

From the Assistant Secretary's Desk

Please visit our improved, more user friendly website at <http://travel.state.gov>

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U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Consular Affairs

Message from the Assistant Secretary

Welcome to the Bureau of Consular Affairs. Along with the launch of our redesigned website, I am pleased to have this opportunity to introduce our new quarterly consular newsletter, *From the Assistant Secretary's Desk*. Our hope is to keep visitors to our website informed of new developments and updated about on-going improvements.

Consular officers are committed to ensuring the safety and security of American citizens abroad

and facilitating travel by legitimate international visitors. The mission of Consular Affairs does not stop at the borders of the United States. Domestically and abroad we strive to maintain the highest standards in providing those Consular services you rely on.

Since I was confirmed as Assistant Secretary of State for Consular Affairs in November 2002, I have had the opportunity to travel both abroad and domestically to review our operations and hear from peo-



ple who use our services. I continue to be interested in your feedback and welcome comments you might have at AskCA@state.gov.

American Citizen Services

The Bureau of Consular Affairs is dedicated to protecting the interests of American citizens abroad. We continue to work to improve the services provided to U.S. citizens traveling or residing in other countries.

Our website has been redesigned with a new look, enhanced features, and is more user-friendly. In addition to the redesign and improved organizational structure of the website itself, the Bureau of Consular Affairs is introducing the Internet-Based Registration System (IBRS). We have long encouraged U.S. citizens abroad to register with a U.S. embassy or consulate to ensure that we can provide them with the most current information per-

taining to their personal safety and security. The Internet Based Registration System will enable U.S. citizens to register themselves and members of their household, multiple destinations, and their emergency contact information via the Internet. Registering with the system will continue to enable the Department of State to provide to the traveler regularly updated Warden information from the U.S. embassies and consulates and other information customized to the individual's travel agenda and itinerary.

All U.S. citizens traveling or residing abroad will have the ability to register under three separate reg-

istration categories: short-term, long-term and organizational. Short-term registration is for those travelers who will be on temporary visits to a country or countries. Long-term registration is for those travelers who are resident in a foreign country or persons making extended trips to a country or countries. Long-term registrants will be enrolled in the applicable U.S. embassies and consulates Warden systems, which allow us to reach you in case of emergency. Organizational registration is for groups, such as those in the travel and business industries, that wish to receive updated consular information when it becomes available.

The Department of State and

its overseas embassies and consulates request this information only to inform and assist Americans traveling or residing in foreign countries. All personal information received by our overseas embassies and consulates pursuant to the registration process, whether in person or otherwise, is safeguarded against unauthorized disclosure by the Privacy Act of 1974. The personal information ob-

Internet-Based Registration System

<https://travelregistration.state.gov/ibrs>

tained in the registration process is not used to track the movements of individual American citizens. To register or for more information, please visit <https://travelregistration.state.gov/ibrs>.

During my official travel, I have also made an effort to discuss with my foreign government hosts,

the very important issue of U.S. citizen children abducted or wrongfully retained abroad. This issue is one of the most heart wrenching and difficult Consular Affairs deals with. Thankfully, we are seeing some success. In 2003 we returned 188 abducted or wrongfully retained children to their American homes from 61 countries. Consular Affairs recently launched a newsletter for the parents of abducted and wrongfully retained U.S. citizen children called *For the Parents*. *For the Parents* newsletter may be accessed at: http://travel.state.gov/for_the_parents.html.

Visas

Secretary of State Powell has championed the concept of "Secure Borders, Open Doors," to facilitate travel by legitimate international visitors. We value our international visitors and have taken several steps aimed at improving security while continuing to support transparent procedures that allow the timely travel of visa holders. We have worked extremely hard at improving our technology, our communications, and process to make visa screening both thorough and efficient. We have also invested significant time and money in our systems in order to move visa applicants more quickly through the interagency clearance process.

One of our goals is to regain travelers' confidence that they will be safe and, most of all, welcome. While I will be the first to admit that changes to visa processing procedures in 2002 led to lengthy delays for some visa applicants, I am concerned that there is a perception that it is harder to obtain a visa or that security checks are delaying many applicants. In fact, in the 2003 fiscal year, only 2.2 percent of all visa applicants required interagency security reviews, and we are now completing 80% of those reviews within three weeks.

Of particular concern to me is that some international students who would like to study in the United States

are deterred by the lingering misperception that it is now harder to qualify for a visa. Though procedural changes were necessary, approval rates for student visas have remained steady and laws on qualifying for a visa have not changed. To ensure timely processing, I instructed our visa-adjudicating embassies and consulates both this summer and last summer to provide expedited interviews for students. We know the vast majority of visa applicants are well-intentioned, but we work diligently to guarantee that the few persons who might pose a security threat will be deterred or detected in the application process. We will continue to work with other agencies of the U.S. government on procedures that are transparent and predictable, so that legitimate travel will be facilitated.

To comply with the Congressionally mandated deadline to collect biometrics from all visa applicants by October 26, 2004, we have begun collecting two digital fingerprints from visa applicants at many of our embassies and consulates. The majority of U.S. embassies and consulates around the world are already scanning the fingers of visa applicants and all 211 visa-adjudicating embassies and consu-

lates will do so by October 26 of this year. This is a quick, inkless, and non-intrusive procedure.

I want to personally extend an invitation to those persons considering travel, work or study in the United States to pursue doing so. While we have taken steps to improve the security of the visa process, I do not believe those measures should deter legitimate travelers.

From January to May of 2004, visa applications have increased by 12.6% and issuances have increased by 16.1% compared to the same period of the previous year. During that time, issuance of student visas has also increased : 28.9% for J-1 visas and 5.6% for F-1 visas.

Useful Websites:

The Department of State: <http://www.state.gov>

The Bureau of Consular Affairs website: <http://travel.state.gov>

To access the Internet-Based Registration System: <http://travelregistration.state.gov/ibrs/>

For the Parents Newsletter: http://travel.state.gov/for_the_parents.html



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