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Briefing with Consular Affairs Acting Deputy Assistant Secretary for Visa Services Julie M. Stufft on the Current Status of Immigrant Visa Processing at Embassies and Consulates

SPECIAL BRIEFING

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VIA TELECONFERENCE

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MR PRICE: Good morning, everyone, and thanks for joining us for this briefing to discuss the current status of immigrant visa processing at our embassies and consulates around the world, especially given the recent rescission of Presidential Proclamation 10014. To help us explain the nuances of the current situation, we have joining us today Acting Deputy Assistant Secretary for Visa Services Julie Stufft. Just a reminder the contents of this briefing are embargoed until the conclusion of the call, but it will be on the record after that.

So without further ado, I will turn it over to Acting Deputy Assistant Secretary Stufft.

MS STUFFT: Thank you so much, Ned, and good morning, everyone. I'm really pleased to be

here to brief you on where we are in the State Department's efforts to process immigrant visa cases during this challenging period and to reduce the current backlog of those cases.

I want to first outline three important principles that underpin our work on this. First, I want to acknowledge that petitioners and applicants who are going through the immigrant visa process are much more than just statistics to us. We do acknowledge the stress and hardships borne by petitioners and applicants both due to reduced capacity to adjudicate visas during the pandemic and the various restrictions on visa issuance as well as the COVID-related limitations on their travel. No less important to us, of course, is the health and safety of our personnel and our applicants who come into our consular sections abroad. This is our highest priority during the pandemic.

And finally, we understand the President's very strong message, as laid out in his initial actions on immigration, in particular Executive Order 14012 on Restoring Faith in Our Legal Immigration Systems. The State Department is committed to do everything we can to resolve the backlogs and complete the visa process as efficiently as possible within the process designed to secure our nation's borders.

Let me tell you a little bit about where we are in the current status of immigrant visa processing. Last week's rescission of Presidential Proclamation 10014 means that there are no general restrictions remaining on issuing immigrant visas. However, many immigrant visa applicants are subject to presidential proclamations remaining in place that restrict issuance of visas, including for those who have been in certain countries during the preceding 14 days before entry or attempted entry to the United States. There are, of course, exceptions to these restrictions for spouses and children of U.S. citizens and legal permanent residents.

While Presidential Proclamation 10014 is no longer in effect, there are still restrictions in place on visa issuance and entry into the United States for individuals physically present in those countries, which are China, Iran, Brazil, UK, Ireland, South Africa, and the 26 countries of the Schengen Area.

You may have also seen the announcement that the Secretary of State granted a blanket exception for individuals in possession of valid FY2020 diversity visas who were subject to those geographic restrictions so that they can travel to the United States before their visas imminently expire, which would end their opportunity to immigrate.

And of course, we are still in the midst of this global pandemic, which has had a dramatic impact on our visa processing operations. I want to give you some background on the scope of those operations.

Before COVID-19, the department issued approximately 10 million visas a year. Just over half a million, 500,000 of those, were immigrant visas while the rest were shorter-term, nonimmigrant visas. The pandemic, though, has severely constrained us in two ways: It's drastically decreased the number of people we can safely move through our facilities overseas; and just like the majority of workplaces in the United States, it has also reduced the number of staff we can safely have in the office at the same time.

The department has instructed our embassies and consulates overseas to follow federal government-wide requirements based on CDC protocols in terms of masking, hygiene, physical distancing, other measures to keep applicants and our personnel as safe as possible. As you can imagine, the guidance differs based on the location of the post and how well the pandemic is contained in that location. I don't know if any of you have visited a visa waiting room in one of our embassies or consulates overseas. They vary according to location, of course, but in many places, even most places, they were built to hold hundreds of people at a time so that we could serve thousands of people in any given day.

In this era of social distancing, we've had to reduce the number of people we can allow into our waiting rooms, which also reduces the number of people who we can safely interview, of course, in a day. We generally must conduct immigrant visa interviews in person, and we are also required to collect fingerprints. Again, these are key actions we take to protect national security. And of course, we must adhere also to local host government restrictions on activities.

So given these challenges, we're taking three key steps to address the situation.

First, we've prioritized the processing of immigrant visas, full stop, at every post. As there is capacity, these will be the first visas adjudicated. Among those, we will continue to prioritize the processing of immigrant visas for spouses and children of U.S. citizens, including fiance(e) visas not subject to regional restrictions.

Second, we're constantly seeking creative ways to increase the number of immigrant visa appointments that we can offer safely. A number of our posts have taken various steps to do

appointments that we can offer safely. A number of our posts have taken various steps to do

this. And given that our overseas physical spaces are quite different, many of these solutions, of course, are context-specific. One embassy, though, has outfitted alternative spaces within the embassy complex to create physical distance – physically distanced workspaces to process more applications. Other embassies and consulates are cross-training personnel who may typically work on other types of visas so that they can process immigrant visas as well. As we collect and share these best practices, we'll find new ways, we hope, to serve as many applicants as we can safely.

I do want to emphasize that we are committed to transparently sharing the current status of our worldwide visa operations. By way of statistics, in January 2020 there were about 75,000 immigrant visa cases pending at the National Visa Center ready for interviews. Thirteen months later, in February 2021, there were 473,000 – about six to seven times greater. The snapshot gives you an idea of how much longer the line has gotten since the beginning of the pandemic. It's important to note, too, that this number doesn't include the entirety of that queue. It doesn't include cases already at embassies and consulates that have not yet been interviewed or applicants still gathering the necessary documents before they can be interviewed, and also, of course, petitions awaiting USCIS approval.

Our priority in the visa office and at the State Department is reducing the backlog while ensuring the safety of our staff and applicants and protecting national security. We're also committed to being transparent, as I said, about our process. I can't promise you that the numbers will decline month to month. There are many factors that can have an impact, including the progression of the pandemic in countries worldwide. We expect this effort will take time. Our work, like that of everyone, continues to face real and persistent challenges related to the pandemic. What I can promise you is that we're working to serve as many people safely as we can to resolve this backlog.

And with that, I'd be happy to take your question.

MR PRICE: Wonderful. Operator, if you want to offer instructions for asking questions, we'll go to questions from there.

OPERATOR: Very good. We have several in the queue. Once again, it's 1 then 0 to queue up for a question. Repeating the 1-0 command will remove you from the question queue. So 1 then 0

for questions.

MR PRICE: Great. We'll start with the line of Jennifer Hansler.

OPERATOR: Your line is open.

QUESTION: Hi, thanks so much for doing this. I was wondering if you could give us an update on the State Department's review of applicants whose visas were denied under Presidential Proclamations 9645 or 9983 and what the steps the administration might take to amend that could look like. Thank you.

MS STUFFT: Jennifer, thanks so much for the question. For the record, some immigrant visa applicants were refused under 9645 and 9983, the travel ban, were also subject to this Presidential Proclamation 10014, and therefore before would not – last week would not have been able to travel to the United States. But I want to tell you that our consular sections overseas are prioritizing the processing of these cases that were affected by these previous proclamations in their operations, full stop. So the cases are being prioritized if they were previously refused under those proclamations you mentioned. Thanks.

MR PRICE: Next we will go to the line of Ted Hesson.

OPERATOR: And Mr. Hesson, your line is open.

QUESTION: Hello, can you hear me?

MR PRICE: We can.

QUESTION: Oh yes, thank you. Thank you for having the call and good morning. I wanted to just be clear, the policy of prioritizing immigrant visas, is that a shift in current policy? And then what is that going to mean for the processing of nonimmigrant visas? Do you expect longer wait times in that arena?

MS STUFFT: That's a great question. As we look at the backlog and how to resolve it, we do – all of our posts are actually able to process IVs if they're able to process any. So just to give you an example, more than 90 percent of our 136 immigrant visa processing posts are processing at least some immigrant visa services. The remainder of those are able to do just emergency services. But only 43 of 233 nonimmigrant visa processing posts are processing routine

nonimmigrants, with the rest are closed for all but emergency services.

So our posts know – it's not a new thing, this is something that we've given guidance on during the summer – once you've processed or once you have control and are able to assist American citizens in those services that IVs, immigrant visas, are the next priority. Will this come at the expense of nonimmigrant visa interviews? We really have to just – the pandemic is our bottleneck at this point, so we're really focused on making sure that those immigrant visas begin being processed. And we're making appointments for them that were affected under 10014 starting in April.

MR PRICE: Go to the line of Nadia Bilbassy.

OPERATOR: Your line is open.

QUESTION: Thank you very much. Thank you very much for doing this interview. I have two questions. Yesterday President Trump criticized the lifting of the ban on majority-Muslim countries. He said that these countries don't have a security record of verifying people who might have link to extremism or terrorists. Can you tell us what system do you use to verify that?

And second on the prioritization of visas, I'm glad to know that you are putting the K-1, which is the fiance(e) visa, as a priority category. I understand this is a reflection of COVID, but can you tell us when exactly are you planning to start with this? For example, the people who have been put online to be interviewed last year, are they going to start soon? When is the starting date? Thank you so much.

MS STUFFT: Thank you very much, Nadia. We'll take that first question so I can be sure to get you a response that my colleagues have also contributed to.

The – your second point about prioritization though, you're asking about fiance(e)s specifically?

OPERATOR: Nadia, if you can please repeat the 1-0.

MR PRICE: Are you there, Nadia?

MS STUFF: I apologize. I can just answer. I think that's what she was saying. I didn't realize – okay. No, those – so those immigrant visa applications are being conducted now. I want to make that very clear, that these posts are actually conducting IV interviews to the extent that they can.

The capacity really is and the health and safety of the applicants and the personnel are the piece that we really need to know for each post, but the interviews are being conducted, appointments are being made, and if – and there's a long queue of applicants waiting, of course, and they're being processed in the order that they've been waiting.

MR PRICE: Let's go to the line of Michael Lipin with VOA.

OPERATOR: Thank you. Your line's open.

QUESTION: Yes, hi, can you hear me?

MR PRICE: We can.

MS STUFFT: Yes.

QUESTION: Great, thank you. After President Biden revoked the travel ban on January 20th, there was a note saying that there's a review period underway to see how visa issuances and applications can be sort of expedited. I wanted to see, regarding the rescission on the ban on Iranian nationals, whether the Trump administration is considering lifting any of the ongoing existing bans against specific groups of Iranians, such as family members of senior Iranian Government officials, people with links to the IRGC, and also students seeking to study nuclear and energy-related subjects in the U.S.

MS STUFFT: Thank you very much for that. I would refer you to the White House for any updates on presidential proclamations on travel.

MR PRICE: We'll go to the line of Lara Jakes.

OPERATOR: One moment for Lara's line to be opened. Please, go ahead, Lara.

QUESTION: Hello. I'm just wondering – and maybe this is because I don't know the differences between all of the EOs and proclamations that have been declared – but when we're talking about reopening or prioritizing immigrant visas, I'm wondering if there's any kind of special section or special prioritization for refugee visas, or if that is just generally accepted as an immigrant visa.

MS STUFFT: That is a different category. Allow me to take that question so we can get back to you and talk to some colleagues who handle refugee operations.

MR PRICE: We'll go to Mouhamed Al-Ahmed.

OPERATOR: One moment for Mouhamed's line.

MR PRICE: It sounds like he may have dropped out of the queue.

OPERATOR: Okay.

QUESTION: If that's the case, we'll go to Michelle Hackman.

OPERATOR: Michelle, your line is open.

QUESTION: Hi, everyone. Thanks for doing this. I'm just wondering if you can address – you mentioned that you will continue not to process immigrant visas for people subject to the COVID ban (inaudible) Schengen ban.

I'm wondering if you can address why, because those bans are structured not as sort of bans on nationals of countries, but of – if they've been present there in the previous 14 days. And I know some folks with non-immigrant visas that are not – that are – that were not subject to other bans were able to go to places like Turkey or Mexico for two weeks before entering the United States lawfully.

MS STUFFT: There certainly is the opportunity – because you're right, those are based on presence, not citizenship. So if there is capacities in other posts, the situation that you lay out is possible. We definitely advise people to check with other embassies and the consulates to find out if there is capacity in those places. Of course, in the – in both the NIV and the IV context, they would have to get into the line that exists at that post for processing, but yes, it's possible. Thanks.

MR PRICE: Great, and we'll take a final question from Ben Marks.

OPERATOR: Mr. Marks, your line is open.

QUESTION: Thank you for doing today's briefing. I'd just like to ask, back in September of 2020, the Trump administration proposed new rules for S, J, and I visas to put fixed periods of stay. I'm particularly interested in the I visas. Are those proposals still being processed or did the Biden administration do away with them?

MS STUFFT: Thanks for that question. Please allow me to take that so that we can confer here for you.

MR PRICE: All right. Well, thank you very much, Acting Deputy Assistant Secretary Stufft. Thanks, everyone, for joining this call. Just a reminder it was on the record and the embargo is now lifted, and we'll talk to you soon.

MS STUFFT: Thank you, everyone.

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