

Indian scientist's visa denial sparks outrage

U.S. Embassy in New Delhi issues unusual statement of regret

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A decision two weeks ago by a U.S. consulate in India to refuse a visa to a prominent Indian scientist has triggered heated protests in that country and set off a major diplomatic flap on the eve of President Bush's first visit to India.

The incident has also caused embarrassment at the highest reaches of the American scientific establishment, which has worked to get the State Department to issue a visa to Goverdhan Mehta, who said the U.S. consulate in the south Indian city of Chennai told him that his expertise in chemistry was deemed a threat.

In the face of outrage in India, the U.S. Embassy in New Delhi issued a highly unusual statement of regret, and yesterday the State Department said officials are reaching out to the scientist to resolve his case.

"It is very strange logic," said Mehta, reached at his home in Bangalore early this morning India time. "Someone is insulted and hurt and you ask him to come back a second round."

The consulate told Mehta "you have been denied a visa" and invited him to submit additional information, according to an official at the National Academy of Sciences who saw a copy of the document. Mehta said in a written account obtained by The Washington Post that he was humiliated, accused of "hiding things" and being dishonest, and told that his work is dangerous because of its potential applications in chemical warfare.

Mehta denied that his work has anything to do with weapons. He said that he would provide his passport if a visa were issued, but that he would do nothing further to obtain the document: "If they don't want to give me a visa, so be it."

'Most degrading experience of my life'

The scientist told Indian newspapers that his dealing with the U.S. consulate was "the most degrading experience of my life." Mehta is president of the International Council for Science, a Paris-based organization comprising the national scientific academies of a number of countries. The council advocates that scientists should have free access to one another.

Visa rejections or delays for foreign academics after the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks have led to widespread complaints by U.S. universities and scientific organizations, but the new incident comes when things are improving, said Wendy White, director of the Board of International Scientific Organizations. The board was set up by the National Academy of Sciences and has helped about 3,000 scientists affected by the new policies.

"This leaves a terrible impression of the United States," said White, who has seen a copy of the consulate's form letter to Mehta. In an interview yesterday, she added that top scientists had worked with senior State Department officials to reverse the decision before Bush's visit next week. "We want people to know the U.S. is an open and welcoming country."

Mehta's case has especially angered Indians because he was a director of the Indian Institute of Science and is a science adviser to India's prime minister. He has visited the United States "dozens of times," he said, and the University of Florida at Gainesville had invited him to lecture at an international conference.

State Department spokesman Justin Higgins denied yesterday that the United States had rejected Mehta's visa and said the consulate had merely followed standard procedure in dealing with applicants with certain kinds of scientific expertise.

In his written account, the scientist said that after traveling 200 miles, waiting three hours with his wife for an interview and being accused of deception, he was outraged when his accounts of his research were questioned and he was told he needed to fill out a detailed questionnaire.

"I indicated that I have no desire to subject myself to any further humiliation and asked that our passports be returned forthwith," he wrote. The consular official, Mehta added, "stamped the passports to indicate visa refusal and returned them."

'As dumb as you can get'

Higgins declined to address why the U.S. Embassy in New Delhi had taken the unusual step of saying it "regrets" that Mehta was "upset by the visa interview process."

In its statement, the embassy said: "At the United States mission in India, and to varying degrees at every U.S. mission worldwide, certain cases involving high technology issues are among those that require review before consular officers in the field are authorized to issue a visa."

White said that issuing a visa would solve the immediate problem, but that it would be more difficult to undo the damage caused by the dispute. Mehta is a high-profile example of the hurdles imposed by the new visa procedures. They require all applicants to appear in person for interviews that are done in only a few locations in large countries such as India, White said.

"If you tell an American, 'If you want a visa to go to India, you have to go to Dallas, Chicago, L.A. or New York, and while you are there, you are going to be fingerprinted, photographed and asked about everything you have done in your research for the last 40 years,' we would find this procedure untenable as Americans," she said.

Mehta said in his written account that he had been invited by the University of Florida, where he has previously been a distinguished visiting professor. White said she expected the International Council for Science to issue a statement today about the case involving its president.

White and William Wulf, president of the National Academy of Engineering, acknowledged that young American consular officers in foreign countries have been under tremendous pressure since the Sept. 11 attacks.

"Making the wrong decision would be career-ending, so they play it safe, not really understanding the macroscopic implications of their decision," Wulf said. "Denying a visa to the president of ICSU is probably as dumb as you can get. This is not the way we can make friends."