type telephone number, in which the user pays the cost of a call, can be established for this purpose.
- An Appointment System. An appointment system can reduce the applicant's waiting time in line and enable the post to control its work load by specifying the number of applicants who can be seen in a given day. Such a system allows an applicant to schedule an interview at a specific date and time.
- Prescreening. This procedure requires an employee to ask an applicant a few questions and to quickly determine whether the applicant is clearly eligible to receive a visa or whether the applicant must be interviewed by an officer.
- Noncashier Fee Collection. This process allows applicants to pay the machine-readable visa fee at a bank or other financial institution. The applicant then presents the fee payment receipt when processing the application, thus eliminating the need for a cashier at the post to handle the fee transaction.
- Travel Agency/Corporate Referral Program. This practice allows posts to designate selected travel agencies and large companies to perform some

initial processing of nonimmigrant visa applicants who meet certain criteria. Agencies and companies are trained to ensure that applicants' documents are in order and are frequently asked to enter pertinent data on the application form. In some cases, agencies and companies forward information to the post electronically, usually via computer diskette.

Other practices identified include public information campaigns urging applicants to apply well in advance of their intended travel dates and the use of color-coded boxes to simplify the return of passports on particular days. Some of the practices identified are easy to implement, such as color coding; others are more complex, such as establishing noncashier fee collection systems. The willingness and ability to implement these practices varies by post. According to consular officials, State is currently in the process of identifying posts that are already employing these practices.

It is important to note that, while some of these practices can aid in better managing consular work loads, the use of such tools does not guarantee a reduction in visa-processing times. In some cases, these techniques may actually contribute to backlogs, depending on how they are managed. One of the most controversial tools in this respect is the appointment system. According to some consular officials, posts inevitably schedule fewer appointments per day than the number of applicants, causing backlogs and public relations problems. Consular management must deal with increased phone calls and requests for emergency processing when the wait for an appointment becomes unreasonably long. All nine of the surveyed posts that had peak-season backlogs in fiscal year 1997, including the consulate in Sao Paulo, used appointment systems. On the other hand, some high-volume posts that did not use appointment systems managed to keep the total turnaround time for processing visas under 7 business days, even in periods of very high demand. For example, in Rio de Janeiro, the total turnaround time for processing "walk-in" nonimmigrant visa applications was 2 days during peak and nonpeak seasons. The post in Mexico City issued visas the same day that applicants walked in, whether in peak or nonpeak seasons; however, a post official told us that applicants often have to wait for several hours in line.

Timeliness Standards

According to Deputy Assistant Secretary for Visa Services, State does not systematically compile information on visa processing turnaround times at overseas posts nor has it established formal timeliness standards for visa processing. State's consular guidance makes references to the importance

of minimizing waiting time and return visits for visa applicants but does not specifically address total turnaround time. On the other hand, State has timeliness standards for issuing passports to U.S. citizens within 25 days after receiving the application. The usefulness of such standards in helping to manage for results is now widely recognized.

Conclusions

Some consulates continue to experience backlogs in processing nonimmigrant visas. Although State has taken a number of actions to improve its visa-processing operations, it has not made a systematic effort to identify and address visa-processing backlogs on a global basis. We believe that State's improvement efforts need to be guided by formal timeliness standards for issuing nonimmigrant visas. Establishing such standards could assist in identifying backlogs, putting State in a better position to determine the resources and actions needed to correct them. Timeliness standards could also help State's efforts to implement better work load management practices and to improve long-range planning for staffing and other resource needs.

Recommendation

To determine the appropriate level and mix of resources needed and to take full advantage of ongoing efforts to improve visa operations, we recommend that the Secretary of State develop timeliness standards for processing nonimmigrant visas.

Agency Comments and Our Evaluation


In its written comments on a draft of this report, State said that the report was a balanced and informative account of the problems faced by consular posts abroad. While State did not directly disagree with the report's recommendation that it develop timeliness standards for processing nonimmigrant visas, State indicated that setting and meeting such standards should be linked to the adequacy of resources. State also expressed concern that timeliness standards might be overemphasized to the detriment of border security goals. State said that imposing rigid standards could adversely affect consular officers' thoroughness in scrutinizing visa applicants.

We agree that setting and meeting timeliness standards should be linked to the adequacy of resources. In fact, we believe that such standards could assist in identifying backlogs, and therefore put State in a better position to determine the level of resources needed to achieve desired levels of both service and security. They could also help State to better manage its

resources. We recognize the importance of maintaining quality in the adjudication of visas and believe this element should be built into any timeliness standards or implementing regulations. We also note that some of State's overseas posts have already established their own timeliness standards for processing nonimmigrant visas and have managed to meet them, even though some of these posts are located in areas considered to be at high risk for visa fraud.

We are sending copies of this report to the Secretary of State and interested congressional committees. We will also make copies available to others upon request.

Please contact me at (202) 512-4128 if you or any of your staff have any questions concerning this report. The major contributors to this report 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, Associate Director
International Relations and Trade Issues

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Scope and Methodology

To determine whether or not consulates are continuing to experience backlogs in processing nonimmigrant visas, we interviewed officials in the State Department's Bureau of Consular Affairs, in Washington, D.C., and sent a uniform set of questions on visa-processing operations to 26 overseas posts in 20 countries: Bridgetown, Barbados; Brasilia, Recife, Rio de Janeiro, and Sao Paulo, Brazil; Santiago, Chile; San José, Costa Rica; Hong Kong; Bogota, Colombia; Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic; San Salvador, El Salvador; Guatamala City, Guatamala; Port au Prince, Haiti; Tegucigalpa, Honduras; Kingston, Jamaica; Seoul, South Korea; Hermosillo, Matamoros, Tijuana, and Mexico City, Mexico; Lima, Peru; Manila, the Philippines; Warsaw, Poland; Damascus, Syria; Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago; and Caracas, Venezuela. We selected these posts based on visa issuance volumes, geographical locations, innovative consular practices, and suggestions by State Department officials. Sixteen of the 26 consulates that we reviewed each process over 50,000 nonimmigrant visa applications per year. Together, the 26 consulates we reviewed processed a total of more than 2.7 million nonimmigrant visa applications in 1996, or over 43 percent of the total number of nonimmigrant visas processed worldwide that year.

We directly observed nonimmigrant visa-processing operations and interviewed consular officials at 3 of the 26 posts: the consulates in Rio de Janeiro and Sao Paulo, Brazil, and Caracas, Venezuela, to obtain a first-hand view of the complexity of consular visa operations and the various processing methods where backlogs are involved. The consulate in Sao Paulo issues the highest volume of nonimmigrant visas in Latin America and is the third busiest visa-issuing post in the world. The consulate in Rio de Janeiro follows Sao Paulo as the next busiest nonimmigrant visa-issuing post.

Based on discussions with the Deputy Assistant Secretary for Visa Services, we used a total turnaround period of 7 business days as a cutoff point beyond which we considered a backlog to exist. We considered the total turnaround period to begin on the first day of a consulate's involvement and to end when a consulate either issued or denied the visa.

To assess factors affecting consulates' ability to process nonimmigrant visas in a timely manner, we analyzed the responses of the previously listed 26 posts to a uniform set of questions. We directly interviewed consulate personnel, observed consular operations, and analyzed available visa work load and other processing data at three of these posts to gain a practical understanding of the obstacles to timely processing. We also

reviewed the annual consular packages of certain posts, the Bureau of Consular Affairs Program Plan for fiscal years 1998-99, State Department Office of Inspector General Reports, and other State Department documents.

To review activities planned or under way to improve nonimmigrant visa processing, we interviewed officials in the State Department's Bureau of Consular Affairs and at three overseas posts. We interviewed and obtained information from Mitretek Systems—a management consulting firm located in McLean, Virginia, that State employed for a work load management study regarding visa services. We also reviewed State Department Consular Workload Management Group documents and National Performance Review reports.

Our work did not include an assessment of the appropriateness of the Sao Paulo consulate's policies and procedures for deciding to deny or grant visas nor did we evaluate the appropriateness of factors considered in the visa decision-making process.

We conducted our review between September and December 1997 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards.

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

Chief Financial Officer

Washington, D.C. 20520-7427

February 13, 1998

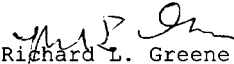
Dear Mr. Hinton:

The Department of State is pleased to have the opportunity to provide the enclosed comments on your draft report "STATE DEPARTMENT: Tourist Visa Processing Backlogs Persist at U.S. Consulates," GAO/NSIAD-98-69, GAO Job Code 711290.

We appreciate the effort by GAO to produce a balanced and informative readout on the problems faced by our consular posts abroad as the latter strive to provide the best possible service with the limited resources at hand.

Once again, we appreciate the opportunity to comment and hope that you will incorporate our observations into your final report to Congress. If you have any questions concerning this response, please contact, Mr. James Pettit of our Visa Office at (202) 663-1175.

Sincerely,


Richard L. Greene

Enclosure:

As stated.

cc:

GAO/NSIAD - Ms. Glod/Mr. Courts
STATE/CA/VO/F/P - Mr. Pettit

Mr. Henry L. Hinton, Jr,
Assistant Comptroller General,
National Security and International Affairs,
U.S. General Accounting Office.

Appendix II
Comments From the Department of State

DEPARTMENT OF STATE COMMENTS ON THE GAO DRAFT REPORT

"STATE DEPARTMENT: Tourist Visa Processing Backlogs Persist at U.S. Consulates," GAO/NSIAD-98/69, GAO Job Code 711290

Following are comments addressed to specific statements in the report.

The body of the report discusses problems of resources and staffing, but the conclusion focuses only on a need for performance standards. The Department believes that setting and meeting such standards are also linked to resource adequacy. State's and Consular Affairs' overall resource situation should be discussed in the report.

See comment 1.

Moreover, proposing a "timeliness processing standard" without highlighting the importance of quality adjudication of visas undermines border security goals. Imposing rigid output standards can send a contradictory message to consular officers that their performance is tied to quota-based measures rather than the thoroughness of their review and scrutiny of applicants to detect those who may seek to violate our immigration laws or threaten our security.

See pp. 15 and 16.

Specific Comments

We question the methodology for determining "turnaround" times. Many posts offer a variety of visa application routes: walk-in service, appointment systems, drop boxes, mail-in applications, and travel agency submissions. The turnaround time for each of these services varies. Applicants who are eligible for more than one application service weigh considerations of convenience as well as timeliness. It is therefore misleading to use the highest turnaround time to describe a post's visa backlog. If, for example, by mailing in an application or submitting an application through a travel agency an applicant can avoid standing in line as a walk-in case, he/she may choose to wait the extra week it takes to obtain the visa in order to be spared the inconvenience. The report should make this factor explicit, since many applicants may intentionally opt for the slower service. The best way to do this would be to indicate the turnaround time for the fastest method in table 2 and, in parentheses, the turnaround time for other method(s).

See comment 2.

Appendix II
Comments From the Department of State

See comment 3.

Now on p. 5.

See comment 3.

Now on p. 6.

If the report is going to contrast turnaround times with those reported in 1992, the volume of visas processed should be provided. Sao Paulo processed 150,088 nonimmigrant visa applications in FY-92 and 319,341 in FY-97. (P.9, first sentence)

To provide context for the observation that 10 visa applicants from the Sao Paulo district applied in Brasilia each day, it would be useful to mention the number of applicants Sao Paulo processes each day, which for FY-97 would be approximately 1,250. (P.10, second sentence)

The following are GAO's comments on the Department of State's letter dated February 13, 1998.

GAO Comments

1. The scope of our review did not include an assessment of State's overall resource situation. However, we revised the report to include information on the budget for State's consular relations activities.
2. In the background section of our report, we describe the various application methods that posts use and note that individual posts may use one or more of these approaches. For the Sao Paulo consulate, we identified the turnaround times for all application methods. For each post, we used the application method with the longest turnaround time because it offered a valid description of a post's peak-season backlog. While certain visa applicants may have a choice among more than one application method at some posts, some of the alternative methods are not available to first-time visa applicants at many of the posts that we reviewed. For example, in Santo Domingo, interviews by appointment are required for first-time visa applicants, and a drop-box system is available only for applicants that are renewing already existing visas.
3. We revised the report to reflect this information.

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