

American

NEWS & VIEWS

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President Obama Announces Visa Process Improvements for Visitors to U.S.

By MacKenzie C. Babb | Staff Writer | 19 January 2012

Washington – President Obama says the departments of State and Homeland Security are working together to improve and speed up the visa process for foreign travelers to the United States.

He announced a new visa pilot program that will “simplify and speed up the non-immigrant visa process for certain applicants, including the ability to waive interviews for some very low-risk applicants” seeking to renew a visa, according to a January 19 White House statement.

Obama said that since the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, the United States has implemented “an intensive, multi-layered visa screening process, including multiple biographic and biometric checks, all supported by a sophisticated global information technology network.” The White House said the United States performs these checks on every visa applicant, without exception.

But under the initiative, select circumstances may allow qualified foreign visitors who were interviewed and thoroughly screened as part of a prior visa application to renew their visas without undergoing another interview.

“Eliminating interviews for these applicants will save them time and money and encourage them to choose the United States again as their tourism destination,” a White House fact sheet on the initiative said, adding that it will also free up resources to interview more first-time applicants. The program is also set to make visa processing more efficient for certain categories of low-risk applicants, such as younger or older first-time applicants.

Assistant Secretary of State for Consular Affairs Janice Jacobs agreed that streamlining the visa process for foreign visitors is important, and also emphasized that U.S. security remains the Obama administration’s highest priority.

“Every visa decision is a national security decision,” Jacobs said in a conference call January 19. That is why consular officers around the world will continue to exercise authority to interview any visa applicant as required for national security, in addition to the full screening and review all visa applicants receive, she said.

Obama announced the pilot program as part of a new executive order issued January 19, which emphasizes expediting the visa process for emerging markets such as China, Brazil and India. Visitors from these three countries contributed approximately \$15 billion and

thousands of jobs to the U.S. economy in 2010, and the number of travelers to the United States is expected to grow by 135 percent from China, 274 percent from Brazil and 50 percent from India by 2016, according to the White House. Expediting the visa process for visitors from these key markets is expected to add an increasingly significant boost to the U.S. economy as it continues to recover from recession.

The executive order charges the departments of State and Homeland Security with increasing nonimmigrant visa processing capacity in China and Brazil by 40 percent in 2012, following consular adjudication of more than 1 million visa applications from China and at least 800,000 from Brazil in fiscal year 2011. It also requires the departments to ensure that 80 percent of all nonimmigrant visa applicants are interviewed within three weeks of application.

Obama’s order calls as well for the two departments to increase efforts to expand the Visa Waiver Program, under which people can travel to the United States for tourism or business for stays of 90 days or fewer without obtaining a visa.

Thus far, 36 countries have met the strict law enforcement and document security standards required for program eligibility. Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton most recently has requested that the Department of Homeland Security consider Taiwan for the Visa Waiver Program.

The executive order additionally requires the Commerce Department to establish a publicly available website with key information and statistics to help people understand U.S. visa processes. It also marks the appointment of 32 private sector business leaders to the department’s Travel and Tourism Board to advise Commerce Secretary John Bryson on issues such as visa policy, aviation security and improving the international travel entry experience.

According to the Commerce Department, international travel is the largest U.S. service-export industry, resulting in \$134 billion in 2010 or roughly 24 percent of overall service exports. Obama has said enhancing the travel and tourism industry offers an important opportunity to create jobs and strengthen the U.S. economy.

Statement by Secretary Clinton on Lunar New Year

19 January 2012

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE
Office of the Spokesperson
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STATEMENT BY SECRETARY CLINTON

Lunar New Year

On behalf of President Obama and the people of the United States, I am delighted to send best wishes for peace, prosperity, and good health to everyone celebrating the Lunar New Year.

Around the world, people will welcome the Year of the Dragon with rich and varied traditions. Asian Americans will gather with family and friends in communities across the United States to celebrate their vibrant heritage and the ties that unite all of us. President Obama and I are committed to our 21st century partnership with the people of the Asia-Pacific region, and we will continue to deepen ties with our allies and partners, while strengthening lasting bonds of friendship and cooperation.

Throughout this new year, and in the years to come, let us continue to work together to realize new opportunities and make progress on the shared challenges we face.

Egypt's Economic Modernization Will Support Democratization

By Stephen Kaufman | Staff Writer | 18 January 2012

Washington — A successful Egyptian transformation to democracy will require not only political reform, but also increased economic opportunities for the Egyptian people, and the Obama administration wants to encourage private enterprise through partnerships with American companies.

The United States also wants to complement private sector initiatives by supporting infrastructure development and mobilizing other resources to spur economic growth.

"Egypt's mix of geography, population and resources makes it a natural hub for regional trade and commerce," Deputy U.S. Trade Representative Miriam Sapiro said January 17. "According to at least one study, if Egypt strengthens its economic institutions now, and embraces economic modernization, it could be one of the top 10 world economies within a generation."

Speaking to an audience that included Egyptian entrepreneurs at the U.S.-Egypt Business Council in Washington January 17, Sapiro said the United States "stands ready to do all it can to help Egypt develop its private sector" by encouraging U.S. companies to fully participate in Egypt's economic growth and by supporting the foundation for a partnership between the two countries "that will remain strong and durable for years to come."

She said that ultimately Egypt's economic growth will be led by the private sector's ability to spur new demand for Egyptian products and services both within and outside the country.

"Increased foreign trade and investment play a key role in stimulating growth," Sapiro said, and experience has shown that "economic growth is far likelier to be stimulated quickly and substantially through a country's open trade and investment policies than through assistance."

She encouraged Egyptians to look to examples such as Brazil, India and Turkey, which have deliberately integrated their economies into the global marketplace and, as a result, have strengthened their economic competitiveness and their prospects for sustained growth.

Direct trade and investment from the U.S. government will be based on a two-part approach, with a short-term strategy to deliver quick and concrete results, and a longer-term plan that would position Egypt and other countries in the Middle East and North Africa "in a fundamentally different position vis-à-vis the global economy," Sapiro said.

The 2011 Group of Eight Summit saw the launch of the Deauville Partnership, which is an economic framework to support Middle Eastern and North African countries in achieving transparent and accountable governments as well as sustainable and inclusive growth. Sapiro said the United States is committed to the best use of that partnership for Egypt, and is ready to cooperate on expanding trade, services and investments, agriculture and good regulatory practices. The United States also wants to encourage regional trade and investment arrangements to create more export opportunities for Egyptian goods and services, she said.

"We would like to see Egyptian companies take greater advantage of existing programs that would benefit Egyptian exports to U.S. markets, such as the Globalized System of Preferences (GSP). These programs allow certain types of Egyptian goods to enter the U.S. duty-free, making it cheaper to 'Buy Egyptian,'" she said. Based on data from 2010, Sapiro said, some Egyptian exports to the United States, such as car parts, fruit juices and carpets, had entered the U.S. market without taking advantage of their duty-free eligibility.

"Our goal is to promote trade, investment and innovation to help create jobs, and assist Egyptian businesses increase and diversify their activities as the surest path to increased prosperity throughout Egypt," Sapiro said. "But it will be companies and entrepreneurs like all of you, from Egypt, countries throughout the region and the world, who will play the largest role in the ongoing

transformation of the Egyptian economy.”

U.S. Backs U.N. Program to Teach Respect for All

18 January 2012

Washington — The United States, Brazil and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) launched a new program in Paris January 18 to develop educational materials that help teachers and students around the world learn to overcome ethnic, racial and religious intolerance and develop respect for others.

“All forms of intolerance are an affront to human dignity,” said Assistant Secretary of State Esther Brimmer, who represented the United States at the launch of the program. “As we challenge our youth to respond to these problems and make a difference, we need to offer them every bit of support that we can.”

“Teaching Respect for All” recognizes the key role of schools in combating racial and ethnic discrimination. The program will review existing curriculums, legislation and policies that include components on education for tolerance, and identify best practices in the field, according to a UNESCO announcement. After that process, which involves government officials, teachers and students, the second phase will develop teaching materials that will be tested in a few pilot countries and later made available to all.

Speaking at the launch ceremony, Brimmer, an African American, said she well knows the difference between high-minded rhetoric and real life.

“The United States has grappled with intolerance, but this struggle is not uniquely American, and America stakes no claim to a magic solution,” Brimmer said. “Brazil, India, Indonesia, South Africa ... all have confronted similar challenges and made significant gains.”

Nations do make progress against racism, bigotry and intolerance, but it is an ongoing struggle, Brimmer said. She cited remarks made in recognition of Human Rights Day December 10 by Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton decrying the persecution of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender individuals because of “who they are, and whom they love.”

The launch ceremony for “Teaching Respect for All” in Paris was an exercise in inclusion itself. Students from a U.S. secondary school and a Brazilian education center participated via videoconference.

Rescuing Iranian Sailors? U.S. Says It Is Just Doing Its Duty

By Stephen Kaufman | Staff Writer | 17 January 2012

Washington — Recent actions by U.S. Navy and NATO ships to rescue Iranian mariners endangered by shipboard mechanical problems or pirates reflect a longstanding international custom on the world’s high seas that whenever a seafarer is in distress, the first duty to respond outweighs any other concerns.

In recent weeks, meeting the call of those in distress has happened several times.

NATO reported January 16 that the Italian warship ITS Grecale responded to the Tahriri, an Iranian-flagged traditional sailing vessel known as a dhow. The Tahriri had suffered engine failure and was dead in the water with a crew of five Iranians and nine Pakistanis on board. On January 7, the Tahriri had been rescued from suspected Somali pirates by the Danish navy vessel HDMS Absalon.

Both the Italian and Danish ships are part of NATO’s Counter Piracy Task Force operating around the Horn of Africa, known as Operation Ocean Shield. Two U.S. Navy vessels, the frigate USS De Wert and the destroyer USS Carney, are part of the NATO naval operation.

The duty to rescue ships in distress has been common maritime practice for centuries. Its most current codification is in Article 98 of the U.N. Convention on the Law of the Sea.

According to Article 98, all countries must require their flagged vessels “to render assistance to any person found at sea in danger of being lost; to proceed with all possible speed to the rescue of persons in distress, if informed of their need of assistance, in so far as such action may reasonably be expected of him; after a collision, to render assistance to the other ship, its crew and its passengers and, where possible, to inform the other ship of the name of his own ship, its port of registry and the nearest port at which it will call.”

In their rescue of the Tahriri’s crew, Italian sailors offered food and water, and they worked throughout the night in an effort to repair the damaged engine. Although the engine could not be fixed, NATO reported, the crew chose to stay with their vessel rather than accept an offer to be transported to the nearest port.

In separate instances, U.S. military vessels have also recently come to the rescue of Iranian sailors. On January 5, the destroyer USS Kidd, part of the USS John C. Stennis Carrier Strike Group, detected a suspected Somali pirate vessel alongside the Iranian-flagged fishing boat Al Molai

in the northern Arabian Sea. At the same time, the Al Molai's ship's master sent a distress call saying that pirates were holding him captive, according to a January 7 article by the American Forces Press Service (AFPS).

When the USS Kidd sent a team to board and search the vessels, they found that 15 suspected pirates had been detaining 13 Iranian sailors for several weeks, and the newly freed Iranian crew said the Al Molai had been used as a "mother ship" for pirate operations.

The U.S. Navy crew took the Iranians onboard and provided them with food, water and medical care.

AFPS quoted Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman General Martin Dempsey saying to CBS News January 7 that the sailors on the USS Kidd had responded "as we do to calls of distress" and with a commitment to protect both the freedom of the seas and the freedom of navigation.

"We ... recaptured the ship, took the pirates into custody, and returned the ship to Iranian control," Dempsey said.

Defense Secretary Leon Panetta told CBS that pirate interdiction is "what we do in that part of the world," and that the U.S. Navy's action "sends an important message to the world that the United States is going to abide by international rules and international order."

Before dawn on January 10, the Iranian cargo dhow Ya-Hussayn used flares and flashlights to broadcast a distress signal after its engine room flooded and its crew determined that the vessel was no longer seaworthy, according to AFPS. The U.S. Coast Guard Cutter Monomoy saw the signal and rescued its six Iranian crew members, who were on the dhow and an attached life raft.

The Monomoy's crew treated an injured crew member and provided the Iranian crew with water, blankets and halal meals before coordinating their transfer to an Iranian coast guard vessel later that day.

Asked by the media about the incident, Pentagon press secretary George Little simply said on January 10 that the Monomoy's actions are "consistent with meeting our obligations to rescue vessels in distress."

Internet Was Tool for Expression and Repression in 2011

By Charlene Porter | Staff Writer | 17 January 2012

Washington — The United States and its international partners "made a great deal of progress" in 2011 in adopting measures that can "turn our commitment to Internet freedom into reality," according to U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights and

Labor Michael H. Posner.

Speaking at a Washington conference January 17, Posner said the use of the Internet as a tool for human rights and as the nemesis of dictatorial regimes were two narratives that unfolded in 2011. While some oppressive regimes attempted to silence their online detractors by "jailing bloggers and hijacking Facebook pages," the United States and a group of nations from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development concurred on principles for an open Internet available to all.

Posner said 2011 also saw 15 countries and private interests launch the Coalition for Freedom Online. "They will stand up for the rights of netizens and cyber-activists," Posner said. "And these governments will work with tech companies on ways to promote respect for their customers' human rights and fundamental freedoms."

The Internet freedom this coalition strives to protect will serve as a basis for the 21st-century human rights agenda, Posner said.

The United States has spent more than \$70 million on advocacy and training programs to defend human rights online through "projects ranging from developing better circumvention technologies and 'panic buttons' for mobile phones to training activists in cyber self-defense," said the human rights official, speaking at the State of the Net conference, sponsored by the Advisory Committee to the Congressional Internet Caucus.

Posner reminded his audience that Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton defined two pillars of U.S. policy on Internet access in 2010: universal human rights of expression and assembly apply online as well as offline; and promotion of those rights is a U.S. foreign policy priority.

But the Arab Awakening, which first burst onto the scene in January 2011, "upped the stakes further," Posner said. Authoritarian regimes that have clung to power through fear and isolation lost control of populations that made demands for greater freedom and accessibility using online blogs, street encampments and grainy videos of police brutality.

The Arab Awakening has been like a "geopolitical earthquake," Posner said.

"Syria is not having a Facebook revolution or a Twitter revolt or a YouTube winter. Syria is having a mass outbreak of courage," Posner said. "Their courage does not emanate from any digital device. It comes from knowing that they are not alone."

Information technology tools allow expression of the outrage of injustice, Posner said, and grievances born from injustice have driven people into the streets to demand their human rights of freedom of expression, assembly and association.

The assistant secretary of state for democracy cautioned against the attempts of some governments to put forth policies phrased as “information security or Internet management” when they are actually attempts to wall off their citizens from the wide-open, and sometimes raucous, Internet. No government should believe it is empowered to deny fundamental rights of expression and association, he said.

“We do not need to reinvent international human rights law, or our enduring principles, to account for the Internet,” Posner said.

He also said technology companies should be compelled to respect human rights as they negotiate a global market to distribute their products. They must resist pressure from repressive regimes to provide personal information about political dissidents.

Other industries have confronted and overcome ethical challenges forced upon them by authoritarian governments, and technology companies must do the same. “All have a special stake in protecting the freedom and integrity of the Net as well as the human rights of their customers,” Posner said.

President Obama, Secretary Clinton Applaud Release of Burmese Political Prisoners

By Stephen Kaufman | Staff Writer | 13 January 2012

Washington — Recent actions by the Burmese government, including the release of political prisoners and a cease-fire with the Karen National Union, were welcomed January 13 by President Obama and Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton, who announced that the United States intends to send its first ambassador to the country since 1988.

The president applauded President Thein Sein’s decision to release 651 political prisoners as “a crucial step in Burma’s democratic transformation and national reconciliation process,” according to a January 13 statement.

“I urge the government to ensure that these and all other former political prisoners are allowed to participate fully and freely in the political process, particularly the upcoming by-elections, and to free all remaining prisoners of conscience,” Obama said.

Obama said the “flickers of progress” he had previously

noticed in Burma are now burning “a bit brighter, as prisoners are reunited with their families and people can see a democratic path forward.”

He welcomed the Burmese government’s decision to hold elections on April 1 and to allow pro-democracy leader and Nobel Peace Prize laureate Aung San Suu Kyi and the National League for Democracy to participate.

“Much more remains to be done to meet the aspirations of the Burmese people,” he said, “but the United States is committed to continuing our engagement with the government.”

U.S. TO BEGIN PROCESS OF APPOINTING AMBASSADOR

Speaking to reporters in Washington January 13, Secretary Clinton said the United States has pledged to “meet action with action,” and announced that the Obama administration is responding to the Burmese government by beginning the process of exchanging ambassadors.

“We will identify a candidate to serve as U.S. ambassador to represent the United States government and our broader efforts to strengthen and deepen our ties with both the people and the government,” she said, adding that having an ambassador in Burma “will help strengthen our efforts to support the historic and promising steps that are now unfolding.”

Clinton described the release of Burmese political prisoners as “a substantial and serious step forward in the government’s stated commitment to political reform.”

“Many of the people released today have distinguished themselves as steadfast, courageous leaders in the fight for democracy and human rights at critical times in their country’s recent history. And like all of the people of their country, they want and deserve to have a voice in the decisions that affect their lives,” she said.

She also welcomed the cease-fire agreement with the Karen National Union, expressing her hope that it “begins to address the longstanding grievances of the Karen people.” Clinton encouraged the government to “enter into meaningful dialogue with all ethnic groups to achieve national reconciliation, to allow news media and humanitarian groups access to ethnic areas.”

“This is a momentous day for the diverse people of Burma, and we will continue to support them and their efforts and to encourage the government to take bold steps that build the kind of free and prosperous nation, that I heard from everyone I met with, they desire to see,” Clinton said.

The secretary said the United States believes the future that the Burmese people are seeking is achievable, and “we look forward to being a partner and a friend as we see the progress continue.”

In December 2011, Clinton became the first U.S. secretary of state to visit Burma in nearly 50 years. Along with meeting top government officials, she also had talks with Aung San Suu Kyi and other civil society and human rights leaders on the country’s recent steps toward political reforms.

U.S. to Hit \$2 Trillion in 2011 Exports, Set to Meet Obama’s Goal

By MacKenzie C. Babb | Staff Writer | 13 January 2012

Washington — A new trade report shows the United States on course to meet President Obama’s National Export Initiative target, with American goods and services exports during the first 11 months of 2011 up 15 percent, or \$251.5 billion, from the same period in 2010.

In a January 13 statement, Commerce Secretary John Bryson said this brought the total goods and services exports for that period to \$1.93 trillion, preparing the United States to exceed a record \$2 trillion in exports for 2011.

“The good news from today’s report is that we remain on track to meet President Obama’s goal of doubling exports by the end of 2014,” Bryson said. The figures also are “an indication of the need to further intensify our efforts to reach the 95 percent of the world’s consumers who live outside our borders.”

Bryson highlighted November’s exports of consumer goods which, at \$15.7 billion, are the highest on record.

The report, released January 13 by the U.S. Census Bureau and the U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis, showed a rise in both goods exports and imports during the period from November 2010 to November 2011, with exports up \$16.6 billion, or 10.3 percent, and imports up \$25.5 billion, or 12.7 percent.

The increase in exports was largely due to a jump in industrial supplies and materials, capital goods, automotive vehicles, parts and engines, consumer goods and other goods. The boost in imports also reflected increases in those sectors, with the addition of foods, feeds and beverages.

The report showed a \$3.8 billion increase in exports of services from November 2010 to November 2011, with the largest jumps in royalties and license fees, travel, and business, professional and technical services.

Services imports in November 2011 were also up from the previous year, increasing by \$2.1 billion. The largest jumps came in royalties and license fees, other transportation, and business, professional and technical services.

The November figures show surpluses with Hong Kong, Australia, Singapore and Egypt. Deficits were recorded with China, the European Union, the Organization of the Petroleum-Exporting Countries (OPEC), Japan, Mexico, Germany, Canada, Ireland, Nigeria, Venezuela, Taiwan and South Korea.

A day before the report’s release, Bryson spoke on U.S. retail sales for 2011. He said the data reflect strong growth, showing a 7.7 percent increase from 2010. The secretary called on the United States to build on the positive economic momentum in 2012 by extending the payroll tax cut and unemployment insurance to “create jobs, promote economic growth and sustain the recovery.”

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