



DEPARTMENT OF STATE
WRITTEN STATEMENT
OF
RENA BITTER
ASSISTANT SECRETARY OF STATE
BUREAU OF CONSULAR AFFAIRS
BEFORE THE
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SUBCOMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND ACCOUNTABILITY
HEARING
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Chairman Mast, Ranking Member Crow, and other esteemed members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to discuss the work of the State Department's Bureau of Consular Affairs and to express my appreciation for the support we receive from Members of Congress and staff for our mission. Of all the State Department's bureaus, the Bureau of Consular Affairs has a unique nexus with our colleagues in the legislative branch. We are the State Department bureau responsible for providing public-facing and customer-centric services for the American people, and as such we consider your constituents to be our constituents.

The public servants performing consular work operate in more than 240 overseas posts and 29 domestic passport agencies and centers. These dedicated staff are focused on several top priorities that serve and protect our people and country. I would like to highlight four of those priorities today as a baseline for our discussion.

Priority: Safety and Security of U.S. Citizens Overseas

Our first priority has remained the same since the earliest days of our Republic: to protect the lives and serve the interests of U.S. citizens abroad.

Last month, Under Secretary of State Victoria Nuland detailed before this Committee our most recent efforts to assist U.S. citizens impacted by the violence in Sudan. Through this effort, and in close coordination with our allies and partners, we evacuated more than 2,000 U.S. citizens and their family members, along with U.S. lawful permanent residents, locally employed staff, and nationals from allied and partner countries. This was a complex and very successful multinational effort under the most difficult circumstances, and a high-profile illustration of the lengths our consular officers and local staff go to serve Americans overseas.

Across the globe, we serve our fellow citizens during some of their most important moments – births, adoptions, medical emergencies, deaths, arrests, and disasters. Thousands of U.S. citizens are arrested overseas each year, and consular officers help these detained citizens by ensuring they

receive adequate medical care and fair treatment under foreign country standards and by facilitating communication between the citizen and their family. Consistent with the Levinson Act, Embassies and Consulates overseas continuously review all U.S. citizen arrest cases for indicators of wrongfulness and work with our offices in Washington to make these determinations when warranted.

Priority: Maintaining Record Productivity in the Face of Unprecedented Passport and Visa Demand.

Demand for both U.S. passports and visas to the United States are at all-time highs. At the same time, due to the historic work of the Bureau of Consular Affairs, right now more people than ever before have the ability to travel to and from the United States. Forty-six percent of Americans have passports, up from 30 percent in 2008 – and 5 percent in 1990. On the inbound travel side, in addition to the citizens of more than 40 visa waiver countries, more than 49 million still-valid visitor visas and border crossing cards are currently held by potential travelers to the United States who are free to visit this country. In fact, more foreign visitors have the ability to travel to the United States today than at any time in our history. These numbers are only growing, and the Bureau of Consular Affairs is meeting the demand.

In Fiscal Year 2022, we issued a record 22 million passport books and cards. We are on track to surpass that achievement in Fiscal Year 2023. Our focus is on ensuring all qualified U.S. citizen applicants can be travel-ready, and for millions of Americans to hold the most modern, secure, and durable U.S. passport book – the Next Generation Passport, which was fully rolled out in 2022. While our previous electronic passports (ePassports) are secure, the Next Generation Passport book uses new technologies to produce a more robust passport with enhanced security features, such as a polycarbonate data page, laser-engraved personalization, and updated artwork.

The Bureau and State Department have taken extraordinary measures to meet the current U.S. passport demand: we instituted an “all hands on deck” posture, and since January 1, we have authorized between 30,000 and 40,000 overtime hours per month for direct-hire personnel at our passport

agencies and centers. In addition to our agency and center staff, who have been working full-time in the office since the summer of 2020, we have recruited volunteers, including State Department retirees, and assigned new Foreign Service Officers to work in Washington D.C.'s Satellite Office. As a result, we issued 5.4 percent more passports and cards in the first five months of this fiscal year compared the same period in FY2022's record-breaking year. While we increased our adjudicative staff -- 10 percent in the last year alone, with more in the hiring pipeline -- our estimates show it will require many more passport specialist positions to manage the unprecedented increase in workload. In our FY2024 Consular and Border Security Programs budget request, you will note the most significant increase is to our salaries budget, where almost \$100 million will allow us to fill vacancies left over from the pandemic and add nearly 300 new positions throughout the Bureau of Consular Affairs.

Our current routine passport processing time – 10 to 13 weeks – is an accurate reflection of current demand levels and is a timeframe we publicize widely. We anticipate no increase to current processing timeframes through the end of the fiscal year, allowing Americans to plan accordingly for their international travel. We are committed to keeping our customers, and you, informed.

In parallel, we are also experiencing pent-up demand for U.S. visas resulting from the near shutdown of international travel during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. In some ways a distant memory, U.S. and foreign restrictions constrained our processing levels for two years or more before those restrictions were lifted. The pandemic and contemporaneous budget shortfalls left many posts significantly understaffed. Thanks to expanded expenditure authorities along with supplemental funding provided by the Congress, we were able to lift hiring freezes that had been in place until late 2021. It takes time to onboard and train new staff for these national security positions and, working with other bureaus in the Department, we are leveraging those authorities to increase substantially the number of consular adjudicator positions filled in FY2023 and to continue that trend into FY2024, budget permitting.

Since the United States re-opened for travel, the State Department has streamlined visa processing and dedicated more resources to reducing wait times, consistent with national security. These efforts include surging staff overseas to adjudicate visa applications, working with DHS to exercise interview waiver authorities for low-risk visa applicants, and expanding the development and use of IT solutions to take advantage of capacity wherever it exists.

I want to emphasize we undertook these efforts without any compromise to national security or our obligations to review appropriately all visa applications. As a result of these efforts and tremendous productivity from our teams overseas, the Department has issued 22 percent more nonimmigrant visas over the same period in pre-pandemic 2019. While appointment wait times for visitor visa interviews remain higher than we would like in a few high-demand countries, we have reduced them substantially in recent months, and we are issuing more visitor visas in these high-demand countries now than we did before the pandemic. Fiscal year to date, we have issued more than one million additional nonimmigrant visas in our top four visa processing missions alone than during the same period in FY 2019 – a 57 percent increase.

Priority: Modernizing Consular Systems and Technology.

While we remain focused on addressing passport and visa backlogs, we are also planning for a more agile, optimized future of consular processing. For example, our goal is that before the end of the year, eligible Americans will be able to renew their passports entirely online, a major milestone in fulfillment of our federal customer service goals. To that end, we concluded a successful pilot of the Online Passport Renewal program in March, which allowed us to take lessons learned and refine the system for the upcoming public launch.

We cannot make these enhancements without sustained and significant investments in our IT infrastructure and staff. The commitment and

responsibility of the Bureau of Consular Affairs is to maintain and implement the highest cybersecurity standards and to recruit and retain the staff capable of doing so.

To achieve this, the Consular and Border Security Programs FY2024 request of \$4.5 billion is the largest request we have ever made. It will allow us to respond to the highest demand for passport services in history and the pent-up demand for visa adjudications, while supporting our efforts to modernize complex IT systems that were built more than 20 years ago.

We continue to need expanded expenditure authorities for consular fees along the lines of those granted at the height of the pandemic. These authorities allow us to direct resources where they need to go to respond to emerging challenges and unexpected fluctuations in demand. We have been able to use fees from surging passport demand to cover U.S. citizens services costs, not only for complex crises such as in Sudan, but also for more routine crises facing the traveling public, such as administering the repatriation loan program for destitute U.S. citizens stranded overseas. They also allow us to manage unexpected fluctuations in demand, including by using the fees to hire additional officers for surging workloads.

Priority: The People of Consular Affairs

The final priority I highlight when I visit our teams throughout the bureau is our people themselves. The 13,000 foreign affairs professionals in the Bureau of Consular Affairs are the truest public servants I have ever known. They are present for our constituents' best and worst moments – births, deaths, adoptions, illness, and destitution. They serve America and Americans directly, and often do so in incredibly difficult circumstances. They worked in person both domestically and overseas during the pandemic to keep serving the public, and the death toll among our consular colleagues was significant. Whatever you see in world news each day – earthquakes, plane crashes, collapsed buildings – you can rest assured our consular colleagues are there to assist impacted U.S. citizens.

This includes, crucially, our locally-employed colleagues around the world, who are not only present to assist Americans in these crises, but also often are living through them personally. They are the institutional knowledge and lifeblood of our operations and we appreciate the attention of Members of Congress, including on this committee, to finding a legislative fix to allow those staff with qualifying, faithful service to immigrate to the United States without delay.

This country has had officials overseas protecting Americans since before it had a constitution. In fact, this responsibility is the reason we have missions overseas, and it is our most important shared responsibility. It is an honor to lead this bureau and to engage further in discussion with you on the issues that affect us and the public we all serve.

