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The Growing Demand for U.S. Visas in China and Brazil

Special Briefing

Managing Director for Visa Services Ed Ramotowski and Minister Counselors for Consular Affairs Chuck Bennett and Donald Jacobson

via Teleconference

November 8, 2011

MR. ECHARD: Good afternoon, and thank you all for joining us today on relatively short notice. We're very fortunate to have with us this afternoon Managing Director for Visa Services Ed Ramotowski and two minister counselors for Consular Affairs, Mr. Chuck Bennett and Mr. Don Jacobson. Mr. Bennett runs the Department's consular operations in China from the U.S. Embassy in Beijing, while Mr. Jacobson oversees operations in Brazil from the U.S. Embassy in Brasilia. They're here today to discuss the growing visa demand in China and Brazil and steps the Department is taking to stay apace.

This briefing is on the record. Without further ado, I will turn it over to Managing Director for Visa Services Ed Ramotowski – last name spelled R-a-m-o-t-o-w-s-k-i – to deliver brief remarks. Then Mr. Bennett and Mr. Jacobson. We'll open up for questions and answer – questions after that. Again, this briefing is on the record.

Ed.

MR. RAMOTOWSKI: Thank you, John. Good afternoon and thank you for joining us. I hope that many of you had had the chance to review our factsheet on visas supporting global travel growth. Over the past year, we've seen an unprecedented rise in visa demand in emerging economies such as China and Brazil. Last year, our highly trained corps of consular officers issued more than 7.5 million visas around the world. That represents a 17 percent increase over Fiscal Year 2010.

The world for visas changed on 9/11. Security is our primary focus while we are on the frontlines protecting America's borders. Worldwide travel dropped immediately following 9/11, but since 2005, though, we've seen our visa issuances rise 42 percent. It's fundamentally important to note that not every foreign visitor to the United States needs a visa. In fact, approximately 65 percent of foreign travelers who come to this country don't need visas. They come from Canada and countries in the Visa Waiver Program.

When it comes to visas though, our job is to protect America's borders while putting out the welcome mat for visitors to stay in our hotels, to eat in our restaurants, buy American products, and enjoy all the wonders of our great country. It's important to note that security remains our top priority, and we see every visa decision as a national security decision. But we also recognize that international travel is important to the U.S. economy, to jobs and opportunity, and our vital national interests. And so we are using creative and innovative methods to welcome new visitors to the United States. Our goal is

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to expand our capacity to adjudicate more than 2.2 million visas in China and 1.8 million visas in Brazil by 2013.

As I've described, we don't follow the standard business model. We are the frontline of border security. Consider our accomplishments with that in mind. Any business would be challenged to absorb 42 percent growth as we have in Brazil. While we have already staffed up high-demand locations, and we plan to send 100 more officers to China and Brazil in the coming year, we can't just send anyone to do this important work. We have to make sure our officers are thoroughly vetted and thoroughly trained. Consular officers hold a position of trust. They understand U.S. immigration law and have achieved a level of cultural familiarity that helps them make good decisions for our country. In China and Brazil, most of our officers also have fluency in Mandarin or Portuguese.

To conclude, let me just say that skyrocketing visa demand in China and Brazil is a good news story. We issued 35 percent more visas in China this year and 44 percent more in Brazil. That has a tremendous impact on the U.S. economy and job growth.

Now, let me turn it over to Chuck Bennett, our minister counselor for Consular Affairs in China, for more details on that situation.

MR. BENNETT: Thank you, Ed. Being on the ground in China, I'm able to provide a direct perspective on what we are seeing there and to describe the significant initiatives we are implementing. In China, we adjudicated more than one million U.S. visas for Chinese applicants during Fiscal Year 2011. In addition to the U.S. Embassy in Beijing, our consulates in Shanghai, Guangzhou, Shenyang, and Chengdu all contributed to this accomplishment, which represents a 34 percent increase over last year.

Today, at each of these locations, applicants are able to secure visa interview appointments in eight days or less, and we're going to continue to reduce visa interview wait time to the greatest extent possible. That will entail adding staff and eliminating inefficiencies wherever possible. Over the next year, we will add 50 more positions in China. To keep wait times down, over the past three summers, especially in Beijing and Shanghai, we've added temporary staff and extended our work hours. We'll continue to send temporary duty officers to manage seasonal spikes in demand. We're working to expand hours to maximize use of our current facilities, and we are in the process in China of adding 22 additional visa interview windows in Guangzhou, 20 new windows in Shanghai, 8 new windows in Chengdu, and 8 new windows in Beijing.

As Ed said, our goal is to expand our capacity to adjudicate more than 2.2 million visas by 2013. We also want to issue longer validity visas for Chinese tourists and business travelers, but U.S. law requires reciprocal treatment for U.S. citizens. Right now, U.S. citizens receive Chinese visas valid for just 12 months. Our ambassador to China, Gary Locke, recently addressed this issue at senior levels to the Chinese Government. Longer validity visas would benefit both countries.

Before I turn it over to Don, I want to make one last important point. We aren't turning away qualified applicants. Once the security concerns are addressed, we don't have any quota or limitation on the number of visas we can issue to Chinese applicants. In fact, we issue visas to nearly 90 percent of all Chinese applicants who apply.

Now let me turn it over to Don Jacobson, our minister counselor for Consular Affairs in Brazil.

MR. JACOBSON: Thank you, Chuck, and good afternoon to everyone. In Brazil, we're also taking significant steps to meet the growing visa demand. Mission China serves as a good model. In Brazil, we adjudicated more than 820,000 visas in the fiscal year that just ended, an increase of more than 42 percent over the previous year. Our goal in Brazil is to have the capacity to adjudicate more than 1.8 million visas by 2013, and so we're looking at ways to expand and remodel our

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consular facilities to interview more visa applicants.

With this in mind, in September, the Department sent a team of experts to Brazil to survey the possibilities for improving an expanding our facilities. Now, while visa wait times in Brazil are not as low as in China, we're doing everything we can to bring down the wait. Since 2005, consular officer staffing in Brazil has doubled. It's going to double again this year. Since 2008, to meet short-term staffing needs, more than 50 officers have worked in Brazil on temporary assignments, providing an additional 2,000 days of service. In October alone, we adjudicated more than 90,000 visas in Brazil, 67 percent more than October of last year.

We're currently hosting a large contingent of temporary duty officers in Brazil to reduce the backlog. Since the surge began in September of 2011, we've reduced the backlog by more than 10 percent. As in China, we've extended our work hours. Over the summer, we also hosted super Saturday events at our consular posts across Brazil, adjudicating nearly 8,000 visa applications in just two days. Furthermore, to increase our capacity to process more visas, we're adding more than 50 more consular officer positions over the coming year. We estimate that one officer can process about 20,000 applications a year.

To reiterate what Ed Ramotowski stated earlier, we want the shortest possible wait times, and we're working toward that goal while keeping America safe. Thank you.

MR. ECHARD: Thank you, gentlemen. Operator, please open up for questions.

OPERATOR: All right. Thank you. At this time, we are ready to begin a question and answer session. If you would like to ask a question, please press the *1 and record your name. To withdraw your question, press *2. Once again, please press the *1. One moment.

Our first question comes from Christine Brouwer, ABC News.

QUESTION: Hi there. Thank you for that briefing. A question from us is we understand your intention to add more consular officers to both Brazil and China, but are any plans to add any more visa processing locations? We spoke a few people who had problems just getting to locations where they could actually apply for visas, sometimes having to travel hundreds of miles. Is there any – are there any plans to either expand locations that can handle these applications or to do – conduct interviews remotely.

MR. JACOBSON: We are looking at that possibility, but it's complicated because of – it requires funding and Congressional approval, and we have to – that's part of the process. But we're looking at all different options for expanding our capacity, and we quite agree that it would be extremely helpful to be able to have operations in more locations.

I'm sorry. This is Don Jacobson from Brazil.

MR. BENNETT: If I can just address that from the China perspective, again, as Don said, we are looking at the possibility in China. We also have the issue of getting approval from the Chinese Government to open new facilities, which in China can be a lengthy process.

QUESTION: Okay. Thank you. And are there any – is there any way that you might be able to conduct interviews remotely? Is there any talk about that, or do security issues simply dictate that that's not possible?

MR. JACOBSON: It's not currently permitted under existing legislation. And from a security prospective, there are real

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concerns about that. There's really no substitute for having the applicant in front of the officer to be able to assess their real situation.

QUESTION: Okay. Thank you.

OPERATOR: Next question is from William Wan, *Washington Post*.

QUESTION: Hi. Thanks so much for doing this. It's really helpful. She had asked a similar question, but I was wondering, the conversation – have there been any conversations about visa parity in terms of difficulties of U.S. citizens to obtain visas to China and whether that leaves any role in terms of the conversations with the Chinese as far as how U.S. visas work. Are – have any of those issues emerged from the last years? There's been this huge increase in visas from China.

MR. BENNETT: Is the – you were breaking up a little bit. Is the question concerning the difficulty that American business people have getting visas to go to China?

QUESTION: Yes. Exactly, if there's any conversations about visa parity in terms of difficulties or issues.

MR. BENNETT: Yeah. As a matter of fact there is. And when I spoke about the visa reciprocity issue and the issue that Ambassador Locke had raised with senior officials in the Chinese Government, one of the points that the ambassador made very strongly was that, currently, China does not normally issue full one-year validity visas to U.S. citizens who are traveling there.

Based on U.S. law and regulation, we need to have reciprocity in this regard. And so one of the issues that we're always speaking to the Chinese about is ensuring that the visas that are issued to U.S. – not only business people but any U.S. traveler traveling to China meets the full reciprocal agreement that we have with the Chinese, which is one-year visas. And until we can get to a point where we're satisfied that they routinely issue that, we – it's difficult to move beyond that to increase reciprocity.

QUESTION: Great. Thanks a lot.

OPERATOR: Next question is from Bingru Wang, Phoenix TV.

QUESTION: Thank you very much. My question to Mr. Bennett on the Chinese visa issue, their two Senators, they introduced a bill which would provide three-year residential visa for Chinese nationals who invest \$500,000 in the U.S. homes. I'm wondering if you have any response to this bill. Thank you.

MR. BENNETT: Yeah. We can't comment on any pending legislation, I'm afraid. So I'm aware of those bills, but I have no comment on that – on those bills at this time.

OPERATOR: All right. Next question is from Jordi Zamora, AFP.

QUESTION: Hi. Yeah. Thanks for taking my question. I was wondering, what is the reason behind of this, such an increase? I'm thinking especially about Brazil. It is only for matter of tourism, is because the economic growth in that country? And also what is the – how Brazil receives U.S. citizen? Is this the same kind of treatment, how long does it take to have a visa to go, to come to Brazil? Thank you.

MR. JACOBSON: The growth in visa demand in Brazil, as you say, is a function of the robust economy in Brazil. They're growing very quickly. Their currency is very strong against the dollar and Brazilians are coming to America to visit Disney

World and do lots of shopping and see lots of part of America now. So the – to answer your question about Brazilians – I mean visas for Americans to go to Brazil, the – Brazil does require visas of Americans, but I am not aware of any delays in getting visas. It is reciprocal in terms of they can also issue 10-year visas just as we issue to Brazilians.

QUESTION: Can I have a follow up? Hello?

MR. JACOBSON: Certainly.

QUESTION: Yeah. If I may follow up on this. It's regarding Brazil again. Do you think that there's any sort of impact on the issue of undocumented immigrants coming from Brazil? I heard some time ago that, maybe from Brazil, some people are coming and staying in U.S. illegally after their visa run out.

MR. JACOBSON: We've not being seeing much of that. We do periodic validation studies to verify that people we've issued visas to have returned and our – from what we've been seeing, the overstay rate is quite low for Brazil.

QUESTION: Thank you.

OPERATOR: And next question is from Christine Brouwer, ABC News.

QUESTION: Hi. Thanks for taking another question from me. I just want to clarify, the hundred consular officers that are being sent to both China and Brazil in the next year, are those all permanent positions?

MR. BENNETT: They are. Yes. There's a couple of different programs. Some of these people – many of these people are just new Foreign Service officers. And in the Foreign

Service, often the first two tours in an officer's career are spent doing consular work. We also have a new program where we're bringing on, what we are calling, limited, non-career appointees. That is, people who are already trained in Mandarin Chinese and in Portuguese for Brazil, and these folks are coming in basically on one-year contracts, which are renewable for up to five years. They are going through all the same training that a Foreign Service officer would go through and some additional training. The advantage is that they already have language skills. And then based upon their performance, their contract can be renewed up to five years.

MR. RAMOTOWSKI: One of our challenges in meeting demand both in Brazil and China is just we don't have enough Chinese and Portuguese speakers coming in at the entry level who already have those languages. So this program is going to help us get more people on the ground quickly.

QUESTION: Thank you.

OPERATOR: Once again if you do have a question, please press the *1.

All right. We do have a question from Lachlan Carmichael, AFP.

QUESTION: Yeah. Just following up on my colleague's question, but this time about China, what's the reason for the surge in demand from China for visas?

MR. BENNETT: I think it's, similar causes – a growing middle class in China, continued year-on-year growth in the economy, and just an interest in traveling overseas and visiting new places. We processed a million visas in China last year. That's a very small percentage of the Chinese population, of course, but we continue to see strong interest in travel

to the U.S. I'll also mention that in the China context, about 160,000 of those 1 million visas were student visas. Chinese are now the largest foreign national group of students in the United States at U.S. universities and colleges. And so that's been an area where there has been a huge amount of growth also over the last five or six years.

QUESTION: Thank you.

OPERATOR: Our next question is from Sarah Clark, *Orlando Sentinel*.

QUESTION: Yes. Can you detail how many officers you currently have in both of those countries, if you're increasing with 50 new officers in the coming year?

MR. JACOBSON: In Brazil, we have just shy of 50 officers. It – I think 49 or 50. So this is really going to be more than 100 percent increase for us in Brazil.

MR. BENNETT: In China, we currently have about 100 officers, just under 100 officers, working in our Embassy and consulates.

QUESTION: Thank you.

OPERATOR: Okay. Once again, if you do have a question, please press the *1.

There are no other questions at this time.

MR. ECHARD: All right. Thank you.

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