

EXAMINING THE FISCAL YEAR 2024 BUREAU OF CONSULAR AFFAIRS BUDGET

HEARING BEFORE THE SUBCOMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND ACCOUNTABILITY OF THE COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES ONE HUNDRED EIGHTEENTH CONGRESS

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EXAMINING THE FISCAL YEAR 2024 BUREAU OF CONSULAR AFFAIRS BUDGET

Wednesday, June 7, 2023

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES,
SUBCOMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND
ACCOUNTABILITY,
COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS,
Washington, DC

The committee met, pursuant to notice, at 1:59 p.m., in room 2154, Rayburn House Office Building, Hon. Brian Mast (chairman of the subcommittee) presiding.

Mr. MAST [presiding]. The Subcommittee on Oversight and Accountability will come to order.

For the purpose of this hearing, we are starting a minute early. It makes me feel good that we are on Army time; we are starting at least a little bit early, right. It is better than some.

The purpose of this hearing is to examine the Bureau of Consular Affairs' Fiscal Year 2024 budget.

I now recognize myself for an opening statement.

As I said, the Subcommittee on Oversight and Accountability will be discussing the State Department's Bureau of Consular Affairs.

I want to begin by thanking our witness, Ms. Rena Bitter, for being here today, as well as thank the thousands of Consular Affairs employees who work at regional passport agencies across the country and in embassies across the globe. With few exceptions, these men and women are committed to getting the job done.

And when one of my constituents applies for a passport or reaches out when they run into trouble abroad, in my experience it sets in motion a giant, bureaucratic machine in many cases, and it is clear that that machine in many cases does not fire on all cylinders. And for the purpose of today's hearing, for myself, I want to understand where those failures are and why that takes place.

It is important because, for many Americans, the Bureau of Consular Affairs is the only division of the State Department that they will ever interact with in their lives. Whether it is renewing a passport or dealing with an emergency abroad, we owe to those that we represent to make sure that this Bureau is getting things right, no matter how big or how small the issue. And if an American's only experience with the State Department is a month's-long delay on their passport application, then that is going to be the only thing that they remember about the Department of State.

I come from a Special Operations background, and we had a saying that what makes Special Operations special is being able to do the most basic things at the highest possible level. And I'm not trying to diminish the importance of passports. They are, arguably, however, the most common function of the Department of State.

And last year, in reference to that, almost 18 million passport applications were received. That is a high number. It is very common. And yet, it is clear that Consular Affairs isn't getting every one of them done in a timely fashion and at the highest possible level. On average, passport wait times are somewhere around three to 4 months, and that is a number that is increasing, from what I understand.

Visa wait times are even worse in many cases. Certain posts, it is not taking weeks, or even months. It is taking years. I have dealt with this personally myself in trying to get people abroad those meetings.

People are able to call their Representative and usually get a passport renewed in a few days, but companies are also able to charge hundreds, sometimes thousands, of dollars and get it handled in a guaranteed 24 hours. An online system was developed for renewals, by which most accounts, it got nearly half a million people to want to participate in, but that beta version crashed, leaving perhaps half a million people in limbo with that process.

Here is what my constituents in some cases have had to say about their experiences in this process:

"So, I just said goodbye to my family. I've been in tears all morning. Very sad to see them all excited about the trip that I am supposed to be going on with them. But the State Department has, effectively, made our families prisoners of the United States."

These were a couple of quotes that people gave us after they were unable to get their passports when they needed them. And I'm sure that my constituents would agree when I say that I would rather Consular Affairs' efforts be spent on getting passports processed in a timely manner versus implementing gender-neutral passports.

This change, as something else, effectively, downgrades the gold standard of identification by allowing a person to not be identified as a man or a woman. Moreover, it is likely that this causes confusion for those "X" individuals who travel to foreign nations that do not recognize their pronouns, let alone the "X" next to their name on a U.S. Government document. That is another problem. State needs to make sure that it is doing the basic things at the highest possible level, or the big things will fail miserably.

And I understand that you came in in the middle of this situation, but the crisis of evacuating Americans from a collapsing Afghanistan went incredibly wrong. And I would love to ask your predecessor about much of what went on in that process.

But, while August 2021 was far from a basic situation, it is clear that Consular Affairs operations were not performed at that time at the highest possible level. We have many questions about the withdrawal. What warnings were sent to American citizens and legal permanent residents in the weeks and days leading up to the pullout of Afghanistan, the pullout of our troops? What was Consular Affairs' roles in the contingency planning efforts? Why did not we have an accurate count of how many Americans were in Afghanistan? Why, to this day, are we failing so many of the Special Immigrant Visa holders who served alongside us, who were completely abandoned and left for dead?

These aren't new questions. I asked the Special Envoy to Afghanistan in May 2021 about Special Immigrant Visas, and he could not even tell me at that time how many Afghans were eligible for the program. So, why, then, did the State Department not devote major resources over the next months to answering that question and formulating a response plan before August 2021?

Additionally, it is my understanding that Consular Affairs is involved anytime an American is arrested abroad. And when it is suspected that these arrests are based on shaky circumstances, it is the job of Consular Affairs to investigate. Why, then, following the disastrous and deadly withdrawal from Afghanistan, was there an attempt to not classify some Americans as wrongful detainees or hostages?

It flies in the face of something that I know my colleague and I here very much believe in, which is no man left behind. And it disregards the United States Government's most absolute, fundamental job—the safety of United States citizens.

State needs to make sure that it is doing the basic functions at the highest possible level, whether it is something like a passport or the national embarrassment that the cost the lives of 13 servicemembers. Americans are frustrated. We owe them answers. We do not owe them excuses.

And again, I want to say that I give credit where credit is due. I know that Consular Affairs staff were back working in person far sooner than most Federal Government employees were in any other agency. But three and a half years past the onset of the pandemic, I know very few people that accept COVID-19 as an excuse to this point, and I certainly do not as well.

I am confident that we all share a common goal—strengthening America's position on the global stage and making sure the basics are things that get done right. In order to achieve that goal, I know it is important for all of us to work together.

In that, I am now going to yield to Ranking Member Crow for his opening remarks.

Mr. CROW. Thank you, Chairman Mast, for calling this hearing and the opportunity to have this discussion today.

You know, I have always loved the saying that "Hard things are hard." Right? It seems simple, and yet, it is true, and it is a great reminder that the things that we talk about on this committee, the charge of this committee, is to have fact-based, rational discussions about very challenging work that people do around the world.

That is why I'm looking forward to this discussion with you, Ms. Bitter, because I want to hear the story about the challenges that your people face.

Every organization can do things better. Every organization can find ways of improving, of being more efficient, particularly when that organization faces crisis after crisis and contingency that forces you to evolve your model and change with the rapidly changing world. And I look forward to hearing about that.

There are a couple of things that I know are true. I know that your organization, in particular, is complicated. You are spread out around the entire world in different cultures, in different countries, many of which are conflict zones. And you are dealing with people in their worst possible circumstances, when emotions are at the

highest, when people are not ready for what is to come. And I look forward to hearing about that.

The other thing I know is true is that your organization has a unique structure; that you are a fee-for-a-service. So, during the pandemic, when your revenue plummeted and Congress had to backfill that, you were able to maintain a lot of your employees, but at the same time the extreme, extreme charge of travel post-pandemic—including me, by the way; I wanted to travel, too, and get out of my basement and get out of my sweatpants and travel, so does every other American—wasn't met with a commensurate increase in resources. And there was also a lag between those fees and your ability to onboard folks to meet that.

So, I look forward to hearing how you have met that unique challenge and some of the innovation you have done to find efficiencies, but also some of the resources you might need from Congress to meet some of those unmet needs.

The other thing I know is true is that the chairman and I share a history in Afghanistan and are committed to Afghanistan. And we, certainly, know that things did not go well in many respects, and we continue to find ways to keep our promises to our allies and our partners.

But what I also know is that the men and women of the State Department went through tremendous sacrifice, volunteering to serve in a situation that was rapidly devolving—at great risk to themselves—to help their friends, too.

And you do not have to serve in uniform to have a monopoly on a commitment to our Afghan friends. And I know in my many, many discussions with my friends at the State Department and the Diplomatic Corps that this was horrific for them, too. And they, at great personal expense and sacrifice, tried to make it right and still try to make it right. And I look forward to hearing that story.

And finally, just a recent example of continued service by the men and women in your charge is Sudan. Again, not a perfect situation, one that not many people saw coming, but able to evacuate thousands of American citizens that have no obligation to register, right? The United States of America is a free and democratic nation. We do not require American citizens to tell the government when and where they are going. That is who we are. We would not do that.

So, it is very hard for you to know who is traveling and who is in a country during a conflict crisis, and I look forward to hearing that story, and how you meet that unique challenge as well.

So, with that, thank you for coming in, and we look forward to the discussion.

And I yield back, Chairman.

Mr. MAST. Very timely. You were much more timely than I was. So, thank you for that.

Other members of the committee are reminded that opening statements may be submitted for the record.

We are pleased to have a distinguished witness before us today on this important topic. The Honorable Rena Bitter is the Assistant Secretary for the Bureau of Consular Affairs at the U.S. Department of State. From 2016 to 2020, she was the U.S. Ambassador to the Lao People's Democratic Republic and has held many senior

Consular Affairs positions, such as Consul General in the Ho Chi Minh City, Consular Chief in Amman, Jordan, and Non-immigrant Visa Chief in London. So, a number of stations.

We thank you for being here today. Your full statement will be made a part of the record, and I will ask you to keep your spoken remarks to 5 minutes.

I now recognize Assistant Secretary Bitter for your opening statement.

**STATEMENT OF RENA BITTER, ASSISTANT SECRETARY,
BUREAU OF CONSULAR AFFAIRS, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE**

Ms. BITTER. Thank you.

Chairman Mast, Ranking Member Crow, and esteemed members of the committee, thank you so much for the opportunity to discuss the work of the State Department's Bureau of Consular Affairs and to express my appreciation for the support that we receive from Members of Congress and from your staffs.

The 13,000 people of the Bureau of Consular Affairs serve your constituents 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, across the United States and across the globe.

Mr. Chairman, last fiscal year, we issued 41,000 visas to temporary agricultural workers to support Florida growers, the U.S. food supply, and State exports.

Ranking Member Crow, in your district, our colleagues at the Colorado Passport Agency oversee a network of 124 acceptance facilities throughout the State for Coloradans to conveniently apply for passports.

Around the world, consular officials are protecting the lives and serving the interests of U.S. citizens and safeguarding our national security. They are present for your constituents' best and worst moments—births, deaths, adoptions, illness. They worked in person, both domestically and overseas, during the pandemic to keep serving the public at great personal peril.

Just last month, I attended a ceremony at the Department to honor Tom Wallis, a consular officer who helped U.S. citizens repatriate from Peru back to the United States during the early days of the pandemic before losing his life to COVID-19. And his name deserves to have a place in the congressional Record.

When I have the opportunity to travel to our 29 passport agencies and centers and more than 240 overseas posts to meet directly with these extraordinary teams, I highlight three key priorities for the Bureau, all of which I look forward to discussing with you further today.

First, the safety and security of U.S. citizens overseas. This is the Bureau and the Department's highest priority. Diplomats have been working to protect the lives and vital interests of U.S. citizens abroad since before the United States had a Constitution. It is our highest and most enduring purpose.

Most recently, in Sudan, we evacuated more than 2,000 U.S. citizens, their family members, along with lawful permanent residents, locally employed staff, and nationals from allied and partner nations in a complex, multinational effort.

Second, we are focused on 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 a all-time high. At the same time, right now, more people than ever before have the ability to travel to and from the United States.

Forty-six percent of Americans today have passports—up from 30 percent in 2008 and just 5 percent in 1990. On the inbound travel side, more than 50 million valid visas are in the hands of foreign travelers. More people can visit the United States today than at any in our history. These numbers are growing, and the Bureau of Consular Affairs is committed to meeting that demand today and into the future, while rigorously safeguard our national security.

While we remain focused on addressing historically high demand for our passport and visa services, we are also planning for a more agile and optimized future. To that end, our third priority is modernizing consular systems and technology. For example, before the end of the year, 5 million Americans will be able to renew their passports entirely online—a major milestone in fulfilling our customer service goals.

We cannot make meaningful progress on these priorities without sustained and significant investments in our IT infrastructure and staff. I'm grateful for Congress' partnership during the darkest days of the pandemic, when our fee-funded Bureau took a sudden 50 percent decline in revenue.

Your appropriation and authorization to use consular revenue more flexibly has been the most important factor on our road to building a Bureau of Consular Affairs for the 21st century. Making these flexible authorities permanent would ensure that we are able to weather any contingency into the future.

So, I thank you again for your continued partnership, and I look forward to our discussion today.

[The prepared statement of Ms. Bitter follows:]



DEPARTMENT OF STATE
WRITTEN STATEMENT
OF
RENA BITTER
ASSISTANT SECRETARY OF STATE
BUREAU OF CONSULAR AFFAIRS
BEFORE THE
UNITED STATES COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS
SUBCOMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND ACCOUNTABILITY
HEARING
ON
JUNE 7, 2023

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.

Mr. MAST. Thank you for your testimony.

I now recognize myself for 5 minutes of questions.

And I want to begin with this: you and I spoke this week. We spoke about an incident that I had—I'm not going to bring that up—but it is layered upon now. In the time since you and I spoke and today, I had other Members of the House of Representatives reach out, knowing that we were having this hearing.

And one Representative, Mrs. McMorris Rodgers, she shared with us one of the emails that she just received, and I'm going to read it to you, but, then, it brings me to some questions that I would like some answers on.

And it starts out, "Good morning." And this is coming from the consular staff. This is coming from a customer service manager. I'm not going to give the name on camera, but you will get a copy of this.

"Do you really think that listing a congressional assistance as the subject is sufficient!"—followed by 10 exclamation points. "That is not a unique name. Please submit inquiries in the format, as we have requested"—this, this, this. "I will be happy to place your inquiries at the bottom of the list if you do not cooperate. This one was delivered today via UPS." Signed this customer service manager.

So, we could go into whether that is appropriate correspondence to come back to this Representative or not. That is a different question for a different time. But what I want to know about is that ability for somebody to place inquiries at the bottom of the queue or the top of the queue, and try to get some understanding of the, essentially, three-tiered system, I would call it, for getting a passport.

You have individuals that are just reaching out on their own, that it may take them three-four months. You have individuals that reach out to their congressional offices—Republican, Democrat, it does not matter—that in most cases I find that we can probably get it done in 48 hours. However, I would not go out so far as to say I could guarantee them 24 hours in most circumstances. And then, you have this third tier of private companies that offer one, two, or 3 days, but, essentially, guaranteeing that somebody can get it in a day for a certain fee.

Can you help explain to me how that is broken up within these consulates for us to have people served that reach out to us or that are getting served directly? And can they put people at the bottom of the list or the top of the list, and by what means and reasons are they doing so?

Ms. BITTER. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

To answer your question in short, of course, that is not an acceptable way for one of our customer service managers to talk to anyone, let alone a Member of Congress. So, I just want you to hear me say that, and you have my apology. And every member of the committee has this apology, and also, Representative McMorris Rodgers. And I will look forward to seeing that correspondence.

Mr. MAST. Very good.

Ms. BITTER. The way that our systems are set up, basically, for the most part, the way prioritization works is first in, first out. We do have a system where you can pay extra for an expedited pass-

port. Right now, regular processing is 10 to 13 weeks and expedited is seven to nine.

As you have pointed out, it is not ideal. We are facing unprecedented passport demand. Last year, we issued 22 million books and cards—

Mr. MAST. I'm going to pause you for a moment, ma'am.

Ms. BITTER. Uh-hum.

Mr. MAST. I understand the numbers. You went over them in your remarks. But I want to understand the inner workings—

Ms. BITTER. Sure.

Mr. MAST [continuing]. Of the Department, more so, specifically, to understand how an outside group can guarantee that, but when somebody reaches out to our offices, we cannot get guarantee that. What is that breakup of the numbers for—if you have 30 consular officers working in an office, are 10 of them working on Members of Congress—28 Members of the House of Representatives from Florida and two Senators—and 10 of them are working on the general list that comes in, and 10 of them are working for the fee-for-service folks? How is that broken down?

Ms. BITTER. It depends on the passport agency. It depends on what is going on. It is a little bit of a hard question to answer, but I'm very happy to give it my best shot.

Mr. MAST. Please do so.

Ms. BITTER. And if you need more detail, I would love to set up a more detailed briefing for you or your team.

So, we have regular processing. We have expedited processing. We also have emergency processing, where we have counter appointments, for people who have true emergencies, in person. Our staff sees 23,000 of these per week. They have expanded those hours there. It is greater than it was pre-pandemic and they are committed to continuing to expand them, as long as we are facing the demand that we are facing, and as long as Americans have emergency needs to travel.

I want to refer back, actually, to our conversation in your office, because you drew my attention to the courier agencies that we also have working. And I wanted to talk a little bit about that briefly, because I am grateful to you for raising it. And it is something that I looked into after we left.

The courier service was in place prior to the pandemic, and we reinstituted it in December. What I want to assure you of is that, while our agencies do work with courier companies to set aside a certain number of appointments, there is no guarantee. It is negotiated with a passport agency.

We monitor it closely to make sure, in particular, that it is not taking away any capacity from counter appointments, from emergency appointments, in particular, or from any of the other work that we are trying to do.

So, I want to assure you that one thing that you raised was one thing that we do not monitor. We do monitor the couriers themselves and we do monitor to ensure that they are not taking up appointments that should go to your constituents, to regular Americans.

You had raised the issue of high fees, and we do not monitor that. And I'm grateful to you for raising it, because I think it is something that we are going to look into.

Mr. MAST. My time has expired. I now yield 5 minutes to Ranking Member Crow.

Mr. CROW. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Ambassador Bitter, could you expound a little bit on this idea of how the fee for service plays with your ability to match surges in demand? You mentioned earlier that there is a record number of U.S. passport holders; that that number has just surged tremendously in the last decade, in particular. What are you doing to meet that surge, onboard new employees, and expand the pipeline?

Ms. BITTER. Thank you for asking the question, sir.

And I am going to have to mention the pandemic, even though I agree with Chairman Mast that the time has past for talking about the pandemic. But there is a real relationship between where we are and where we were then.

We are fee-for-service. And so, the fees that we take in are completely related to how much the service that we provide costs the American people. At the pandemic, we lost 50 percent of that overnight. And it is because of our relationships with Congress that we were able to work with you to get an appropriation. We had to freeze our staff, but, thanks to the appropriations, we were not forced to fire people. We were not able to start hiring again until our fees returned.

During that time period, Congress also gave us expanded spending authorities, so that we could move fees more easily between the different parts of our services, so that we could address emerging challenges.

So, when fees began to come back, when international travel resumed in late 2021, we were able to start hiring again. We could hire passport adjudicators because passport fees were coming in. But, thanks to the expanded spending authorities, we were also able to begin hiring overseas visa adjudicators as well. So, we were able to start bringing on more people into overseas positions. We would not have been able to do that before the expanded authorities that you all gave us during the pandemic.

Both on the domestic side and on the overseas side, these are national security positions. Every passport adjudication, every visa adjudication is a national security position. And it does take time to onboard people; to ensure that they have the appropriate clearances; to make sure they are suitable; to train them in many cases in quite difficult languages. So, all of these things take a little bit of time before we are able to get people out in the field.

We were able to start hiring for overseas positions in the beginning of 2022, and people started reaching the field by the summer of 2022. We still have positions overseas vacant.

On the passport side, we have been able over the past year to build our team by 10 percent. We have increased the number of passport adjudicators. We have about that many in the pipeline. And you will see in our foreign ops plan, and also, in our 2024 budget, it is we have notified requests for more staff. We need more staff to address these issues.

And I will say one more thing, if I may, which is we do not want to surge our way out of this. We do not want to insist on people doing overtime. We want to be able, also, to invest in modernized systems and equipment to be able to support these functions.

So, our budget and our ops plan both go, not only to hiring the people that we need to address these issues, but also to making sure that they have appropriate systems and the best modernized systems possible for the 21st century.

Mr. CROW. Yes, so shifting quickly to crisis and contingency operations, I would like a quick note from you on what those look like on the ground. Because a lot of times people will say, "Well, there are 'X' number of American citizens in this conflict zone. Why cannot we get these folks out?" But the reality is many of them are dual nationals. Many of them have family members that they do not want to leave behind. Oftentimes, they do not understand when a crisis reaches a tipping point, and after it reaches that tipping point, then it becomes much harder to get out. People do not want to leave their residents until that moment.

So, can you paint a picture for me as to the complexity of accomplishing those missions?

Ms. BITTER. Yes. Thank you. I appreciate your asking the question.

You have highlighted it and I think the chairman did as well. We do not track American citizens. What we can do—and the most important thing we do—is to provide timely and accurate information, so that they can make the best possible decisions about their own safety and security in traveling overseas.

In crises, we increase our communication with American citizens. We try to inform them with the most accurate information about changing circumstances, about what they may face in any overseas environment. We offer them assistance when it is time. When we are approaching a crisis, we urge Americans to leave. We offer them assistance in leaving. We offer them repatriation loans if we can get them to leave. We offer to assist them with making commercial arrangements. And if circumstances permit and they haven't, in some circumstances we may offer non-commercial options.

But you highlighted the exact challenge. It is very, very difficult. We are asking people who are dual nationals with long residencies in these countries and really deep family relationships that they are unwilling to leave. And making decisions about when and whether to leave is an extraordinarily difficult decision that we are asking people to make.

Thank you for raising that.

Mr. CROW. Thank you. My time has expired.

Mr. MAST. Thank you.

I now recognize Representative Perry for 5 minutes.

Mr. PERRY. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Thank you, Madam Secretary.

Do travel documents that Americans receive from the Federal Government allude in any way to the fact that those traveling presenting those documents must abide by the laws of the countries that they are interested in visiting?

Ms. BITTER. I do not know if the passport does. I'd have to take a look. But, certainly, our travel advice advises them that.

Mr. PERRY. Certainly, your travel advisory does, and I would encourage you to take a look at the passport.

And with that, in February 2022, Brittney Griner was arrested for drug possession in Russia. I do not think there's any dispute about that. Now, we fast forward 10 long months later, and the United States did a one-for-one prisoner swap for Brittney Griner. They traded a well-known arms dealer, Viktor Bout, or kind of called his nickname as the "Merchant of Death," right?

Now, I think everybody here understands that wrongful detention, each case has its own intricacies and a lot of unique issues. However, in that case, the decision that she was wrongly detained was made in a matter of weeks. Yet, we have others locked up overseas where determinations have taken years or, literally, there never is a determination.

Do you have any insight as to why it appears, certainly, to most Americans, that the case of Brittney Griner was rushed? Did it have anything to do with what some would consider celebrity status?

Ms. BITTER. Thank you, Congressman. I appreciate the question.

First, I want to thank Congress. I think what you are referring to, the wrongful detention determinations are made under a law that Congress passed called the Levinson Act.

Mr. PERRY. Right.

Ms. BITTER. And we are grateful for it because it is a tool in our toolkit and we really appreciate Congress' interest in this issue.

We work in lockstep with our Special Presidential Envoy for Hostage Affairs in making these determinations. It starts with, as you have highlighted—and you know this—that it is based on the totality of the circumstances.

For our part in the Bureau of Consular Affairs, where we care about all detainees overseas—there are more than 1700 American citizens detained overseas—and our officers are the ones on the frontline who visit them, who insist on consular access—

Mr. PERRY. But, ma'am, with all due respect, I got all that, but, well, it was 10 long months, but you just named, literally, over a thousand, right? You did not name the thousand, but you characterized over a thousand people wrongfully detained overseas. Yet, in this particular case, it seems like America went way above and beyond the call of duty. And thank goodness they did. We want every single American home, whether or not they have broken the law overseas. We can take care of that here in the United States.

But it, certainly, seems like there is two standards here, and I'm trying to get to whether there was a particular standard that was afforded to Ms. Griner as a priority to win political points for social justice warriors, or otherwise. We traded the "Merchant of Death."

And I think it is important that everybody understands that this guy found his way around sanctions in Angola, Liberia, Sierra Leone, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Yugoslav. He was involved in the Yugoslav wars in the nineties; in the 2000's, once again, involved in selling arms to the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Kenya, Lebanon, Tajikistan, Libya, and Tripoli. In the case

of the Kenyan arms, they were used to attack our allies in Israel. This guy is a dangerous guy.

And is it your opinion, or would it be your professional opinion, that we did not just incentivize every enemy of the United States to hold captive American citizens that wish to exchange that person for some high-value target that the United States is lawfully detaining?

Ms. BITTER. Again, I think I may have misspoken. If I did, I apologize. I referred to 1700 Americans detained overseas, not wrongfully detained.

With respect to the Brittney Griner case, as I mentioned, we work with our colleagues in the Special Presidential Envoy for Hostage—

Mr. PERRY. OK. So, how did the special circumstances occur? Why did they occur?

Ms. BITTER. Again, we work in lockstep with them.

Mr. PERRY. I know you do, but what happened?

Ms. BITTER. And I would like to defer to them to ensure that you get the best possible answer.

Mr. PERRY. You have no knowledge of these proceedings whatsoever?

Ms. BITTER. The proceedings of?

Mr. PERRY. Regarding Brittney Griner's release and trade for the "Merchant of Death," while other detainees, wrongfully detained or otherwise, remain rotting in foreign prisons around the globe?

Ms. BITTER. One, and I'm going to explain to you—I'm going to give you a little bit of a bigger picture, so I can be clear about why I would like to defer to my colleague in SPEHA, which is because, once again, under the Levinson Act, somebody is determined to be wrongfully detained. Then, the lead for the case switches and becomes SPEHA in that instance.

So, while we work very closely and in lockstep, as I say, I want to defer to them to answer your questions in greater detail.

Mr. PERRY. I thank the chairman. With all due respect, that was not an answer, but I appreciate it, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. MAST. The chair now recognizes Mr. Kim for 5 minutes.

Mr. KIM. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you for coming on out here and talking with us.

I wanted to lift up some of the work that you all are doing and dive in a little deeper, get an understanding of the dynamics there. You mentioned about 13,000 staff that is in the Consular Affairs. Do you know offhand sort of some breakdown of how many of them are Foreign Service, Civil Service? Or does that number also include locally employed staff?

Ms. BITTER. It does not include locally employed staff, but I do not have the breakdown in front of me.

Mr. KIM. OK. Well, look, we can get some followup on that front, but what we are talking about here is, if you are saying that there are going to be Foreign Service and Civil Service that combine for that number, you know, my understanding is that the State Department is at around, I think around 26,000 total for Foreign Service and Civil Service. So, you are saying that the Consular Affairs is taking up, potentially, a massive portion of what the staff of the State Department would be, is that correct?

Ms. BITTER. We are a big Bureau.

Mr. KIM. Yes. You talked a lot about this already today, about the fee for service, how you are funded through that capacity. I wanted to ask, does Consular Affairs get back 100 percent of the fees that it is being provided for the services that they are rendering? Or does some of that money get diverted to other parts of the State Department?

Ms. BITTER. Thanks for asking.

Depending on the fees, some of it goes to the Treasury, and a very, very large—well, not a large, excuse me—but a percentage of our budget does go to the platform of the State Department to be able to support the services that we provide.

Mr. KIM. So, in terms of what goes to other parts of the State Department, is that your determination? Or who is determining where these go and how much of this funding goes back to the Bureau that is actually providing the services here?

Ms. BITTER. We work with our partner bureaus, we call them on service-level agreements. And if I may, just for a big picture—

Mr. KIM. Uh-hum.

Ms. BITTER [continuing]. We are fee-funded, but we are part of the State Department.

Mr. KIM. Yes.

Ms. BITTER. And so, if I had one plea for Congress, it would be to fund the State Department, because the platform that they provide is the platform that we sit on. So, IT services—

Mr. KIM. Yes.

Ms. BITTER [continuing]. They are a partner bureau. Hiring, clearing people, contracts, training—all of these parts of the Department are hardworking colleagues in the Department.

Mr. KIM. I agree with that wholeheartedly.

Ms. BITTER. Yes.

Mr. KIM. And as someone who worked there before, you know, I'm somebody that absolutely will be fighting here in this committee, and elsewhere, for increased funding writ large. I guess what I'm just trying to get at is for us to be thinking about, as a whole, are we properly prioritizing Consular Affairs and the work that you are doing within the broader context of the Department?

As you mentioned, the staffing is a enormous percentage of what the State Department is. The funding, you are right, there is a platform in the State Department as a whole, but you are the only portion of it that has this other arrangement in terms of not having that guaranteed in that kind of capacity.

And so, I guess I'm not going to necessarily put you on the spot here, but it is for all of us here on this committee, and more broadly, to kind of be thinking about that. I will be honest with you, when I think about what part of the State Department has the most amount of direct interaction with the American people, would you say that it is probably your Bureau?

Ms. BITTER. I would say 100 percent it is our Bureau, and—

Mr. KIM. And in terms of which part of the State Department has the most direct interactions with foreign nationals and businesses that are thinking about coming to the United States, is it your Bureau?

Ms. BITTER. Yes, absolutely.

Mr. KIM. So, you know, I just kind of want to hone in here. I have been really focused on this with my work. You know, when I think about what my constituents are thinking about, you know, the 70 or 80 thousand people that I represent, when they are thinking of the State Department, they are often thinking about your Bureau and whether or not they can get that passport in time, or whether or not their family member can get a visa to come for their wedding.

And I say that because it is important for us to do the big-picture work, the diplomacy and the multilateralism out there, but we also just need to really crush it when it comes to the work that is directly related to the American people. And so, I would just ask us to really think about that. That is a first-order effort. It is something I did not really think about when I was at the State Department, but we have to earn the trust and respect of the American people. We have to think about what it is that they are interacting; how do we make that as frictionless as possible?

So, for instance, I would love for us to think through and work with the State Department. Is a bureau the appropriate level? Should we have an Under Secretary, for instance, that is focused on this, make this a bigger pillar of the State Department? Should we think about ways in which we can assure that funding—make sure you can have control over the funding, especially the funding that is because of the services that you are providing? Those are the things that I would love for us to dive in deeper. I would love to keep working with you on it.

My time is expired. So, I will yield back to the chair, but let's keep this conversation going.

Thank you.

Ms. BITTER. Thank you very much.

Mr. MAST. Thank you.

I now recognize Mr. Waltz for 5 minutes.

Mr. WALTZ. Thank you. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Madam Secretary, I'm the co-chair of the U.S. India Caucus. I think it is one of the most consequential economic, diplomatic, security relationships we have in the 21st century.

However, one of the consistent and painful complaints that I receive from Indian Americans, and from our Indian colleagues, is the wait time, despite the fact that in India I believe you have the second or third most Consular Affairs officers. And the data that I have is the average waiting period in Mumbai, India was 587 calendar days.

And with our trade over \$150 billion, with the consequential relationship, with Prime Minister Modi coming for a State dinner and visit just this month, what are we doing to fix this? I mean, have you looked at any India-specific policy fast tracks or issues? Have you looked at even perhaps a Quad umbrella or bubble for some of these critical business relationships.

In my State, just in Florida, it is estimated that \$28 billion in trade, conferences, events, and visitors—that is 250,000 jobs—are affected by these delays. So, what are we doing to fix it?

Ms. BITTER. Thank you very much.

If I may, I will address India first, and then, if I could zoom out a little bit and talk about—

Mr. WALTZ. Good. Very briefly. I have two more questions I want to get to.

Ms. BITTER. Oh, got it.

Mr. WALTZ. Great.

Ms. BITTER. Thank you very much.

So, with respect to India, there has been quite a bit of pent-up demand. I just want to highlight that we have, for all of the reasons that you have mentioned, we really have prioritized India pretty significantly.

Mr. WALTZ. At 587 days of delay?

Ms. BITTER. For one category of visa applicants. For virtually every other category of visa applicants, wait times are pre-pandemic levels or below.

Mr. WALTZ. So, what is the category that is 587? Is that B-1, business?

Ms. BITTER. First-time tourist visa applicants.

Mr. WALTZ. OK.

Ms. BITTER. We have opened appointments for Indian applicants at other posts that are dedicated just to Indians to make sure that they are able to get their travel needs met. We surge staff to India. We reduced wait times by about two-thirds at the beginning of the year. And we will continue to focus on it. We are very aware of these issues.

If I may, because you referred to some of the challenges that your constituents were facing, over the course of the—we do have high wait times in some posts for first-time tourist visa applicants. But I want to highlight that this year to date we have issued 22 percent more visas than we issued pre-pandemic the Fiscal Year to date.

And I want to mention that because we are working very, very hard on these issues. We have employed a variety of different—

Mr. WALTZ. Just in the time that I have left, it sounds like you are taking steps. It sounds like they are not moving fast enough, at least to meet the demand. And your Bureau should not be the obstacle. You should be the facilitator. And if you need more resources, you need more authorities, I hope that a year from now we are not still talking about on any category over a year wait time.

I just want to switch to Afghanistan. I know you are not responsible for or you are not the lead for the SIVs, but you are for the P-1/P-2, correct?

Ms. BITTER. Actually, it is the reverse. We are the lead for SIVs, but not for P-1/P-2.

Mr. WALTZ. You are not for the P-1/P-2? My understanding from SIGAR is that—from the Special Inspector General—that the current processing rate to move through all of our allies that are still waiting, that are still in harm's way, that fought and served with us—with me—it will take 18 years to process that many visas. These people are being hunted down by the Taliban right now, as we speak. Despite the President and your boss, the Secretary, lauding this as an outstanding success, it was an absolute disaster and a disgrace.

What are we doing to get through those SIVs faster—

Ms. BITTER. Thank you.

Mr. WALTZ [continuing]. Because they are being hunted and killed right now?

Ms. BITTER. Thank you. I appreciate the question.

And also, thank you for your service. One of the things that makes Afghanistan unique is the number of people, and the number of people on this committee, who served and sacrificed there, and who are deeply engaged and who care.

And I just want to assure you, and everybody on this committee—

Mr. WALTZ. Deeply engaged? Forever scarred by the failures of our own government, frankly.

But, please, tell me what little can we do to fix it or to make it better?

Ms. BITTER. We are deeply committed to this program. And since the inception of the program, 104,000 Afghans and their families, Afghan allies and their families, are living in the United States. And since the end of the evacuation in September, we have issued more than 22,000 visas to our Afghan allies and family members. More than 12,000 of those have been issued just in this fiscal year.

So, we are dedicated—

Mr. WALTZ. But if you look at how long it is going to take to process those that were left behind, they do not have another year or two to hide from the Taliban. And if we had done our job, if you had done—if the State Department had done their job, you would not have veterans groups exhausting their savings, exhausting their kids' 529 plans, getting divorced, committing suicide because of the people we left behind. So, please do not paint a rosy picture on this.

Come to us and tell us what we need—I mean, you are right, you do have our commitment. You have our commitment and the resources and the authorities you need to move faster.

Ms. BITTER. Right.

Mr. WALTZ. So, please come to us and let us know what that is, so that we do not have more dead Afghans that we left behind while waiting on bureaucracy.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I yield my time.

Mr. MAST. I now recognize Mrs. Cherfilus-McCormick for 5 minutes.

Mrs. CHERFILUS-McCORMICK. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Ms. Secretary Bitters, conferences and trade shows support over 225,000 jobs and create over \$28.2 billion in economic impact across Florida each year. They also support countless small businesses throughout the 20th district, nationwide, and in Florida. Unfortunately, international buyers and exhibitors from many countries remain unable to return to the events in the United States due to ongoing visitor visa appointment wait time delays.

Wait times for visitor visa appointments currently exceed 180 days in 70 U.S. embassies and consulates around the world. For example, as of today, 737 days in Mexico City; 630 days in San Paolo, and 600 days in Port-au-Prince, Haiti. With international attendees needing six to 9 months of lead time to come to business events in the United States, we remain closed for businesses to many who would be buyers and exhibitors who not only spend money at these

conferences and trade shows, but also drive demand for restaurants, hotels, and travel.

Beyond its normal operations, what is the Consular Affairs doing to urgently bring down the visitor visa appointments wait times at U.S. outposts in the world?

Ms. BITTER. Thank you for the question. I appreciate it.

One thing I just want to highlight is that, today, more people can travel to the United States today, get on a plane today, than at any other time in our history. That said, we do have long wait times for first-time tourist visa applicants at certain posts. As I was mentioning earlier, we are working enormously hard on that, and we have reduced median wait times globally to about 2 months for first-time tourist visa applicants. But globally, in every other category of visa applicant, wait times are at pre-pandemic level or better.

We have issued 22 percent more visas year to date than we did prior to the pandemic. And, in fact, at our four highest-producing posts, which have the biggest backlogs as well, we have issued 57 percent more visas than we did prior to the pandemic. This is a result of extraordinary pent-up demand, and we are working through it. We are getting more staff to the field.

And I should also highlight, particularly for the kind of events that you are talking about, we have a business visa unit here in Washington. We would love to be able to work with these organizations to be able to make sure that visas aren't an impediment.

Mrs. CHERFILUS-McCORMICK. Well, you talked about the awareness of the issue. Do you have any tangible goals for your businesses that you are trying to meet by the end of the year?

Ms. BITTER. I'm sorry?

Mrs. CHERFILUS-McCORMICK. You said that you have awareness of it. What are your tangible goals for reducing these wait times? Because, as I mentioned, they are all over 500 days. So, do you have any tangible goals by the end of the year that you want to see reduced, especially in the cities that I mentioned—

Ms. BITTER. Sure.

Mrs. CHERFILUS-McCORMICK [continuing]. Mexico City, San Paolo, Port-au-Prince, Haiti.

Ms. BITTER. Uh-hum. So, thank you for asking that.

For some of the places, again, median, we are talking about a 2-month wait time. But there are posts where we have—and you have mentioned them—much longer wait times. Our goal is for everybody, all of our posts, to be below 120 days, and we are working to get there. The more staff we get out in the field, the more we will be able to do that.

Mrs. CHERFILUS-McCORMICK. So, specifically, my question was about the business communities. You said that you are aware of them and you have an office that you are working with. Is there any plan to expedite their visas or to make sure they are reduced?

Ms. BITTER. So, every post in the world has an expedite program where they are able to get in touch with the consular section to be able to ask for an expedited appointment. More than that, if those businesses are in touch with the commercial offices or others in the embassy, we always want to make sure that, for travel that is in

the U.S. Government interest, like important business events, that those people have access to quicker appointments.

Mrs. CHERFILUS-McCORMICK. In January 2012, President Obama issued an Executive Order requiring 80 percent of non-immigrant visa applications were interviewed within 3 weeks after their application was received. When will the U.S. embassies and consulates be able to interview 80 percent of all non-immigrant visa applications within 3 weeks?

Ms. BITTER. Right. Thank you.

We do remember that Executive Order. The circumstances, of course, were quite different.

Mrs. CHERFILUS-McCORMICK. But, for time, I'm just wondering, when will you guys be able to meet that?

Ms. BITTER. Right. As I mentioned, we are looking at trying to get down—for all of our posts again, we are already at 2 months median globally. We would like for most of our posts, if not all, to get to 120 days by the end of the year.

Mrs. CHERFILUS-McCORMICK. Do you have a projection? By the end of the year?

Ms. BITTER. That is what our goal is and we are going to work toward it.

Mrs. CHERFILUS-McCORMICK. Thank you so much, Mr. Chairman. I yield back.

Ms. BITTER. Thank you.

Mr. MAST. Thank you.

The chair now recognizes Mr. Mills for 5 minutes.

Mr. MILLS. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Thank you, Assistant Secretary Bitter.

I wanted to note a couple of things. You talked about—and so did the ranking member, Mr. Crow, for whom I have a tremendous amount of respect and I had served with in Iraq in the same brigade—about timeline tipping points, and many of us not wanting to leave family behind, when they talk about the American citizens trapped in Afghanistan. And you talk about the increasing communication with U.S. personnel and even an offer of assistance in leaving.

I want to play a quick video, if I may, if you could direct your attention here.

[Video played.]

So, I want to tell you what you are looking at right now. Right now, you are looking at an American family who was sitting outside of Abbey Gate, where the U.S. State Department said that we were to go to in order to receive support for us to be able to assist—and I'm using your language—assist in leaving.

Now, this wasn't a family who did not want to leave. This is a family, as you can see, showing their American passports, begging to be able to come inside to have a chance at survival.

Now, I also want to make mention that this is a significant date, August 26th. Do you know where that family is now? They are dead.

Do you find it acceptable that an American family—remember what President Biden said when he asked the question, he said, "If you want to leave Afghanistan, all you have to do is show your blue passport." There is a family showing their blue passports. Do you

find that acceptable that they had no U.S. Consulate representative or State Department personnel to help them? And do you know why that is?

I am going to read the statement from the Marines. On March 8th, we had Marine Sergeant Tyler Vargas-Andrews—from the State Department, Department of State—who said that, “The State Department at HKIA would completely shut down processing of Afghans and Americans every evening and into the morning, leaving ground forces with a nightmare that they did not work in reasonable rotations and very much presented an unwillingness to work in the situations.”

A further member, a platoon sergeant in the Marine Corps stated that, “My biggest gripe”—his biggest gripe, bearing in mind 13 Americans were killed in uniform, some of which were his Marines—his biggest gripe was “that the Department of State personnel, they would come out to do their shift and randomly show up and leave. They were slowing down the entire process, and I couldn’t understand what the thought process was behind this.”

Can you answer why the U.S. Consulate, one, would not work around the clock to ensure Americans were receiving the necessary attention they need, like that family who is dead, to be able to get out of the country, when it is their right, as a blue passport-holding American, to have our government to be able to support them?

Ms. BITTER. Thank you for the opportunity to answer that question.

I’m going to just start by addressing, just reflecting on my Department colleagues who volunteered from all over the globe to go to Kabul to assist their colleagues and to assist American citizens. And I am overwhelmed with admiration for what they did and gratitude——

Mr. MILLS. Ma’am, that’s great, and I appreciate it as well. But I’m also the only Member of Congress who actually conducted rescues myself of Americans out of Afghanistan, who spent 3 years of my life in Afghanistan, 7 years of my life in Iraq. I appreciate service as well. And guess what? I also served with the Department of State.

Ms. BITTER. I honor your service as well, sir, and I honor the service of the Marine who was mistaken when he said there were not consular officers at the gates. Consular officers worked 24 hours, 7 days a week, on a——

Mr. MILLS. Well, ma’am, that was one of the dates right there.

Ms. BITTER. They worked 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, throughout the airport complex, wherever they were needed, side by side with their military colleagues and diplomatic security on all aspects of identifying and facilitating American citizens——

Mr. MILLS. Well, in my last minute, though, you are saying that they were at every single gate. I just showed you video proof of an American family who was trying to leave at the gate that they were text messaged by Task Force Afghanistan, which is a State Department task force. “Meet here and we will show your passport to let you in.” Did you see them getting let in or had anyone assisting them in that effort?

Ms. BITTER. It is really—I think that you are aware of how challenging and complex the situation at the gates was. Our colleagues were there. They were everywhere they needed to be——

Mr. MILLS. So, you are saying that these Marines are lying, right, in their testimony where they are saying that they did not see the consulate officers staying there, and that, to quote him again, he said that they would “leave every evening and come late in the morning.”?

Now, this is from Sergeant Tyler Vargas-Andrews, who is the sniper who could actually have killed the suicide bomber, but wasn’t given any permissible approvals, and is now an amputee and suffers from many other things. So, are you saying that his testimony is false, then, that he is not right and saying that the State Department and consulate officials were at the gates with him?

Ms. BITTER. I’m saying that he is mistaken.

Mr. MILLS. Well, Mr. Chairman, with that, I yield back.

Mr. MAST. The chair now recognizes Ms. Titus for 5 minutes.

Ms. TITUS. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I would like to go back to some of the questions about the visas. I represent Las Vegas. And so, this visa issue is very important to us, not just for visitors, tourists, coming, but also for conventions and planning—and conventions have gotten more international all the time—and how to plan whether you are going to come to a conference or a convention, or you are going to be represented at a trade show. So, this issue is very important to us.

We have got 40 million visitors coming to Las Vegas every year, \$20 billion in wages, \$80 billion in overall economic outputs. So, if this falls apart, people are devastated.

So, I know that we mentioned some of the excess wait times. They have gone up and down in India. But other places that have a big impact on us are Brazil and Mexico. Mexico and Canada are a source of our main visitors. So, if we cannot get from Mexico or from Brazil, it is a serious problem.

So, we are talking about ways to help bring down the backlog. I know that President Obama at his time issued an Executive Order that 80 percent of all temporary visas would be issued in less than 21 days. And that really worked. It brought the high of 114 days down to just 2 days in 2012. Now, unfortunately, the last President Trump did away with that. And I wonder if there are any plans by the State Department or President Biden to put that back in place, or if that would be a good idea. Or if not, what might work? I know it is a goal, but what are some specifics?

Ms. BITTER. First, we think about Las Vegas a lot. We know how important tourism is to Las Vegas. And we visited many recent travel shows that have been held there. And so, we really appreciate how important this is to you and to your constituents.

Again, just to go to the Executive Order, I think, you know, the challenges that were being faced in 2012 are not the challenges that we face in 2022. We are already so productive. We are already processing so many more visas than we did at that time, that what we are looking for is simply more staffing in the field. And we are absolutely getting it out there as quickly as we possibly can, to be able to conduct these visa interviews as quickly as possible.

Again, for every category that does not require an interview, and for every category that is students and others, repeat travelers, our wait times are pre-pandemic or better. And I would also highlight that we have brought wait times for first-time visitor visas down 50 percent since the beginning of the fiscal year. So, we are going to absolutely keep at it, and with your constituents in mind.

And the other thing I want to highlight is that we do have a business visa unit. If you hear of conventions that are taking place, please let us know. I think one of the proudest moments I had in this job was when we got a thank you tweet from the Consumer Electronics Show—

Ms. TITUS. That is a big one.

Ms. BITTER [continuing]. Because I think a third of the attendees there were international.

So, again, this is something we think about a lot. We think about it all the time. And we are excited because, again, more people than ever before are able to travel to the United States right now, and we want to facilitate that and be part of the future.

Ms. TITUS. Well, is there anything that we can do as a committee, or Congress, besides just giving you resources for more staff and equipment? For example, a virtual interview process or any way to help along those lines?

Ms. BITTER. I can tell you one priority, and then, two legislative priorities I would love to quickly talk about.

Ms. TITUS. Please.

Ms. BITTER. One priority is—I spoke briefly about this when Mr. Kim was talking—we are fee-funded, but we are also part of the State Department. So, ensuring that the State Department is fully funded and that the management platform on which we sit is robust and healthy is really important to us—to be able to hire, to be able to execute contracts, training, getting people out into the field. So, that is really important.

And then, we do have two legislative authorities that I would be happy to talk briefly about. One is, one of the things that Congress gave us in the aftermath of the pandemic was expanded spending authorities, which allow us to move fees more flexibly across our global enterprise. Those authorities are year to year, and we would be very grateful if they could be made permanent. Because some of the things that we want to do—making investments in IT and really hiring to meet this demand—we need to be able to plan on a more long-term basis than year to year.

And then, finally, there is a passport fee, the passport application and execution fee, that we were given authority to collect in 2022 and to expend that year. But, in subsequent years, we are allowed to collect it, but not expend it. That money can be used as a source to assist American citizens overseas. Right now, we have to move money around and borrow or steal from visa money to be able to fund some of the unfunded things that we do overseas, like visiting people in prison, for example, and other things.

So, given the fact that 46 percent of Americans now have passports, above 30 percent just 13 years ago, we know those people are going overseas. So, we want to make sure that we have a dedicated source of funding that we can use to assist them if they are in trouble overseas.

And I think I'm out of time. Thank you for letting me get through that.

Ms. TITUS. Thank you.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. MAST. I now recognize Ms. Dean for 5 minutes.

Ms. DEAN. Thank you, Chairman Mast, Ranking Member Crow. And thank you, Ambassador Bitter, for testifying today.

I represent suburban Philadelphia, Montgomery and Berks Counties.

I want to, No. 1, say thank you to members of your team who came and did a passport processing day on a Sunday. I cannot tell you—more than a hundred folks came in and got their passports or renewals processed—I cannot tell you how thankful my constituents were that your team worked so diligently with our. So, thank you for that.

We are all talking about passports and the increase in it. And maybe you can speak to this. And I do not want to belabor the point, but my district staff now has seen an incredible increase in passports, passport-related issues. So far this year, we have worked with about 500 constituents. That is normal, and pre-pandemic, we would have worked with that many in a full year. So, if you could speak to that? What is going on that is driving that?

And I do want to ground this in what the title of the hearing is, which is examining the Fiscal Year 2024 budget request by the Bureau. So, if you could speak to that, and then, I have a second set of questions.

Ms. BITTER. Great. Thank you. I really appreciate it.

Ms. DEAN. Thank you.

Ms. BITTER. First of all, thank you for your kind words for our team. And I realize I have gotten through an hour without talking about how proud we are of our passport teams, in particular, who are extraordinarily hardworking, who have worked incredible amounts of overtime to meet the demand for passports. So, thank you for saying that, and also, for your partnership. Members of Congress and your staffs are the best way that we have to reach the American people and your constituents. So, thank you for that.

Ms. TITUS. Sure.

Ms. BITTER. You highlighted—and it is really true—that what we are facing is truly unprecedented passport demand. And that is creating wait times for passports that are longer than we would like.

I mentioned this before, but it is really worth highlighting. I mean, we produced 22 million passport products last year, and this year we are likely to produce 25 million, which is about a 15 percent increase. So, it is we are really working very hard to keep up.

And because of the trends that we see in the number, the percentage of Americans that have passports, we do not think that this is an anomaly. We think this is a trend. So, we have been hiring and doing our best to bring as many people on as possible. We have increased our team by 10 percent this year with about 10 percent more in the pipeline.

So, what you will see in our 2023 ops plan and in our 2024 budget is where we notified and want to bring on as many new passport adjudicators as we can, but also overseas staff.

Ms. TITUS. Do you have any idea of the number of folks, of staff, you are talking about, whether nationally or overseas?

Ms. BITTER. Sure. It is—I hope that you do not make me do math in public—but it is 177 new passport adjudicators.

Ms. DEAN. OK.

Ms. BITTER. And then, I think it is 285 total.

Ms. TITUS. OK. Thank you.

Ms. BITTER. Don't make me do the math.

Ms. TITUS. No.

Ms. BITTER. Thank you. I appreciate it.

Ms. TITUS. Yes. And finally, in the time remaining, I, too, want to take a look at the SIVs and Afghanistan. What were some of the challenges for the Special Immigrant Visa Program in the leadup and during the evacuation of Afghanistan? And what is the current State of the SIV pipeline?

We are all—I do not care what party, what color; you know, you could be purple—we all care about making sure that those folks are processed as quickly as possible, and we are devastated that so many have not been able to access that. What is the status? What was the challenging coming into it, and what is the status now?

Ms. BITTER. Thank you.

I am going to focus on where we are now, just because I started just as the evacuation started. And so, the challenges that the program faced prior to that, I do not have as much direct knowledge on, although we are very happy to talk to you and your staff separately about it.

But I do kind of want to focus on where the program is today.

Ms. TITUS. Please.

Ms. BITTER. We share your commitment and dedication to this; truly, we do. Since the evacuation ended, we have been able to adjudicate or to issue 22,000 Afghan allies who are now living in the United States. And we have been able to increase our efficiency. Just 12,000—12,000 of that 22,000—is just in this Fiscal Year to date.

So, we are working really hard to be as efficient as possible.

Ms. TITUS. How many are in the pipeline?

Ms. BITTER. I'm going to pause for 1 second. It is a little bit hard to say how many are in the pipeline because the program is still open. The ones that we focus on are ones that are approved for the program. There are several different steps.

The Special Immigrant Visa Program is, at base, an immigrant visa program. And so, the folks who are applying for it have to show that they are qualified for the visa before they can even apply for the visa. And then, once they apply for the visa, which is when we start working with them, they have to meet the same regulatory and the same documentary and the same kinds of requirements that any other immigrant visa applicant has to meet.

And some of these cases are complex. We have a national security responsibility, as well as a facilitation responsibility. But, again, there are a lot of steps that are dependent on the applicant.

Where we are focused—one thing I should also say is, to the extent that we have the authority to streamline the process, we have done so and we are looking for more ways to do so.

But what we are really looking for is, once people are approved for the visa and it is time to apply, that is where we want to do more to just expand our capacity and to create more platforms where we can see more applicants.

Ms. TITUS. OK. I know I have gone way over. I thank you.

Ms. BITTER. Thank you.

Ms. TITUS. I thank you, Mr. Chairman, also. I yield back.

Mr. MAST. The chair now recognizes Mr. Issa for 5 minutes.

Mr. ISSA. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I would like to start off by telling you a story to set the stage for my question. Just less than 3 weeks ago, the Governor of one of our larger States flew in the Governor's plane to Toronto with his staff. He arrived in Toronto. As he prepared to board that flight to Taiwan from Toronto nonstop, one of his staff with a passport with in excess of 5 years left on it was refused because of a technical error—an error caused by your Department, or at least the State Department, that had flagged it, even though it had been repeatedly verified not as missing, as missing.

OK, fine. What can we do about it? It is a valid passport. The person did not get on the plane.

He began talking to the State Department in Toronto—obviously, a key member of the Governor's staff. They said, "There's nothing we can do. It's midnight. It's Saturday." There was nothing they could do on Sunday. In fact, the individual came back to here, and in Washington, at eight o'clock in the morning, they made an application, got a brand-new passport, and were out the door at nine o'clock.

And I want to thank you for that. I want to thank the entire team that facilitated it.

But, just like the 60 or so requests a month that my office makes that your people accommodate on an expedited basis, we know that a passport, particularly a renewal of an existing passport, can be done in an hour. The question is, why do we have a backlog of 13 weeks that is not, as you said in your opening statement, surged to get from 13 weeks to 13 days or 13 hours?

Any business, particularly one that is able to derive revenue from each and every application, at least in the case of those which require, with all due respect, no adjudication, but, in fact, are purely administrative, would find a way to contract for additional services, in addition to the services you have, to get caught up. Can you please answer that question?

Ms. BITTER. Thank you. And I'm also very sorry to hear that we were unable to assist in Toronto, and I intend to look into that. So, thank you for letting me know.

I will tell you a little bit about what we are doing to try to keep up with the unprecedented demand that we are experiencing.

Mr. ISSA. Ma'am, my question was much more narrow than that. My question was, why are you not using—or asking Congress if you do not believe you have the authority—a technique to surge to get caught, at least as to the mundane 5-plus million renewals?

In your opening statement, you—rightfully so—said, "Oh, we're going to make this to where it's online." Online, and then, wait 13 weeks isn't going to be much better, particularly when, as you know, most Americans—because it is not written on the passport—

do not know, is this passport going to be accepted? Because it is not electronic. It does not tell you when somebody at INTERPOL has a problem.

On top of that, it does not say, if you have less than 6 months left, good luck, you're screwed. The reality is that a big chunk of those people who come to us for expedited service, they have got 5 months and 25 days when they show up, and they get told, "I'm sorry, you cannot go to this country because you do not have 'X' amount of months left."

These kind of errors on renewals, in addition to the regular renewals, beg the question. And like I say, I want to make it a very—I'm the last to ask, so I want to make it a narrow question, only one question.

Ms. BITTER. Uh-hum.

Mr. ISSA. If it were my business, if I were the CEO of your enterprise, I would be asking, why can I not move that from 13 weeks to 13 hours? I can tell you that the Governor of Virginia moved from all day to a matter minutes at DMV, and he did not even have to hire additional people. He simply had to start accounting for how they do it.

In your case, you are talking about this demand. But I have to tell you, Google faced a doubling of its business every year. Lots of people face massive increases. I understand that adjudication by Federal officers that are trained to take time, that all of that are complex questions. And I have been working as a member of the Foreign Affairs for 22-plus years with your folks. And I have got to tell you, there is plenty of dedication.

But this one, finally, has caused me to say, can you please ask me—or answer, where is your plan? If you do not have it today, I think this committee has every right to ask that you have it in the near future. Where is your plan to take the mundane renewal of existing passports and get them down as fast as you did for that young staffer who needed to fly back from Toronto, get it, and catch up with her boss, the Governor?

Ms. BITTER. Thank you, Congressman.

There is a little bit to unpack in there. And the one thing I want to highlight is that every passport adjudication is a national security adjudication, and we take that very, very seriously.

There is a lot to unpack in there in that. I think you are talking about things like automation. You are talking about things like, what is our—I'm happy to talk to you about our plans to surge to address the current wait times.

But, in the future, what we are trying to do is we recognize that this demand is a trend, and that it is not an anomaly. So, we are trying very hard to hire more of these national security professionals to be able to address future demand.

And then, also, to make investments in our technology. We do not want to hire our way out of this. We do not want to overtime our way out of it. We want to be able to take advantage of all of the kinds of technology that is available to us to be able to get ahead of it.

Mr. ISSA. OK. I'm going to have to cut this off because the chairman has limited patience.

But I have been doing this, like I say, for over 22 years. I will give you an extensive, in-writing request. And the request is for you to answer the question that I am afraid you were not able to answer today, which is, I do not accept your statement about national security when it comes to the administrative process of the renewal. You have the existing passport. You have all that you need. It is an administrative process to take the picture, put them together, and so on.

We contract out to private contractors security clearances at the TS level. If we can find a way to do that, then we, certainly, could find a way to get your 13-week backlog done, in addition to the clear need on an ongoing basis to have the service personnel in order to stay caught up.

So, Mr. Chairman, I thank you for your indulgence. I will followup with a couple of paragraphs. And with your indulgence, I will ask you to answer it in writing.

Ms. BITTER. I look forward to it. Thank you.

Mr. ISSA. I thank you. Thank you very much. And I apologize if the question never really got understood, but I will endeavor to do better in writing.

Thank you.

Ms. BITTER. Thank you.

Mr. MAST. I thank you, ma'am, for your valuable testimony.

And I thank the members of the committee for their questions.

Ms. BITTER. Mr. Chairman, I'm so sorry to interrupt you. I apologize, but there is one thing that I forgot to mention, and I'm kicking myself. And if you do not mind, I would like to get it in the record.

Mr. MAST. Please.

Ms. BITTER. And that is to thank Representative Crow and other members of this committee for putting forward the Afghan Allies Protection Act. It is just another example of how grateful we are for the partnership of Congress in supporting our Afghan allies and, also, for members of this committee. So, my apologies, and thank you for letting me put that on the record.

Mr. MAST. We are happy to give you the opportunity to speak. We want your answers. I know the members appreciated it when they received answers, and they would appreciate receiving answers in the future to questions that they have, questions that they may submit in writing and plans that they would like to see on how to deal with this.

You did hear from nearly every member, I believe, on issues related directly to what all of our constituents—maybe the only time that they actually come in contact with the State Department is when they need a passport; when they need to travel; when they need to get to a family event. It is a priority for every person that goes in and out of the Capitol. And so, we do hope that you will get back to us on plans, and plans rapidly, to address the issues that Americans are seeing.

And we understand your statement that you do not want to necessarily overtime your way out of this, but sometimes when you are in a serious situation, you have to do what you can to get through the moment. And I think this is one of those situations. In my opinion, we need to get through the moment. We need to get

caught up. We need to get people into a situation where they are not waiting months upon months to get a renewal of a passport that they may have held for years.

The members of the subcommittee, as I mentioned, may have some additional questions for you, and we ask that you do respond to those in writing.

And I now recognize Mr. Crow for any closing remarks that he may have.

Mr. CROW. Thank you, Chairman, for calling this hearing today. It was a robust discussion.

And thank you, Ambassador Bitter, for your service and your testimony, and for answering the questions.

A few just very key takeaways for me today.

One is recognizing the service of those State Department officials that, again, at great personal risk, all volunteered to go into Afghanistan to try to come to the aid of their friends and our partners and our allies. And I join you in recognizing that service.

No. 2, the State Department's After Action Review of Afghanistan did reference the need for some holistic looks at how we handle contingency operations. Because there is never a scenario ever where you do not experience a contingency or a crisis. And you learn from it. That is a natural part of military and government becoming better.

When we were in the military, we did an AAR after every mission, and there were always lessons learned. So, we would love to work with you to look at some of those lessons learned and what type of structural reforms and resources we can put into play to make sure we are doing things better going forward.

Next is your call for overall State Department funding, since your Bureau, which is very forward-facing and interfaces with the American people, and does very critical work, relies on those platforms of the State Department for your technology. Making sure that we are making the investments to modernize that technology, so that the American people can get the service that they deserve and that they expect. And we can continue to improve on those systems.

And then, finally, thank you for mentioning the Afghan Allies Protection Act, which is something that we have worked on in a bipartisan and bicameral manner for several years. The Coalition of the Honoring Our Promises Working Group, which is a bipartisan working group that I co-founded, along with some of my Republican friends, has done great work passing legislation.

And for those who share our commitment, and continuing to do everything possible to bring our partners and our friends to safety, we have to pass this bill. Because we are almost out of visas. We have almost exhausted the number of allocated visas, and the Afghan Allies Protection Act will increase the number of allocated visas by 20,000.

But, also, just as importantly, it will help us get those folks out of Afghanistan by making very important reforms to that system, such as allowing for remote processing and remote interviews. So, we, obviously, do not have boots on the ground right now, and having the ability to conduct that remote interview and processing is essential for continuing to keep that pipeline for our friends open.

So, with that, I thank you for your testimony today. We look forward to following up on all of those issues and work with you to serve the American people.

And I yield back.

Mr. MAST. Pursuant to committee rules, all members may have 5 days to submit statements, questions, and extraneous materials for the record, subject to the length limitations.

Without objection, the committee stands adjourned.

[Whereupon, at 3:22 p.m., the subcommittee was adjourned.]

APPENDIX



**COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS
SUBCOMMITTEE HEARING NOTICE**
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
WASHINGTON, DC 20515-6128

**Subcommittee on Oversight and Accountability
Brian Mast (R-FL), Chairman**

May 31, 2023

TO: MEMBERS OF THE COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS

You are respectfully requested to attend an OPEN hearing of the Committee on Foreign Affairs to be held by the Subcommittee on Oversight and Accountability at 2:00 p.m. in room 2154 of the Rayburn House Office Building. The hearing is available by live webcast on the Committee website at <https://foreignaffairs.house.gov/>.

DATE: Wednesday, June 7, 2023
TIME: 2:00 p.m.
LOCATION: 2154 RHOB
SUBJECT: Examining the Fiscal Year 24 Bureau of Consular Affairs Budget
WITNESSES: The Honorable Rena Bitter
Assistant Secretary
Bureau of Consular Affairs
U.S. Department of State

*NOTE: Witnesses may be added.

By Direction of the Chair

The Committee on Foreign Affairs seeks to make its facilities accessible to persons with disabilities. If you are in need of special accommodations, please call 202-226-8467 at least four business days in advance of the event, whenever practicable. Questions with regard to special accommodations in general (including availability of Committee materials in alternative formats and assistive listening devices) may be directed to the Committee.

COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS
MINUTES OF FULL COMMITTEE HEARING

Day 7 Date June Room RHOB 2154

Starting Time 1:59 PM Ending Time 3:22 PM

Recesses ☐ (to) (to) (to) (to) (to) (to)

Presiding Member(s)

Chairman Mast

Check all of the following that apply:

Open Session ☒

Executive (closed) Session ☐

Televised ☒

Electronically Recorded (taped) ☒

Stenographic Record ☒

TITLE OF HEARING:

Examining the Fiscal Year 24 Bureau of Consular Affairs Budget

COMMITTEE MEMBERS PRESENT:

Chairman Mast, Mr. Perry, Mr. Issa, Mr. Hill, Mr. Waltz, Mr. Mills, Ranking Member Crow, Ms. Titus, Mr. Kim, Mrs. Chertoff-McCormick, Ms. Dean.

NON-COMMITTEE MEMBERS PRESENT:

HEARING WITNESSES: Same as meeting notice attached? Yes ☒ No ☐

(If "no", please list below and include title, agency, department, or organization.)

STATEMENTS FOR THE RECORD: *(List any statements submitted for the record.)*

TIME SCHEDULED TO RECONVENE _____

or

TIME ADJOURNED 3:22

Meg Wagner
Full Committee Hearing Coordinator

Oversight and Accountability Subcommittee on Foreign Affairs

118th Congress

ATTENDANCE

Meeting on: Examining the Fiscal Year 24 Bureau of Consular Affairs Budget
Date: June 7, 2023

Convened: 1:59 PM
Adjourned: 3:22 PM

[illegible]

RESPONSES TO QUESTIONS SUBMITTED FOR THE RECORD

Questions for the Record submitted to
Rena Bitter by
Representative Colin Allred (No. 1-9 to No. 9)
House Foreign Affairs Committee Subcommittee on Oversight and
Accountability
June 7, 2023

Consular Personnel:

Consular staff returned to in-person staffing in August 2021 after the COVID-19 pandemic caused significant strain on the State Department from the backlog caused by global lockdown mandates, heightened demand for visa and passport services, and massive repatriation efforts led by consular staff to bring American citizens back to the United States. However, even before COVID-19, there were significant issues related to staffing at embassies in certain regions of the world.

Question 1:

How is the Department working to increase staff in understaffed regions, particularly Sub Saharan Africa? What challenges is the Department facing in ensuring adequate staffing in these regions?

Answer 1:

In addition to working with the Department's Bureau of Global Talent Management (GTM) to fill all existing vacant positions by the end of FY 2023, the Bureau of Consular Affairs (CA) is re-establishing 81 positions abolished during the pandemic due to CA's budget constraints. Many of those positions are at posts in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Detention of AMCITs overseas

The Bureau of Consular Affairs supports all U.S. citizens detained overseas, ensuring all obligations under Vienna Convention are respected and working with regional bureaus and the Special Presidential Envoy for Hostage Affairs as appropriate on specific cases. Once notified by the host government of the detention of an U.S. citizen, consular officers immediately work to gain access to them to ensure their safety and wellbeing.

Question 2:

As of 2023, how many Americans are currently detained abroad and how many could be constituted as “wrongfully detained”? Which countries are the main perpetrators of arbitrary detentions?

Answer 2:

The Department does not publicly disclose exact numbers of detainees or arrestees as these numbers are fluid. The Department places a “D” indicator on its Travel Advisories to warn U.S. citizens of the risk of wrongful detention by a foreign government. Currently, the “D” indicator applies to the following countries: Burma, the People’s Republic of China, Eritrea, Iran, Nicaragua, North Korea, Russia, and Venezuela.

Question 3:

Once consular officers discover an American has been detained, when do they notify family members and their Congressional representatives of the detention?

Answer 3:

When a U.S. citizen is detained abroad, U.S. embassies and consulates overseas seek consular access to the citizen without delay. Generally, the State Department is unable to share information about private U.S. citizens absent their written consent in accordance with the Privacy Act.

Bureau Improvement Questions:

Visa wait times vary widely from location to location, particularly for non-immigrant, business related visas. In Canada, for example, some people wait 500 days to just reach the interview while in Latvia the wait time for an interview for the same visa is 3 days.

Question 4:

What is the reason for this variation?

Answer 4:

Nonimmigrant visa (NIV) interview wait times are driven by a variety of factors including demand for visa services, staffing, facilities limitations, the security situation, and – in recent times – differences in the way countries' health regulations under COVID-19 impacted operations at U.S. embassies and consulates. These factors continually evolve, meaning NIV appointment availability will continue to be subject to local conditions and resources, and therefore will vary by location. Longer interview wait times generally do not indicate a lower volume of visa adjudications or issuances.

Question 5:

How is the Department working to modernize the system, or how is the Department finding ways to eliminate bureaucratic hurdles to speed up processing times?

Answer 5:

Bureau of Consular Affairs' (CA) recently redefined its modernization strategy to focus on our ability to protect user information, improve our cybersecurity posture, and enhance both internal and external customer experience while evolving our capability to adapt to requirements as they arise in a more nimble and iterative way. CA is incorporating usability testing and customer experience feedback into all product development processes to ensure that we are delivering products that are easy to use and meet business requirements.

Ensuring that people are coming to this country legally is vitally important to our national security. However, when it takes 15 years in some cases to get an immigration visa, this may incentivize foreign nationals to come here illegally.

Question 6:

With that in mind, how is Consular Affairs coordinating with USCIS to reduce the backlog on immigrant visas to ensure that those who are eligible to come to the U.S. are able to do so in a timely fashion.

Answer 6:

The National Visa Center (NVC) receives approved IV petitions from USCIS, creates cases, and performs pre-processing before sending interview-ready cases to our embassies and consulates. NVC does not have any internal processing backlogs and keeps pace with posts' scheduling capacity. The Visa Office coordinates closely with USCIS on digitization and other efforts aimed at streamlining petition workflow for consular processing. Many years-long waits for IVs are due to high demand in numerically limited IV categories.

Question 7:

Has Consular Affairs identified duplicative steps in processing and if so, what has the Bureau done to upend bureaucratic impediments in the process?

Answer 7:

The Bureau of Consular Affairs actively monitors and streamlines our processes for adjudicating visas to improve efficiency and reduce wait times.

It is my understanding that certain elements of the Bureau of Consular Affairs are still paper based. Aside from slowing down processing time, this also runs the risk of losing important documents which then extends an already aggravatingly slow processing timeline.

Question 8:

Is the Department looking at migrating towards a more modern digital process? If not, what challenges are you facing to modernize the Bureau?

Answer 8:

Where possible, the Bureau of Consular Affairs (CA) is moving our modernized services to a more flexible cloud platform to accommodate fluctuating volumes while working to optimize integrations with our legacy systems. CA is also improving backend services, such as our integrations with passport printing and archival systems, to simplify and automate/digitize current processes and reduce pain points. By prioritizing secure cloud capabilities and architecture, we are decreasing the required infrastructure and lead time necessary to meet our customers' needs.

Background:

Since the end of the pandemic, wait times for passports have increased dramatically. Because of this, the district offices for members are coming under increased pressure to communicate with the Bureau of Consular Affairs in order to ensure that the process is moving along.

Question 9:

What is the most effective way for our district offices to communicate with the Bureau of Consular Affairs in order to best serve our constituents?

Answer 9:

A primary source of information is travel.state.gov/congress. The Bureau of Consular Affairs (CA) provides regular webinars and workshops to District Staff to enlist their assistance in publicizing processing times so constituents can ensure they have a valid passport before making travel plans. We also invite staff to contact Consular on the Hill, a part of CA's Congressional Affairs Unit.

**Questions for the Record submitted to
Rena Bitter by
Representative Brian Mast (No. 1-5)
House Foreign Affairs Committee Subcommittee on Oversight and
Accountability
June 7, 2023**

Question 1:

Can you please explain why “XIX. Immigrant and Nonimmigrant Visa Ineligibilities (by Grounds for Refusal Under the Immigration and Nationality Act): Fiscal Year 2022” is the only category of FY 2022 visa data the Department has not yet published and why it remains unavailable on the Department’s website? Please provide the date the Department intends to publish such data. (link here: <https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/legal/visa-law0/visa-statistics/annual-reports/report-of-the-visa-office-2022.html>)

Answer 1:

Table XIX of the *Annual Report of the Visa Office* for FY2022 is undergoing internal review, and the Visa Office expects to publish the report in the coming weeks.

Question 2:

How many visa applicants did the State Department reject under PP 10043 during FY 2022 and FY 2023 (to date)?

Answer 2:

In FY 2022, 1,655 nonimmigrant visa applicants were found ineligible under PP 10043. FY 2023 through May 31, 790 nonimmigrant visa applicants have been found ineligible under PP 10043. (FY 2023 data are preliminary and subject to change).

Question 3:

Please explain, and provide any supporting documents reflecting, the process and procedure the Department uses to effect compliance with PP 10043.

Answer 3:

PP 10043 suspended the entry into the United States of any national of the People's Republic of China (PRC) seeking F (student) or J (exchange visitor) nonimmigrant visas to study or conduct research in the United States above the undergraduate level in certain fields, or who have certain types of ties to entities that support or implement the PRC's Military-Civil Fusion strategy. The Department reviews every visa application and determines whether an applicant is ineligible for a visa under this proclamation.

Question 4:

Please provide the number of visas the Department has revoked pursuant to Section 6 of PP 10043.

Answer 4:

The Visa Office has prudentially revoked 1,477 visas pursuant to section 6 of PP 10043. This number does not include visas that may have been revoked by consular officers overseas, as our systems limit the ability to distinguish between PP 10043-based revocations and refusals at posts.

Question 5:

Please provide a breakdown year-by-year of the number of visas that have been granted pursuant to the national interest exemption.

Answer 5:

The Department is unable to quantify the number of applications that have received a National Interest Exception for PP 10043. By regulation, the only evidence of a national interest exemption appears in the visa annotations, a free text field, and we cannot guarantee the results will capture every possible variation in spelling, spacing, punctuation, and diction a consular officer might use.

**Questions for the Record submitted to
Rena Bitter by
Representative Mike Waltz (No. 1 to No. 3)
House Foreign Affairs Committee Subcommittee on Oversight and
Accountability
June 7, 2023**

Question 1:

In our exchange, you mentioned that State had issued visas to more than 22,000 Afghans and their families, and over 12,000 visas this year alone. However, State's January 2023 SIV Quarterly Report on the Afghan SIV program stated that there were 147,378 principal Afghan SIV applicants waiting processing, an increase of 16,329 principal applicants from the previous quarter. Given the SIV processing rate over the last two years and taking into account the rates of new Afghan SIV applicants, how many years do you estimate it will take for State to fully process the backlog of SIV applications? What additional steps will State take to reduce the time Afghans spend waiting? What do you consider your target processing time, end to end?

Answer 1:

The Department will continue to process Afghan SIV applications until the numbers allocated by Congress have been exhausted. We have surged resources to this vital program and have reviewed every stage of the multi-step Afghan SIV application process to streamline it wherever possible, consistent with U.S. law, and we continue to look for areas to improve. The Department will continue to process Afghan SIV applications as quickly as

possible in accordance with the statutorily required program parameters
and national security requirements.

Question 2:

You mentioned that CA was the lead for SIV visas but not for P1 and P2 visas. However, my understanding is that in Pakistan, because of restrictions placed on the US presence, CA does functionally have the lead on processing P1 and P2 visas. Is that the case? If so, what is CA's plan for doing so and what is the progress in getting that done? If it hasn't begun yet, why not?

Answer 2:

P1 and P2 referrals for Afghan nationals are not visas but are categories of eligibility for access to the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP). The Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration serves as the Department's lead on refugee matters and oversees referrals to USRAP.

Question 3:

Can my office receive a full breakdown of the number of visas applied for and issued to Indians, both in India and abroad, across all visa types and over time? We'd also like that compared to other countries with the most CA personnel.

Answer 3:

CA has processed over 1,030,000 nonimmigrant visa (NIV) and over 25,000 immigrant visa (IV) applications for Indian nationals through May 31 in FY 2023. Eighty-one percent of these applications were processed by our embassy and consulates within India. These year-to-date figures exceed workload levels from the same period in pre-pandemic FY 2019. Comparing Missions India and Brazil (five posts comprise both), Brazil increased NIV processing by 43 percent and India increased NIV processing by 18 percent compared to the same period in FY 2019.

**Questions for the Record submitted to
Rena Bitter by
Representative Joaquin Castro (No. 1 to No. 3)
House Foreign Affairs Committee Subcommittee on Oversight and
Accountability
June 7, 2023**

Assistant Secretary Bitter:

The Bureau of Consular Affairs plays a critical role at the State Department, providing consular services to Americans who are abroad, issuing passports, and helping foreign nationals obtain visas to visit the United States for business, tourism, education, or immigration.

As you know, much of this work is funded through fees – the State Department charges fees for issuing passports or visas and the fees are used to pay for these operations.

I want to ask about a concerning issue that I am committed to fixing – and this is an issue that largely the fault of Congress. For most of the fees, Congress gave the State Department the authority to collect, retain, and spend the fees but we failed to provide the State Department the ability to retain all the fees they collect.

And in one concerning situation, the State Department has the right to collect and retain fee revenue but not to spend it.

I'll elaborate: the State Department has the authority to collect the Passport Application and Execution Fee and also to retain it – but Congress only gave them the ability to spend money from that account for Fiscal Year 2022.

This means that – every year – the State Department collects \$500 million in fees that are deposited into an account that the Department doesn't have the authority to use.

This is the only retained fee targeted to fund overseas citizen services – when American citizens are stranded abroad or need assistance.

Question 1:

How much money is the Department collecting in this account over the next few years?

Answer 1:

In FY 2024, the Department anticipates collecting \$434 million in passport application and execution fees (PAEF). The FY 2024 Budget Request seeks expenditure authority for \$250 million in PAEF. To be neutral on Department appropriations, the FY 2024 Budget Request also proposes cancelling \$250 million in unobligated CBSP balances. If these provisions are enacted, we project the FY 2024 CBSP budget would increase by \$138 million (or two percent) over FY 2023.

Question 2:

How important is it that the Department have the ability to use this money to fund your operations?

Answer 2:

Increased authority to retain and spend PAEF would enable the Department to have a dedicated funding sources for assisting U.S. citizens abroad. Without it, the Department will be reliant on the availability of other fees. As we have seen during COVID, international travel demand may not always provide a reliable source of funding for such an important workload.

Question 3:

Would being granted the ability to spend these funds you have already collected allow you to more effectively help Americans with passports and consular services?

Answer 3:

Yes. The ability to spend PAEF beyond FY 2022 collections would give the Department a dedicated and sustainable funding source to cover the costs of providing essential services to U.S. citizens overseas. At the same time, it would preclude the need to use other fees to cover these costs, reducing the risk of a funding gap during a crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic. This is a critical step in addressing structural misalignments in the CBSP and enabling CA to be self-sustaining as a fully fee-funded bureau.

**Questions for the Record submitted to
Rena Bitter by
Representative Thomas Kean, Jr. (No.1and 2 to No. 2)
House Foreign Affairs Committee Subcommittee on Oversight and
Accountability
June 7, 2023**

Assistant Secretary Bitter, several of my constituents have reported that when they went to a Passport Acceptance Center, they were told by staff that they had plenty of time and did not need to expedite their passport. However, they should've been advised to expedite their request due to the turnaround time for non-expedited passports.

Question 1:

How is the Bureau making sure that its acceptance centers have the best and latest information so that they can advise applicants appropriately from the start of the process and set expectations accordingly?

Answer 1:

The Department communicates policy guidance to a network of approximately 8,000 acceptance facilities and 45,000 acceptance agents through our national customer service office and regional passport agencies. Passport Services also has an office dedicated to oversight of acceptance facilities that reinforces policy guidance during routine inspections. Occasionally there can be miscommunication of policy between acceptance

agents and applicants. We welcome feedback on specific cases to further standardize communication across this large network.

Question 2:

Additionally, when an application is received that is deficient (e.g., damaged photo, incorrect Social Security) and the applicant is sent a letter advising of the deficiency and asked to correct the problem (e.g., send a new photo, provide correct Social Security) is the applicant advised that the error would delay the processing and for how long the delay might be?

Answer 2:

When an application is found to be missing an element needed for processing, the passport agency communicates with the customer through the supplied contact information, providing an Information Request Letter (IRL) which addresses the necessary step(s) that the applicant must take to complete their application. Generally, the duration of any processing delay hinges upon the time that it takes for the applicant to provide the necessary response to the agency. Once the applicant's response has been received, the application is again reviewed by an adjudicator.