

July 16, 2003

HOUSE ADOPTS SCHAKOWSKY PROVISION CALLING ON SECRETARY POWELL TO PREVENT UNNECESSARY WAIT TIMES FOR THOSE SEEKING VISAS FOR TRAVEL TO THE U.S. WHILE ENSURING SECURITY

WASHINGTON, D.C. - U.S. Representative Jan Schakowsky (D-IL) applauded the adoption of her amendment to H.R. 1950, a bill authorizing funds for the operations of the U.S. State Department. The sense of the Congress amendment calls on the State Department to provide adequate resources to U.S. embassies and consulates so that rules requiring face-to-face interviews for virtually all those seeking a U.S. visas may be implemented without unnecessary and long delays and without compromising security. Schakowsky's amendment also requires the Secretary of State to report to the Congress on allocations to U.S. embassies and consulates. Below is Schakowsky's statement:

□

"Mr. Speaker, I am pleased today to speak in support of my amendment to H.R. 1950, the State Department Authorization bill, which expresses the sense of the Congress that the Secretary of State should provide adequate resources to United States Embassies and Consular Offices in order to meet the workload requirements for visa application processing."

□

"The State Department recently issued a rule requiring nearly all visa applicants who wish to come to the United States for travel, business, or study to have personal interviews at Embassies or Consular Offices. This rule will significantly increase the amount of work and time Embassies and Consulates must give to each visa applicant. In Fiscal Year 2002, nearly 5.8 million business and tourist visas were issued and it is estimated that, in some countries, as few as 20% of applicants were required to be interviewed. While I support necessary security precautions, this new rule will clearly result in months of backlogs that could seriously jeopardize American business, education, and tourism unless these offices are provided with adequate resources and personnel to handle the increased workload."

□

"Unfortunately, the Secretary of State has expressed to U.S. Embassies and Consulates that he "expects and accepts that many posts will face processing backlogs for the indefinite future." Furthermore, the message from the State Department in Washington, D.C. is that, while posts can request more personnel, for the most part, they "must implement the new interview guidelines using existing resources. Posts should not, repeat not, use overtime to deal with additional workload requirements."

□

"Requiring our Foreign Service officers to take on a vastly increased workload without also providing the resources necessary to support that work may actually undermine our national security. It is unclear that overworked staff who are forced to conduct personal interviews with thousands of visa applicants will be able to adequately identify terrorists"

and other potentially harmful visitors in what are reportedly two to three minute interviews. Instead, these workers will be more likely to miss important details in visa applications as they rush to keep up with additional work requirements. Only by providing sufficient resources to meet the new interview requirements, can we ensure that the steps we take to implement more stringent security protections will effectively safeguard our nation from those who may wish to do us harm.

□

"Furthermore, if we are to remain a respected nation and an ally to countries around the world, it is critical that people be able to travel to the United States for business and pleasure without unnecessary hurdles or burdens. It is also critical for our economy, which depends on tourism and on conducting business with foreign nationals in order to stay strong, that people be able to travel to the United States without unnecessary inconveniences. Long wait times and growing backlogs of visa applications will serve to do the opposite and discourage people from coming to the United States to spend money and conduct business.

□

"I have heard from my constituents of people missing business meetings, important family events, and opportunities to study at American universities because it took too long for their visa application to be processed. For example, we have heard about three month waiting periods in Israel, one of our closest allies, which prevented a young Israeli from coming to the U.S. to work as a camp counselor. In another example, a group of Indian performers who were set to tour the United States will miss their performance in Chicago this weekend because they were not approved in time. And three people from Jakarta will miss their business meeting next week because their visa was not accepted in time. Finally, a young man had to postpone a wedding reception he had been planning for months because visa backlogs prevented his fiancée from getting to the United States from South Korea in time.

□

"It is because of situations like these and countless others that we must provide our Embassies and Consulates with adequate resources to meet the needs of visa applicants. It is because of our national security interests that we must provide our Foreign Service officers the resources they need to do their jobs well. I am pleased that this amendment was accepted into the en bloc amendment, and I thank Chairman Hyde and Ranking Members Lantos for their support."