

## Passport crunch over, State Department says

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**WASHINGTON (AP)** -- The State Department said Friday it has worked through a massive backlog in passport applications and that processing times are back to normal after months of major delays that disrupted summer travel plans for thousands of Americans.

The department said steps taken to deal with the crisis -- the hiring of hundreds of new adjudicators, temporary transfers of employees to passport centers and the opening of a new facility to handle the deluge -- had brought the waiting period for a standard application back to six to eight weeks and three weeks for expedited service.

"We're very pleased that we've been able to get back to the customer service standard that has long been our desire, and pleased that we've been able to do so in accordance with the commitments that we made to the American people and Congress," deputy spokesman Tom Casey said.

"So, good news, and we hope that this will ensure that Americans will be able to receive their passports, now and in the future, in a timely and secure fashion," he told reporters.

At one point during the summer, the processing time had stretched to more than three months for a standard application, infuriating many would-be overseas travelers and sparking a rash of harsh criticism from lawmakers.

The surge was largely the result of new post-September 11, 2001 immigration rules that took effect in January requiring U.S. citizens to have passports for air travel to Canada, Mexico, the Caribbean and Bermuda. Those rules were suspended temporarily until the end of September due to the inability of the State Department to handle the crush of applications.

Casey said the State Department has issued more than 16 million passports since the beginning of budget year 2007 last October and is now poised to get up to 17 million by September 30. The department issued just over 12 million passports the previous year.

By the end of September, Casey said the department will be able to process 500,000 applications per week due to the increase in personnel and capacity at passport production centers.