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U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE

STATEMENT

OF

IAN G. BROWNLEE

PRINCIPAL DEPUTY ASSISTANT SECRETARY, BUREAU OF CONSULAR AFFAIRS

BEFORE THE

**HOUSE COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS, SUBCOMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT
AND INVESTIGATIONS**

HEARING ON

**REPATRIATIONS AND IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON STATE DEPARTMENT
CONSULAR PROGRAMS**

JULY 21, 2020

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Chairman Castro, Ranking Member Zeldin, and other Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today. For the past six months, the Bureau of Consular Affairs (CA) has been working around the clock to inform U.S. travelers of the risks related to the novel coronavirus, to assist U.S. citizens stranded abroad, to repatriate U.S. citizens back to the United States, and to leverage all available capabilities to help contain the spread of this outbreak.

I would like to thank all your offices as we worked together to repatriate thousands of your constituents. This has been a whole-of-government effort. We have coordinated with the CDC, DHS, DOT, and Congress to bring home over 110,000 U.S. citizens and Lawful Permanent Residents (LPRs) worldwide. Throughout this outbreak we provided first daily, then twice weekly briefings to both the House and Senate to keep you updated on our progress in helping your constituents overseas. Thank you for the additional appropriations and legislative authorities you provided in recent supplementals supporting our ability to continue our work. Without that assistance, we would not be able to continue helping U.S. citizens and Lawful Permanent Residents overseas.

To help manage the changing workload and support our staff overseas, the Department of State established a Repatriation Task Force, including sub-units focused on congressional inquiries and cruise ships. Volunteers from across the Department, as well as those employees who returned to the United States on authorized and ordered departure, staffed these task forces around the clock. At our posts overseas, officers who normally adjudicated visas shifted to American Citizens Services (ACS) work, allowing the Department to focus resources on our number one priority overseas: providing assistance to U.S. citizens.

In February, every overseas post created COVID-19-specific information pages on their public-facing websites to provide information on local conditions. We issued global travel advisories in March advising U.S. citizens to avoid international travel due to the global impact of COVID-19. Overseas posts disseminated messages to all registered U.S. citizens encouraging them to return to the United States via any commercially available option and continued to send frequent messages advertising both U.S. government-organized and commercial repatriation flights.

At the onset of the pandemic, Mission China repatriated over 1,000 U.S. citizens from Wuhan via U.S. government charter flights. Embassy Tokyo supported passengers onboard the Diamond Princess cruise ship, securing charter flights to evacuate more than 300 U.S. citizens. Our team in South Africa coordinated with the South African government to secure permission for nearly 400 U.S. citizen semester at sea students to disembark their ship and return to the United States on commercial flights before the nationwide lockdown closed all airports. These are but a few examples of the extraordinary work our posts accomplished under extremely difficult conditions. Throughout the pandemic overseas posts have continued to offer other emergency services to U.S. citizens, including issuing emergency passports for repatriation flights and travel authorization letters to help U.S. citizens pass police checkpoints to get to airports.

We continue to work with overseas posts to identify and assist U.S. citizens and LPRs who encounter difficulties securing a means of departure. As of June 30, 2020, 8,500 U.S. citizens and LPRs continue to express an interest in returning to the United States, but that number includes varying degrees of urgency, and we are confident most of this demand can be met by the increasing number of commercially available flights. Direct U.S. government charter

flights wound down as scheduled options increased. In cases where there are limited or no options for regular scheduled flights, we first attempt to facilitate unscheduled commercial flights. Only then do we recommend U.S. government charter flights as necessary. Thank you for continuing to highlight the cases of constituents who have reached out to you for assistance. We stand ready to assist in any way possible.

On March 20, 2020, the Department temporarily suspended routine visa processing, and we significantly reduced passport operations the same month. These dual actions were taken for the health and safety of our employees and customers. Steep declines in passport and visa fee revenue caused by COVID-19's effect on international travel and tourism have also severely impacted our budget.

The CARES Act provided necessary fiscal flexibility to allow us to continue providing vital consular support to U.S. citizens overseas. The Administration is reviewing additional funding needs and is monitoring the situation closely. As you know, decreasing revenue threatens our ability to maintain the same level of consular assistance to those U.S. citizens in need.

We are projecting more than a 50 percent drop in visa fee revenue and similarly dramatic declines in passport fee revenue due to COVID-19 with total projected losses of over \$1.4 billion dollars for this fiscal year. We also foresee a continued strain on fee revenue throughout the next fiscal year. Thanks to the temporary expenditure authority provided in the CARES Act, we have used the carry forward balances from certain fee revenue to maintain consular operations this fiscal year. However, we are on track to substantially deplete balances in those accounts by the end of the fiscal year.

As I've noted previously, most of the State Department's consular funding comes from fees collected from visa applicants, and our current fee authorities allow us to use a portion of these fees to cover the costs of providing essential services to U.S. citizens abroad. CA's fee-for-service model relies on a stable flow of visa and passport applicants to fund those activities and extraordinary activities such as repatriations.

The pandemic severely disrupted consular fee revenue. Our normal income is \$3.5 billion. Relative to FY 2019, we expect a drop in revenue of more than \$1.4 billion in FY 2020 and a comparable revenue loss in FY 2021. To continue offering emergency and routine services to U.S. citizens overseas, including overseas voting assistance in this election year, we need additional authority such as that requested in the FY 2021 Budget to better achieve full cost recovery and maintain continuity of operations for these essential services until the anticipated recovery of demand, currently projected for FY 2023. Specifically regarding U.S. citizen services, the Administration's FY 2021 Budget proposed allocating U.S. citizen services costs to security surcharges applied to certain visas.

The Department continues to provide services to millions of U.S. citizens abroad, including assisting the 83,000 U.S. citizen babies born abroad, the 15,000 being held on criminal charges, and the 11,000 U.S. citizens who die overseas each year. We are also helping foreigners adjust to the travel restrictions that are now in place. We authorized overseas posts to begin to resume certain routine visa services, depending on individual posts' Diplomacy Strong Phase and local conditions. We have continued to adjudicate emergency and mission-critical visas throughout the pandemic, including those with a national security nexus, healthcare workers, and H-2A agricultural workers.

We are constantly revising our internal procedures, and we continue to work closely with our Public Affairs sections to educate the global audience on Presidential Proclamations and changing visa guidelines. Domestically, Passport Services has moved to mission critical teams at all agencies and centers. Twelve passport agencies and centers are at Phase I and five agencies are at Phase II. Our services both domestically and abroad are essential, and we have maintained continuity of operations at reduced levels throughout the pandemic.

We remain committed to protecting the health and welfare of U.S. citizens overseas and are actively working with governments and international partners to achieve this goal in this crisis.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I look forward to answering your questions and those of other members of the Subcommittee.

My colleague, Deputy Assistant Secretary Karin King, will talk more about how we have we have assisted U.S. citizens abroad during the global pandemic and how we will continue to do so in the future.