



Testimony

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BORDER SECURITY

Reassessment of Consular Resource Requirements Could Help Address Visa Delays

Statement of Jess T. Ford, Director
International Affairs and Trade



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Highlights of GAO-06-542T, a testimony before the Committee on Government Reform, House of Representatives

BORDER SECURITY

Reassessment of Consular Resource Requirements Could Help Address Visa Delays

Why GAO Did This Study

In deciding to approve or deny a visa application, the Department of State's (State) consular officers are on the front line of defense in protecting the United States against those who seek to harm U.S. interests. To increase border security following the September 11 attacks, Congress, State, and the Department of Homeland Security initiated a series of changes to border security policies and procedures. These changes have added to the complexity of consular workload. But consular officers must balance this security responsibility against the need to facilitate legitimate travel. In recent years, GAO has issued a series of reports on the visa process. This statement discusses (1) wait times for visas, (2) factors that affect wait times, and (3) GAO's recent work on consular staffing.

What GAO Recommends

We recommended in October 2002 and again in September 2005 that State reassess its consular staffing requirements. In commenting on a draft of our September 2005 report, State disagreed with our recommendation that it prepare a plan to address consular requirements. In light of the increased workload due to additional border security requirements and ongoing staffing shortages and processing delays at some posts, we continue to urge State to fully assess its resource needs to ensure it has the right people at key posts.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-06-542T.

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

What GAO Found

As a result of changes since September 11, 2001, aimed at strengthening visa policies and procedures, applicants have faced extensive wait times for visas at some posts. According to consular officials, posts that consistently have wait times of 30 days or longer for interview appointments may have a resource problem. During a recent 6-month period, 97 of State's 211 visa-issuing posts reported maximum wait times of 30 or more days in at least one month; at 20 posts, the reported wait times were in excess of 30 days for this entire 6-month period. Further, in February 2006, 9 posts reported wait times in excess of 90 days.

Several factors have contributed to these delays at some consular posts. For example, Congress, State, and the Department of Homeland Security have initiated new policies and procedures since the September 11 attacks to strengthen the security of the visa process; however, these new requirements have increased consular workload and exacerbated delays. Additionally, some applicants have faced additional delays because of special security checks for national security concerns. Other factors, such as resurgence in visa demand and ongoing embassy facility limitations, could continue to affect wait times.

We recently reported that State had not conducted a worldwide, comprehensive assessment of staffing requirements for visa operations. While State has increased hiring of consular officers, there is a need for such an assessment to ensure that State has sufficient staff at key consular posts, particularly in light of the visa processing delays at some posts.

Consular Posts with Maximum Reported Wait Times for Temporary Business and Tourism Visa Interview Appointments in Excess of 90 Days, February 2006

Post	Maximum Wait Time in Days
Chennai, India	168
Ciudad Juarez, Mexico	92
Havana, Cuba	129
Mexico City, Mexico	134
Mumbai, India	154
New Delhi, India	91
Paris, France	116
Port Au Prince, Haiti	167
Rio de Janeiro, Brazil	140

Source: Department of State

Note: These data are based on reports from overseas consular posts to the Consular Affairs Bureau in Washington, D.C. According 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.

April 4, 2006

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee:

I am pleased to be here to discuss GAO's observations on delays in the nonimmigrant visa process.¹ In deciding to approve or deny a visa application, the Department of State's (State) consular officers at 211 visa-issuing posts overseas are on the front line of defense in protecting the United States against potential terrorists and others whose entry would likely be harmful to U.S. national interests. But consular officers must balance this security responsibility against the need to facilitate legitimate travel. Congress, State, and the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) have initiated a series of changes since the September 11 attacks to enhance border security policies and procedures. These changes have added to the complexity of consular officers' workload. They have also, in turn, contributed to the delays facing foreign citizens at some posts who are seeking visas for travel to the United States. For example, in February 2004, we reported that applicants had faced delays when scheduling appointments for visa interviews at consular posts in China and India.² Although wait times in China have improved in recent months, applicants in India continue to face long delays. Moreover, worldwide, nine posts reported maximum wait times of 90 or more days in February 2006. In light of the increased workload per visa applicant due to additional border security requirements, we recommended in October 2002 and again in September 2005³ that State reassess its staffing requirements.

Today I will discuss (1) wait times facing visa applicants, (2) factors that affect wait times, and (3) our recent work on consular staffing concerns. My statement covers a

¹The United States also grants visas to people who intend to immigrate to the United States. In this testimony, the term "visa" refers to nonimmigrant visas only. Persons who may require nonimmigrant visas include temporary business travelers and tourists.

²See 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).

³See GAO, *Border Security: Strengthened Visa Process Would Benefit From Improvements in Staffing and Information Sharing*, GAO-05-859 (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 13, 2005), and GAO, *Border Security: Visa Process Should Be Strengthened as an Antiterrorism Tool*, GAO-03-132NI (Washington, D.C.: Oct. 21, 2002).

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series of reports that we have issued regarding the visa process and related areas. Over the course of our work for these reports, we have reviewed relevant legislation and agency documents, interviewed State's consular and human resource officials in Washington, and observed visa operations and interviewed consular officials at more than 20 consular posts. In addition, in 2005, we interviewed consular staff at 25 overseas posts regarding issues such as visa policies and procedures, staffing, and training. Our work was conducted in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards (see appendix I for a list of GAO reports).

Summary

Since September 11, 2001, applicants have faced extensive wait times for visas at some posts. According to consular officials, posts that consistently have wait times for visa interview appointments of 30 days or longer may have a resource or management problem. State's data show that between September 2005 and February 2006, 97 posts reported maximum wait times of 30 or more days in at least one month; at 20 posts, the reported wait times were in excess of 30 days for this entire 6-month period.⁴ Further, in February 2006, nine posts reported wait times in excess of 90 days. In Chennai, India, applicants applying for visas faced an average reported wait time of 126 days over this 6-month period.

Several factors have contributed to delays for visa interview appointments at some consular posts. For example, new policies and procedures implemented since the September 11 attacks have strengthened the security of the visa process; however, these new requirements have increased consular workload and exacerbated delays. For example, consular officers are now required to interview virtually all visa applicants. Additionally, some applicants have faced additional delays because of special security checks. Other factors, such as resurgence in visa demand, and ongoing consular facility limitations, could continue to affect wait times.

⁴According 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.

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In September 2005, we reported that State had not conducted a worldwide, comprehensive assessment of staffing requirements for visa operations. In commenting on a draft of that report, State argued that it had a staffing plan. While State has increased hiring of consular officers, we continue to see a need for such an assessment to ensure that State has sufficient staff with the necessary skills at key consular posts, particularly in light of the visa processing delays at some posts.

Background

The 1952 Immigration and Nationality Act, as amended, is the primary body of law governing immigration and visa operations.⁵ 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.⁶ As we reported in July 2005, the act also authorizes DHS to, among other things, assign employees to any consular post to review individual visa applications and provide expert advice and training to consular officers regarding specific security threats related to the visa process.⁷ A subsequent September 2003 Memorandum of Understanding between State and DHS further outlines the responsibilities of each agency with respect to visa issuance. DHS is responsible for establishing visa policy, reviewing implementation of the policy, and providing additional direction. State manages the visa process, as well as the consular corps and its functions at 211 visa-issuing posts overseas.

⁵P.L. 82-414, 8 U.S.C. § 1101 et seq.

⁶State retains authority in certain circumstances, as outlined in the act. See P.L. 107-296.

⁷The act also requires that DHS on-site personnel in Saudi Arabia review all visa applications prior to adjudication by consular officers. P.L. 107-296, Sec. 428(e) and Sec. 428(i). See GAO, *Border Security: Actions Needed to Strengthen Management of Department of Homeland Security's Visa Security Program*, GAO-05-801 (Washington, D.C.: July 29, 2005).

The process for determining who will be issued or refused a visa contains several steps, including documentation reviews, in-person interviews, collection of biometrics⁸ (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 response 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.

Applicants May Face Extensive Wait Times for Visa Interviews

According to consular officials, posts that consistently have wait times for visa interview appointments of 30 days or longer may have a resource or management problem. To monitor posts' workload, State requires that posts report, on a weekly basis, the wait times for applicant interviews.⁹ As of March 2006, State's data showed that between September 2005 and February 2006, 97 posts reported maximum wait times of 30 or more days in at least one month; at 20 posts, the reported wait times were in excess of 30 days for the entire 6-month period. Moreover, in February 2006, nine posts reported wait times in excess of 90 days (see table 1).

⁸Biometrics is 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 testimony, "biometric identifiers" refers to fingerprints. See GAO, *Technology Assessment: Using Biometrics for Border Security*, GAO-03-174 (Washington, D.C.: Nov. 14, 2002).

⁹Posts are asked to provide the appointment wait time applicable to the majority of applicants applying for a given category of visas on a given day, and not an average wait time. In September 2005, our analysis of State's data on reported wait times revealed significant numbers of posts that did not report on a weekly basis during the 6-month period we reviewed. Therefore, the data were not sufficiently reliable to fully determine how many posts had wait times in excess of 30 days. We recommended that State ensure that consular chiefs update interview wait time data on a weekly basis. For the purposes of this statement, the data are sufficiently reliable to broadly indicate that delays for visa appointments are an ongoing concern.

Table 1: Consular Posts with Maximum Reported Wait Times for Temporary Business and Tourism Visa Interview Appointments in Excess of 90 Days, February 2006

Post	Maximum Wait Time in Days
Chennai, India	168
Ciudad Juarez, Mexico	92
Havana, Cuba	129
Mexico City, Mexico	134
Mumbai, India	154
New Delhi, India	91
Paris, France	116
Port Au Prince, Haiti	167
Rio de Janeiro, Brazil	140

Source: Department of State.

According to the Assistant Secretary of State for Consular Affairs, managing consular workload is a major issue for the department, particularly at posts in India and China where volume is expected to continue to increase. In February 2004,¹⁰ we reported that officials at some of the posts we visited in India and China indicated they did not have enough space and staffing resources to handle interview demands and the new visa requirements. According to consular officers, during the 2003 summer months, the wait for visa interviews was as long as 12 weeks in Chennai, India. In China, applicants at one post were facing waits of about 5 to 6 weeks during our September 2003 visit due to an imbalance between demand for visas and the number of consular officers available to interview applicants and staff to answer phones. Although these posts have undertaken initiatives to shorten the wait times, such as using temporary duty help and instituting longer interviewing hours, delays for visa interviews remain an ongoing concern. For example, the U.S. embassy in New Delhi instituted a new appointment system in October 2005, which resulted in immediate, additional interviewing capacity at post, according to consular officials. However, reported wait times in New Delhi had risen above 90 days by February 2006 (see table 2).

¹⁰GAO-04-371.

Table 2: Maximum Reported Wait Time in Days for Temporary Business and Tourism Visa Interview Appointments at Posts in India, September 2005 through February 2006

Post	September	October	November	December	January	February
India						
Calcutta	111	96	101	94	94	86
Chennai (Madras)	168	121	122	84	123	136
Mumbai (Bombay)	79	Not reported	70	127	134	154
New Delhi	140	9	24	40	74	91

Source: Department of State.

At posts in China, Consular Affairs indicated that improvements in facilities and staff increases have helped to lessen wait times for interviews. However, consular officials have acknowledged that demand for visas at posts in China is likely to rise and continue to affect wait times in the future. Table 3 shows recent wait times for visa appointments in China.

Table 3: Maximum Reported Wait Time in Days for Temporary Business and Tourism Visa Interview Appointments at Posts in China, September 2005 through February 2006

Post	September	October	November	December	January	February
China						
Beijing	36	21	25	34	26	18
Guangzhou	49	30	17	18	Not reported	1
Shanghai	58	28	30	36	33	19
Shenyang	35	12	2	7	6	8

Source: Department of State.

Officials, Groups Have Noted Impact of Visa Delays on U.S. Scientific and Business Interests

Although we have not attempted to measure the impact of the time it takes to adjudicate a visa, we reported in February 2004 that consular officials and representatives of several higher education, scientific, and governmental organizations reported that visa delays could be detrimental to the scientific interests of the United States. Although these officials and representatives provided numerous individual examples of the

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consequences of visa delays, they were unable to measure the total impact of such lengthy waits. For example, in September 2003, Department of Energy officials in Moscow explained that former Soviet Union scientists have found it extremely difficult to travel to the United States to participate in U.S. government-sponsored conferences and exchanges that are critical to nonproliferation efforts. Business groups have also expressed concern about the impact of visa delays. For example, officials from the American Chamber of Commerce and other industry executives have testified numerous times in recent years about the problem of delayed entry for foreign nationals traveling to the United States for legitimate business purposes. In addition, on June 2, 2004, a coalition of eight industry associations published a study estimating that U.S. companies suffered losses totaling \$30 billion from July 2002 to March 2004 due to delays and denials in the processing of business visas.¹¹ Beijing's Deputy Chief of Mission and consular officials at the embassy and consulates in China also stated that visa delays could have a negative impact on student and scholar exchanges.

Several Factors Contribute to Wait Times for Visas

Visa delays are a longstanding problem. However, since September 2001, several factors have exacerbated wait times for visas. First, changes to visa policies and procedures have resulted in additional workload for consular officers. Second, while not reaching pre-2001 levels, visa application volume has increased in recent years. Third, many posts face facility constraints, which limit the extent to which posts can increase visa processing. Finally, staffing shortfalls also affect the length of time that applicants must wait for a visa.

Visa Policy and Procedural Changes Have Increased Consular Workload

Since the September 11 attacks, Congress, State, and DHS have initiated a series of changes to policies and procedures designed to enhance border security. These changes

¹¹The Santangelo Group, *Do Visa Delays Hurt U.S. Business?* (Washington, D.C.: June 2, 2004).

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have added to the complexity of consular officers' workload and, in turn, exacerbated State's resource constraints. These changes include the following:

- Consular officers must interview virtually all visa applicants; prior to August 2003, they could routinely waive interviews.
- Since October 2004, consular officers are required to scan foreign nationals' right and left index fingers and clear the fingerprints through the DHS Automated Biometric Identification System before an applicant can receive a visa.¹²
- Some responsibilities previously delegated to Foreign Service nationals¹³ and consular associates¹⁴ have been transferred to consular officers. For example, consular associates are no longer authorized to adjudicate visas.
- As previously mentioned, some applicants have faced additional delays due to various special security checks, or Security Advisory Opinions. For example, foreign science students and scholars, who may pose a threat to our national security by illegally transferring sensitive technology, may be subject to security checks known as Visas Mantis. In the spring of 2003, it took an average of 67 days for Visas Mantis checks to be processed and for State to notify consular posts of

¹²The 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, FBI 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).

¹³Foreign Service national employees are non-U.S. citizens employed at a U.S. Foreign Service post by a U.S. government agency.

¹⁴Consular associates are U.S. citizens and relatives of U.S. government direct-hire employees overseas who, following successful completion of the required Basic Consular Course, are hired by the Consular Section at their post. Beginning in fiscal year 2002, State began a 3-year transition to remove adjudication functions from consular associates and provide additional consular officers.

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the results. Since then, State and other agencies have taken actions which have reduced delays to about 15 days for these checks.¹⁵

In addition, on July 13, 2005, the Secretary of Homeland Security announced that the U.S. government had adopted a 10-print standard for biometric collection for visas. In January 2006, the director of the U.S. Visitor and Immigrant Status Indicator Technology program¹⁶ 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. In February 2006, State reported that it plans to complete pilot testing and procurement of the 10-print equipment to ensure that all visa-issuing posts have collection capability by the end of fiscal year 2007. Requiring applicants to submit 10-prints could add more time to the applicant's interview and potentially delay visa processing.

To help mitigate the adverse impact of these policy and procedural changes on wait times, State has taken actions to help maintain the right balance between promoting security and facilitating travel. For example, while we have not assessed the impact of these actions, all overseas posts have established procedures to expedite the processing of business visas and are working closely with local American Chambers of Commerce in more than 100 countries to expedite the visa process for bona fide business travelers. In July 2005, State also established a Business Visa Center to facilitate visa application procedures for U.S. businesses in conjunction with upcoming travel or events.

Regarding foreign students, in February 2006, State announced that it has extended the length of time foreign students may be issued student visas, which will allow some students to apply up to 120 days before their academic program start date (as compared

¹⁵GAO, *Border Security: Streamlined Visas Mantis Program Has Lowered Burden on Foreign Science Students and Scholars, but Further Refinements Needed*, GAO-05-198 (Washington, D.C.: Feb. 18, 2005).

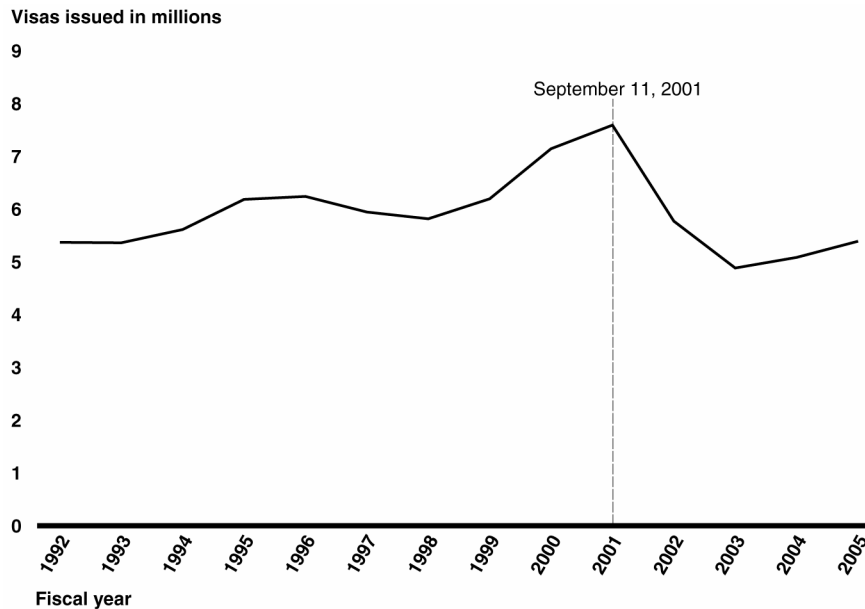
¹⁶US-VISIT is a government wide program to collect, maintain, and share information on foreign nationals and better control and monitor the entry, visa status, and exit of visitors. Under the program, most foreign visitors are required to submit to fingerprint scans of their right and left index finger and have a digital photograph taken upon arrival at U.S. ports of entry. As a complement to US-VISIT, State implemented the Biometric Visa Program at all visa-issuing overseas consulates on October 26, 2004. See Section 303 of the Enhanced Border Security and Visa Entry Reform Act of 2002, P.L. 107-173.

to 90 days under previous regulations).¹⁷ According to State, U.S. embassies and consulates also have established special, expedited visa interviews for prospective foreign students.

Increasing Visa Demand Strains Consular Resources

While not returning to levels prior to the September 11 attacks, visa issuance rates increased in fiscal years 2004 and 2005, according to State’s data (see fig. 1). Should application volume continue to increase, State has acknowledged that additional management actions will be necessary to ensure that visa applications are processed in a timely manner.

Figure 1: Worldwide Visa Issuance Volume, Fiscal Years 1992 through 2005



Source: Department of State.

Note: According to State, the data for fiscal year 2005 are preliminary as of November 23, 2005, and are subject to change.

In the future, we believe that increased global trade and economic growth will likely result in increased demand for visas, particularly in certain countries.

¹⁷These changes apply only to initial-entry students.

Facilities Constraints Limit State's Options for Addressing Visa Delays

Embassy facilities at some posts limit the number of visa applications that are processed each day and make it difficult to keep up with visa demand. In our September 2005 report, we noted that many visa chiefs we interviewed reported problems with their facilities. For example, at 14 of the 25 posts covered in our survey, consular officials rated their workspace as below average, and 40 percent reported that applicants' waiting rooms were below average. In addition, due to overcrowded waiting rooms at four of the eight posts we visited, we observed visa applicants waiting for their interviews outside or in adjacent hallways. Moreover, a limited number of security guards and screening devices, as well as limited physical space, often create bottlenecks at the facilities' security checkpoints. In March 2006, we observed visa facilities in Paris, France, and noted that there are insufficient adjudicating windows to meet visa demand. A senior consular official acknowledged that many consular facilities are located in run-down buildings with insufficient adjudicating windows and waiting rooms. In fiscal year 2003, Congress directed the Overseas Building Operations Bureau to begin a 3-year Consular Workspace Improvement Initiative to improve the overall working environment for consular officers.¹⁸ In fiscal years 2003 and 2004, State obligated \$10.2 million to 79 workspace improvement projects at 68 posts. However, according to a senior consular official, these funds are being used to provide temporary solutions at posts that may require a new embassy as part of State's multibillion-dollar embassy construction program. It may take years before some posts' facilities needs are fully addressed.

To have sufficient resources to manage the demand for visas and minimize the time applicants must wait, State may need to consider establishing new visa-issuing posts. Indeed, in its 2005 inspection of the Embassy in New Delhi, for example, the Office of the Inspector General stated that State should establish a permanent consulate in Hyderabad, India, by no later than 2008 in light of the need for expanded visa processing facilities due to increased application volume. In March 2006, the President announced

¹⁸See House Conference Report 108-10, attached to P.L. 108-7, Consolidated Appropriations Resolution, 2003.

that the United States would open a new consulate; however, it is unclear when this may happen.

Staffing Shortfalls Impact the Effectiveness of Visa Operations

In September 2005, we reported that State faced staffing shortfalls in consular positions—a key factor affecting the effectiveness of the visa process and the length of time applicants must wait for visas. As of April 30, 2005, we found that 26 percent of midlevel consular positions were either vacant or filled by an entry-level officer.¹⁹ In addition, almost three-quarters of the vacant positions were at the FS-03 level—midlevel officers who generally supervise entry-level staff. Consular officials attribute this shortfall to low hiring levels prior to the Diplomatic Readiness Initiative²⁰ and the necessary expansion of entry-level positions to accommodate increasing workload requirements after September 11, 2001. We believe experienced supervision at visa-issuing posts is important to avoiding visa delays. For example, experienced officers may provide guidance to entry-level officers on ways to expedite visa processing, including advising staff on when special security checks are required.

During our February 2005 visits to Riyadh and Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, and Cairo, Egypt, we observed that the consular sections were staffed with entry-level officers on their first assignment with no permanent midlevel visa chief to provide supervision and guidance. Although these posts had other mid- or seniorlevel consular officers, their availability on visa issues was limited because of their additional responsibilities. For example, the head of the visa section in Jeddah was responsible for managing the entire section, as well as services for American citizens due to a midlevel vacancy in that

¹⁹Foreign 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 at grades 6 through 4 are classified as junior officers; 3 through 1 are midlevel officers. In addition, members of the senior Foreign Service are senior officers. In this testimony, we refer to them as entry-level, midlevel, and senior-level officers.

²⁰In fiscal year 2002, State launched the Diplomatic Readiness Initiative—a 3-year effort to ensure global diplomatic readiness—through which State reported that it hired 834 Foreign Service officers. In addition, the Intelligence Reform and Terrorism Prevention Act of 2004 authorized the hiring of an additional 150 consular officers per year for fiscal years 2006 through 2009. See P.L. 108-458 § 7203.

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position. At the time of our visit, the Riyadh Embassy did not have a midlevel visa chief. Similarly, in Cairo, there was no permanent midlevel supervisor between the winter of 2004 and the summer of 2005, and Consular Affairs used five temporary staff on a rotating basis during this period to serve in this capacity. Entry-level officers we spoke with stated that due to the constant turnover, the temporary supervisors were unable to assist them adequately. At the U.S. consulate in Jeddah, entry-level officers expressed concern about the lack of a midlevel supervisor. More recently, during a February 2006 visits to posts in Nigeria and China, we found similar consular vacancies. For example, first tour, entry-level officers in Chengdu and Shenyang, China, are filling midlevel consular positions.

We have reported on numerous occasions that factors such as staffing shortages have contributed to long wait times for visas at some posts. Since 2002, State has received funding to address these shortfalls. Through the Diplomatic Readiness Initiative and other sources, State increased the number of Foreign Service officer consular positions by 364, from 1,037 in fiscal year 2002 to 1,401 in fiscal year 2005. However, while we have not studied this issue, the disparity in wait times among posts may indicate the need to reallocate positions to address the growing consular demand and long wait times at some posts.

In the event of staffing shortfalls, State has mechanisms for requesting increased staff resources. For example, if the Consular Affairs Bureau identifies a need for additional staff in headquarters or overseas, it may request that the Human Resources Bureau establish new positions. In addition, posts can also describe their needs for additional positions through their consular package—a report submitted annually to the Consular Affairs Bureau that details workload statistics and staffing requirements, among other things. For example, in December 2004, during the course of our work, the consular section in Riyadh reported to Washington that there was an immediate need to create a midlevel visa chief position at post, and consular officials worked with human resource officials to create this position, which, according to State officials, would be filled by summer 2005.

State Has Not Assessed Overall Consular Resource Needs

State's current assignment process does not guarantee that all authorized positions will be filled, particularly at hardship posts. Historically, State has rarely directed its employees to serve in locations for which they have not bid on a position, including hardship posts or locations of strategic importance to the United States, due to concerns that such staff may be more apt to have poor morale or be less productive.²¹ Due to State's decision to not force assignments, along with the limited amount of midlevel officers available to apply for them,²² important positions may remain vacant.

According to a deputy assistant secretary for human resources, Consular Affairs can prioritize those positions that require immediate staffing to ensure that officers are assigned to fill critical staffing gaps. For example, Consular Affairs could choose not to advertise certain positions of lesser priority during an annual assignment cycle. However, senior Consular Affairs officials acknowledged that they rarely do this. According to these officials, Consular Affairs does not have direct control over the filling of all consular positions and can often face resistance from regional bureaus and chiefs of mission overseas who do not want vacancies at their posts. Thus, as we have previously reported, certain high-priority positions may not be filled if Foreign Service officers do not bid on them.

In commenting on a draft of our September 2005 report, State disagreed with our recommendation that it prepare a comprehensive plan to address vulnerabilities in consular staffing. State argued that it already had such a plan. Moreover, State claimed that it appreciates that priority positions must be filled worldwide based on the relative

²¹State defines hardship posts as those locations where the U.S. government provides differential pay incentives—an additional 5 percent to 25 percent of base salary depending on the severity or difficulty of the conditions—to encourage employees to bid on assignments to these posts and to compensate them for the hardships they encounter. See GAO, *State Department: Staffing Shortfalls and Ineffective Assignment System Compromise Diplomatic Readiness at Hardship Posts*, GAO-02-626 (Washington, D.C.: June 18, 2002).

²²The assignment process begins when Foreign Service employees who are eligible to be transferred from their current assignment each year receive a list of instructions and upcoming vacancies for which they may compete. Staff then must submit a list of those positions for which they want to be considered.

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strategic importance of posts and positions. While State argued that every visa consular officer is serving a strategic function, the department identified one post, Embassy Baghdad, as a clear example of a priority post. Further, State acknowledged that it has fewer midlevel consular officers than it needs. We continue to believe it is incumbent on the department to conduct a worldwide analysis to identify high-priority posts and positions, such as supervisory consular positions in posts with high-risk applicant pools or those with high workloads and long wait times for applicant interviews. Although State noted that it anticipated addressing this shortage of midlevel consular officers, it did not indicate when that gap would be filled.

On January 18, 2006, the Secretary of State announced the department's plan to restructure overseas and domestic staffing. This plan aims to shift U.S. diplomatic personnel from European posts and headquarters offices to posts in Africa, South Asia, the Middle East, and elsewhere. While we have not conducted a comprehensive review of this initiative, only midlevel political, economic, and public diplomacy officers, and not consular officers, would comprise the initial realignment of 100 positions, according to State officials.

In February 2006, consular officials told us that, since our report, they concluded a review of consular position grades to ensure that they reflect the work requirements for each consular position. Based on this analysis, consular officials recommended that 47 positions be upgraded—from an entry- to midlevel position, for example—to reconcile the management structures of posts that have undergone rapid growth. However, State's bidding and assignment process does not guarantee that the positions of highest priority will always be filled with qualified officers. Therefore, a further assessment is needed to ensure that State has determined its staffing requirements and placed the right people in the right posts with the necessary skill levels.

Conclusions

The visa process presents a balance between facilitating legitimate travel and identifying those who might harm the United States. State, in coordination with other agencies, has made substantial improvements to the visa process to strengthen it as a national security tool. However, given the large responsibility placed on consular officers, particularly entry-level officers, it is critical to provide consular posts with the resources necessary for them to be effective. Indeed, extensive delays for visa interview appointments point to the need for State to perform a rigorous assessment of staffing requirements to achieve its goal of having the right people with the right skills in the right places.

Mr. Chairman, this concludes my prepared statement. I will be happy to answer any questions you or Members of the Committee may have.

Contact and Staff Acknowledgments

For questions regarding this testimony, please call Jess T. Ford, (202) 512-4128 or fordj@gao.gov. Individuals making key contributions to this statement include John Brummet, Assistant Director, and Kathryn Bernet, Eugene Beye, Joseph Carney, and Jane Kim.

Appendix I: Related GAO Products

Border Security: Strengthened Visa Process Would Benefit From Improvements in Staffing and Information Sharing. GAO-05-859. September 13, 2005.

Border Security: Actions Needed to Strengthen Management of Department of Homeland Security's Visa Security Program. GAO-05-801. July 29, 2005.

Border Security: Streamlined Visas Mantis Program Has Lowered Burden on Foreign Science Students and Scholars, but Further Refinements Needed. GAO-05-198. February 18, 2005.

Border Security: State Department Rollout of Biometric Visas on Schedule, but Guidance Is Lagging. GAO-04-1001. September 9, 2004.

Border Security: Additional Actions Needed to Eliminate Weaknesses in the Visa Revocation Process. GAO-04-795. July 13, 2004.

Visa Operations at U.S. Posts in Canada. GAO-04-708R. May 18, 2004.

Border Security: Improvements Needed to Reduce Time Taken to Adjudicate Visas for Science Students and Scholars. GAO-04-371. February 25, 2004.

State Department: Targets for Hiring, Filling Vacancies Overseas Being Met but Gaps Remain in Hard-to-Learn Languages. GAO-04-139. November 19, 2003.

Border Security: New Policies and Procedures Are Needed to Fill Gaps in the Visa Revocation Process. GAO-03-798. June 18, 2003.

Border Security: Implications of Eliminating the Visa Waiver Program. GAO-03-38. November 22, 2002.

Technology Assessment: Using Biometrics for Border Security. GAO-03-174. November 15, 2002.

Border Security: Visa Process Should Be Strengthened as an Antiterrorism Tool. GAO-03-132NI. October 21, 2002.

State Department: Staffing Shortfalls and Ineffective Assignment System Compromise Diplomatic Readiness at Hardship Posts. GAO-02-626. June 18, 2002.

State Department: Tourist Visa Processing Backlogs Persist and U.S. Consulates. GAO/NSIAD-98-69. March 13, 1998.

State Department: Backlogs of Tourist Visas at U.S. Consulates. GAO/NSIAD-92-185. April 30, 1992.