

Thousands of Scholarships Lift Saudi Enrollments in U.S.

By JOEL BRINKLEY

WASHINGTON, Dec. 17 - Urgently trying to improve relations with the United States, the Saudi Arabian government is promoting a scholarship program that has already more than doubled the number of new Saudi enrollments at American colleges and universities since last year.

The program, aimed in part at reducing widespread hostility in the Saudi public toward the United States, has reversed a steady plunge in Saudi students here that started immediately after the Sept. 11, 2001, terror attacks.

The Saudi government offered 5,000 students full four-year scholarships, complete with living allowances. About two-thirds of the 5,000 students enrolled in American schools this fall, the State Department said, and the number would have been higher had the United States been able to process all the visa requests.

The academic relationship between the countries has been an area of concern for senior officials. James Oberwetter, the United States ambassador to Saudi Arabia, said in an interview that the drop "in exposure the population has had to the United States" was not helpful for the Saudis "at a time when they need to be looking outward instead of inward."

The United States had long been the nation of choice for wealthy Saudis to educate their children. Prince Turki al-Faisal, the Saudi ambassador to Washington and a graduate of Georgetown University, noted that two-thirds of his nation's cabinet ministers had been educated in the United States. "We have a kind of umbilical relationship" with American universities, he said in an interview.

Still, after the Sept. 11 attacks and the revelation that 15 of the 19 hijackers were Saudi, stories of mistreatment and hostility toward Saudis in the United States began flowering in the Saudi press and in public discussions. They continue today. An article last week in the Arab News, an English-language Saudi newspaper, said that in Riyadh, an American Embassy employee had called Saudis waiting in line for visas "animals." And most Saudis who have traveled here in recent years tell stories about long delays and hard-edged questioning upon arrival.

The number of Saudi students arriving to study here dropped from more than 4,000 in 2001 to a low of just 1,008 last year, according to a State Department count of new education visas. In a broader reflection of the tensions between the nations, the total number of visiting Saudis fell from 46,636 in 2001 to about 12,000 last year.

"The relationship was nearly destroyed," Mr. Oberwetter said.

In April, however, Abdullah, then the crown prince, visited President Bush at his ranch in Crawford, Tex., and among the issues they mentioned in a joint statement was a desire to "increase the number of young Saudi students to travel and study in the United States."

This summer, the Saudi Education Ministry announced the scholarship program and for the first two weeks, specified in newspaper advertisements that they were for study in the United States. Later, the ministry authorized scholarships to other nations' schools as well.

But the visa problem has been significant. The visa offices at the American Embassy in Riyadh Saudi Arabia were overwhelmed by applications from scholarship students, in part because staff had been reduced for security reasons.

Last December, attackers stormed the heavily guarded United States Consulate in Jidda, killing five local employees before four of the five gunman were shot dead. Because of continuing security concerns, the consulate stopped offering visa services last month, reducing the number of visa stations open for business.

Mr. Oberwetter is in Washington this week, and one of his missions, he said, is to get approval to install more visa officers. The State Department does not want to put more personnel into Saudi Arabia at a time when foreigners there are targets of attack.

As it is, Mr. Oberwetter announced in Riyadh last week that students would have to wait eight weeks to get an appointment for a visa interview, and he urged them to "plan well ahead."

The Saudi Embassy's cultural and educational mission in Washington manages the scholarship program, and on Thursday, Mazyed I. Almazyed, the cultural attaché, waved toward some 15 staff members charged with processing applications and scholarships, saying: "We are at a standstill. Because of the visa problem, everything is stopped."

Maura Harty, the assistant secretary of state for consular affairs, noted that visa approval times, once the application has been taken, had been reduced from several months to no more two weeks. As for the eight-week appointment delay, she said the closure at Jidda and the sudden crush of applications had combined to overwhelm the embassy.

On Thursday and Friday, 45 Saudi students arrived in Washington. Prince Turki visited with them at the embassy on Friday morning. They sat quietly in their new winter coats and stocking caps as he told them they were ambassadors with "the message that Saudi Arabia is hoping for a better future where the Saudi people will enjoy the benefits of your education here."

He urged the students, most of them recent high school graduates, not to socialize only among themselves but to get to know Americans. "Learn the ways of American life," he told them. "The American people are friendly and hospitable."

Mr. Almazyed said many Saudi students arrived with preconceptions that were less generous. He lectures them to "forget all that." Usually he visits students a few weeks after they have enrolled; he recalled one typical encounter this fall.

"This is not what I expected," he said the student had told him.

"In what way is it different?" Mr. Almazyed asked him.

"Oh, well, you know," was all the student would say. But he was smiling.