

**Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Consular Affairs
Wanda L. Nesbitt**

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Subcommittee on Travel and Trade**

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Chairman Smith, distinguished members of the Committee:

Thank you for inviting me to speak with you today about the efforts of the Department of State and in particular, the Bureau of Consular Affairs (CA), to balance border security objectives with our commitment to ensuring the United States remains “Open for Business.”

Introduction

Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice summarized this commitment during her confirmation hearings when she stated “Our interaction with the rest of the world must be a conversation, not a monologue, and America must remain open to visitors and workers and students from around the world. We do not and will not compromise our security standards, yet if our public diplomacy efforts are to succeed, we cannot close ourselves off from the rest of the world.”

As the Secretary’s words illustrate so well, the Department of State recognizes that this country is at its best when we remain true to our finest principles, to our history, and our common ideals. America is a nation of immigrants, and has always welcomed visitors from all over the globe, whether they come for tourism, business or study. We recognize that our nation’s well-being is fortified by the contributions – both the quantifiable and those we cannot measure – that visitors make to our society.

The Department of State is cognizant of the economic benefits generated by international visitors to the United States. Last year we welcomed approximately 49 million foreign visitors and they in turn spent over \$100 billion here on travel-

related expenses. On the academic front, international students contribute approximately \$13 billion annually to our economy as they pursue a wide range of educational opportunities available in this country. Furthermore, we continue to facilitate legitimate business travel to the United States. Beyond the dollar signs, the good will that we engender among foreign visitors who visit the United States, attend our schools, do business with us, visit their family members, and experience some of the cultural, economic and tourist opportunities that this country has to offer, is priceless.

At the same time, however, we must balance the security requirements of protecting our homeland. The context for today's U.S. visa policy and security posture is, quite simply, September 11, 2001. In the immediate aftermath of 9/11, the U.S. Government moved quickly to shore up our nation's border security and reassure American citizens and international visitors alike that our nation was safe and secure. After conducting a top-to-bottom review of visa procedures and implementing myriad changes since 2001, we continue working day after day to make sure we have the strongest possible shield in place to protect our country, our citizens – and our guests.

Our mission is to strive for the ideal balance between protecting our borders and promoting a vibrant, open, and global society here at home. While the challenge is not an easy one, we firmly believe that these objectives are not contradictory. And when we make this country more secure for American citizens, we make it more secure for everyone.

Visa processing

Consular officers overseas in our embassies and consulates serve literally on the front lines of the global war on terror. We have the responsibility for adjudicating immigrant and nonimmigrant visa applications in a manner that protects U.S. borders and deters illegal immigration, while continuing to ensure that family members of American citizens can join them in the U.S., and allowing us to continue to welcome legitimate visitors into our country. This is the essence of the work we do and the backbone of the "Secure Borders, Open Doors" policy.

Today, 97 percent of approved travelers receive their visa in one to two days. For the two-and-a-half percent of visa applicants who, for national security reasons, are subject to additional screening, the Department has streamlined the interagency process so that even this small percentage of the overall number of applicants can

expect an answer promptly. We continue to make improvements by automating and updating visa processing and screening systems so the overall result is greater transparency, efficiency and predictability – for all our valued visitors – while at the same time promoting security. For example, we are working diligently to transition to 10-print biometric collection and screening for both visa applicants and visa waiver travelers.

In order to adjudicate over 7 million visa applications annually, the Department of State has created more than 515 consular positions since September 2001. The Department has enhanced the training of consular officers overseas in interviewing techniques and counterterrorism, while continuing to also emphasize the need for efficiency and the facilitation of legitimate travel. We are also exploring ways to use cutting-edge technology to transform traditional visa application methods. For example, at many posts applicants can use an Electronic Visa Application form that reduces our data-entry times.

Despite numerous improvements and encouraging statistics on the increased number of visas applications abroad, misperceptions about the visa process still persist. This is true overseas, as well as here at home. The Bureau of Consular Affairs, along with all U.S. Embassies and Consulates, has been engaged in a variety of outreach efforts, particularly to international students and the business community. We want business people, exchange visitors, and tourists to know that America's welcome mat is still out. We want everyone to know that the Department of State is committed to ensuring that the visa application process, or a misperception of it, does not serve as an impediment to legitimate travel to the United States.

Travel facilitation

The Department of State recognizes that business visitors and tourists are essential to the economic security of our nation. For that reason, we have instructed all of our overseas posts to facilitate legitimate business and urgent travel and we regularly survey them on their efforts. Our Embassies and Consulates have responded in innovative ways. Many have established formal business facilitation programs that enroll major companies and permit their employees to obtain expedited appointments, or expedited processing on the day of interview. Others expedite appointments for groups or schedule group appointments, and establish specific time blocks when business groups may appear for an interview. Still

others set aside specific time blocks to allow certain categories of nonimmigrant visa applicants to appear without a scheduled interview slot.

The Bureau has made efforts to increase the transparency of the visa process to benefit every category of nonimmigrant visa applicants. All our posts maintain websites that provide information on how to apply for a visa. Each posts strives to make their website as useful as possible; some have even worked directly with host governments to get feedback on how their citizens navigate the site and how the USG's information could be better communicated to that audience. On the websites, visa applicants can also find estimated wait times for a visa interview appointment. This feature enables business people and tourists alike to plan and make arrangements for their trip – regardless of whether they will spend that trip in an office building or at an amusement park.

In addition to these initiatives, many of our Embassies and Consulates have established business facilitation units to serve as a point of contact for the business community. And our posts around the world have integrated regular business visa training for consular officers into their normal operations to update consular officers on a country's economic conditions, provide information on the structure of the country's business community, and discuss business visa interviewing techniques.

In Washington, the Bureau has partnered with our Embassies and Consulates to create a Business Visa Center, to assist U.S companies and convention organizers by explaining the visa process when they invite employees or current and prospective business clients and partners to the United States. The Business Visa Center provides information to U.S. companies about the application process for visitor visas for those seeking to travel to the U.S. for business purposes and works with both the companies and the consular officers, when needed, to communicate information effectively between U.S businesses and posts worldwide.

Here are some more specific examples of how our Embassies and Consulates overseas are extending the welcome of the United States to business travelers and tourists:

- In addition to conducting active outreach with business organizations, Mission India operates a very successful Business Executive Program (BEP) designed to facilitate legitimate business travel, develop relationships with business with strong ties to the United States, and help visa officers make more informed

decisions. Employees of the hundreds of companies in India registered in this program have separate lines for screening and interviews.

- Over 600 companies that are members of AmCham China have been accepted into the Business Visa Program managed by Embassy Beijing. Member companies' employees may apply at the Embassy any day of the week and bypass the standard waiting period for a visa interview. Over 10,000 business visa applicants were processed through this channel last year.
- Embassy Singapore instituted a walk-in procedure allowing applicants to apply, be interviewed and (if approved) obtain their visas within one day in many cases. They also discussed establishing a business traveler facilitation program in conjunction with AmCham Singapore, but the AmCham indicated that such a program was not necessary or desirable as the international business community is satisfied with Post's current visa processing procedures and speed!
- Our Consulate General in Sao Paulo established a Business Travel program that includes U.S., multinational and well-known Brazilian companies that routinely send business travelers to the United States. The Consulate General receives requests directly from the companies' HR departments by email and sets special, expedited appointments for prospective business travelers in the afternoons. Any business traveler whose company is not a participant in the business travel program may also obtain an expedited interview by sending a faxed or e-mailed request.
- And finally, Embassy Seoul has enrolled 141 companies into its Business Referral Program. Companies routinely conducting business activities in the U.S. or with U.S.-based businesses are eligible for the program. Member company employees receive expedited visa appointments and speedier processing the day of the interview.
- CA's own statistics also show that visa issuances are on the rise. The number of business and tourist visas issued rose to 3 million in 2005 and are being issued even more efficiently in 2006.

These are only a few of the many ways that the Department of State supports business relationships between U.S. firms and their potential clients, partners and customers all over the world.

Passports and WHTI

Another central component of our border security efforts is the adjudication and issuance of U.S. passports. This document is among the most valuable citizenship and identity documents in the world. As the global community becomes more connected all the time, the demand for passports continues to grow. Last year, we issued over 10 million passports and we are well on the way to issuing about 13 million this year. More recently, and in response to the surging demand, the Bureau received approval to hire an additional 130 government personnel to adjudicate passport applications. The Department has also made commensurate increases in private sector staff at our passport facilities.

We are also working on a significant initiative called the Western Hemisphere Travel Initiative or WHTI that will affect travel to the U.S. by American citizens as well as citizens of Canada, Mexico and Bermuda. WHTI is our plan to implement a provision in the Intelligence Reform and Terrorism Prevention Act of 2004 that established a legal requirement for American citizens and travelers from other countries in the Western Hemisphere to enter the United States, beginning January 1, 2008, with a passport or other accepted form of documentation denoting citizenship and identity. This requirement will apply to travel to the United States from Canada, Bermuda, the Caribbean and Mexico as well.

The goals of the Western Hemisphere Travel Initiative are to strengthen our border security and facilitate re-entry into the United States for American citizens. This requirement streamlines the review process so only a limited number of documents that denote citizenship and identity can be presented at Ports of Entry, rather than one of more than 8000 different versions of documents currently in use today.

The Department of State is also engaged with our hemispheric neighbors to make sure that they are aware of the requirements of WHTI. We want to ensure that WHTI does not hinder the legitimate flow of people and goods between our nations. Because WHTI represents a significant change to current practice, we are planning to roll it out in phases, and provide advance notice to the public to help people get a passport or other secure document in time for their planned travel.

Throughout this process, we have been engaging the public, including citizens, business leaders, and local government. Many residents of border areas requested

a less expensive, more convenient travel document than the traditional passport book for land border crossings.

As part of the Rice-Chertoff Initiative, Secretaries Rice and Chertoff announced in January the development of a passport card that carries the rights and privileges of a standard U.S. passport. The passport card will be adjudicated and issued by the Department of State to the exact same standards as the traditional book-style passport. The card will be produced as part of a system of Border Management travel documents called People, Access, Security, Service (PASS).

Conclusion

It is our government's fundamental commitment to balancing our security needs with the *openness* of the United States that the Department of State is striving to maintain each day. We have taken extraordinary measures to make the passport and visa adjudication processes more efficient and more accessible and we have done so with an unwavering commitment to highest security standards. We believe these actions benefit American public at home and abroad, as well as the foreign citizens that visit our country by facilitating their legitimate travel.

Mr. Chairman, members of the Committee, I thank you again for inviting me to participate in this hearing and to explain the Department's efforts to promote exchange through travel and trade within the context of our commitment to Secure Borders *and* Open doors.

I look forward now to answering your questions.