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Remarks Announcing New Interview Waiver Pilot Program

U.S. Embassy, Beijing

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(as prepared for delivery)

Today I am happy to announce additional details in an important change to U.S. visa procedures that will benefit many thousands of Chinese visa applicants. On January 19, President Obama signed an Executive Order to significantly increase legitimate travel and tourism to the United States, with the goal of increasing visa-processing capacity in China by up to 40% in 2012. In 2011, we processed more than 1 million visa applications in China, an increase of 34% over the previous year, and already in the first few months of fiscal year 2012, we have processed 48% more visas in China compared to the same period in 2011. At the same time, we have significantly reduced wait times for interviews in China. As of yesterday, wait times at all posts in China are less than 6 days.

To meet increasing demand in 2012 and beyond, we are assigning 50 new consular officers to China. And I am happy to announce that in a few months we will reopen our former Embassy consular facility located in the first Diplomatic Neighborhood of Beijing. Reopening this facility will increase our interviewing capacity in Beijing by 50%.

President Obama has set a worldwide goal to interview 80% of all visa applicants within three weeks of the request for an appointment. In China, we are already meeting this goal and intend to continue to do so.

In addition to new consular staff and facilities, under a new initiative announced by the President, in select circumstances, some qualified foreign visitors who were interviewed and thoroughly screened in conjunction with a prior visa application may be eligible to renew their visas without undergoing another interview.

This new pilot program permits consular officers to waive interviews for some qualified nonimmigrant applicants worldwide who are renewing their visa within 48 months of the expiration of their previously held visa, and within the same classification as the previous visa. In China, many previous holders of B (temporary visitors for business/pleasure), C1 (transit), D (crewmembers), F (students), J (exchange visitors), M (nonacademic students), and O (visitors with extraordinary ability) visas will be able to renew their visas if they have been expired less than 48 months (four years), without another interview.

We expect that this will benefit tens of thousands of applicants in China, saving them time and money, and making it easier for them to travel to the United States more frequently. It will also free our resources to interview more first-time applicants, and to do so quickly.

While this new initiative will open as many as 100,000 appointments for first time visa applicants, our consular officers continue to have the authority to interview any applicant who they determine requires a personal interview.

As China develops economically, more of its citizens will want to visit the United States as tourists, on business or for education. We know that travel to the United States will foster a better understanding of our two cultures and peoples. We welcome the challenge of meeting the explosive growth in demand for our visas. One of my top priorities as U.S. Ambassador is to ensure that we keep wait times short even as demand rises.

QUICK FACTS ON U.S. VISAS IN MISSION CHINA

February 2012

Overview

- In calendar year 2011, Mission China processed one million nonimmigrant visa applications, an increase of 34% from the previous year. China now makes up about 11% of the total visa workload for the United States around the world. Close to 90% of nonimmigrant applications from Chinese nationals were approved.
- In the 2011 fiscal year, Chinese nationals applying for travel under the variety of [visa categories](#) included: more than 700,000 for B1/B2 visas for business and tourism (an increase of nearly 40% over the previous year), and more than 200,000 for F and J visas for academic studies, cultural exchanges, and research (a 30% increase over the previous year).
- In the first quarter of the 2012 fiscal year, Mission China nonimmigrant visa processing increased by 48% over the same period in 2011.

Enhanced Consular Operations

- Mission China continually seeks to improve its operations and efficiency, and is expanding visa processing capacity by opening new consular facilities in Guangzhou and Shanghai, and adding around 50 new consular officers China-wide in 2012, representing an approximate 50% increase in consular officer staffing. The issue of lengthening visa validity for Chinese nationals has also been raised with the Chinese government, subject to visa reciprocity for U.S. citizens seeking travel to China and other mutual cooperation.

Interview Waiver Pilot Program

- On February 13, Mission China will launch a pilot program to streamline visa processing by permitting consular officers to waive interviews for some qualified nonimmigrant applicants worldwide who are renewing their visa within 48 months (four years) of the expiration of their previously held visa, and within the same classification as the previous visa. In China, previous holders of B (temporary visitors for business/pleasure), C1 (transit), D (crewmembers), F (students), J (exchange visitors), M (nonacademic students), and O (visitors with extraordinary ability) visas can renew their visas if they have been expired less than 48 months (four years).
- Over the course of the year, this policy could open as many as 100,000 interview appointments for Chinese travelers applying for visas for the first time.
- Our partners at CITIC Bank are aware of the new procedures. Applicants who qualify for interview waiver under the new guidelines can follow [existing procedures](#) to renew their visas.
- Protecting our borders and national security remains the U.S. government's highest priority. As always, with this renewal program, some applicants who apply to renew their visa without an interview will be called in for an interview for both security and quality control reasons.

Opening an Additional Visa Processing Location in Beijing

- Later this year, we will reopen our former Embassy consular facility located in the first Diplomatic Neighborhood of Beijing.
- We anticipate that reopening this facility will increase our interviewing capacity in Beijing by 50%, as many as 150,000 visas.

Economic Impact

- Encouraging increased travel between China and the United States is mutually beneficial. Not only do we learn more about each other's culture and society, but increased tourism is good for our economies.
- In 2010, [more than 800,000](#) Chinese nationals traveled to the United States, each spending an average of \$6,000 per trip. The Department of Commerce expects the number of first-time Chinese travelers to the United States to triple in the next five years.