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Green-Card Lottery Record --- 15 Million Seek to Settle in U.S. Through Visa Program That Leaves It to Chance

By Miriam Jordan

A record 15 million people around the world this year entered America's green-card lottery, an immigration program that offers a quick path to legal, permanent U.S. residence for 50,000 people a year -- selected purely by the luck of the draw.

The so-called "diversity visa program" lottery drew nearly 25% more entries than last year, according to the State Department. The limit of 50,000 green-card recipients through the program was established years ago by Congress. Some lawmakers are now calling for an end to the program.

The annual lottery creates a buzz across the developing world. Applicants from Kenya to Khazakstan brave lines at Internet kiosks to fill out electronic entries. In the final hours of the month-long enrollment period, which this year closed Nov. 3, entries were rolling in at the rate of 62,000 an hour.

Recent winners already in the U.S. include cab drivers, professional athletes, Internet entrepreneurs and military personnel.

"I would never have started a company that created value in the United States if I hadn't won the lottery," said Adam Gries, a 29-year-old Israeli who runs an Internet start-up in San Francisco. "I would be creating companies in Israel."

Critics say the program poses security risks, lures uneducated immigrants and enables individuals with no connection to the U.S. to get into the country more quickly than those sponsored by relatives and employers.

"More and more people are learning about this program and are dumbfounded that we have it in the first place," said Rep. Bob Goodlatte (R., Va.), who has introduced legislation to abolish it. "Our chances have never been better to kill it," he added, following his party's successes in the midterm elections and amid high unemployment in the U.S.

Launched in 1990 to promote diversity in the immigrant population, the green-card lottery is now open to people from almost anywhere in the world, except countries that already boast a large number of nationals in the U.S., including Mexico, China, India and the Philippines. No special skills are required: A high-school diploma suffices. Lottery winners eventually qualify for U.S. citizenship.

The number of entries has been rising each year. This year's total is more than 2.5 times greater than five years ago, when the lottery attracted 5.5 million entries. Immigration scholars say possible reasons include the spread of Internet connectivity and increased awareness of the lottery, which costs nothing to enter.

"There is no faster way to get a green card to come to the United States," said Mark Jacobsen, an immigration lawyer. "The American dream is held out as a torch to the entire world."

In Africa and Asia, banners advertising the lottery festoon remote villages and teeming city alleys, where Internet cafes do brisk business helping applicants fill out entry forms, which must be completed online.

In flood-prone Bangladesh, "it seems everyone in the country knows about it," said Sandra Ingram, consular chief in Dhaka, who holds news conferences during lottery season.

After an electronic draw, about 100,000 applicants will be notified in May -- twice as many as ultimately will be eligible to move to the U.S. -- to undergo interviews, background checks and medical exams.

There is no cap on how many times the same person can enter the lottery -- but no country can represent more than 7% of the total visas issued in a given year. For the fiscal year ended Sept. 30, 2009, nationals from Ethiopia, Egypt and Nigeria were the top recipients. This year, Bangladesh and Nigeria supplied the most entries.

Five years since arriving as a single man in San Diego, lottery winner Tsegaye Kedir of Ethiopia is married and a U.S. citizen preparing to attend college.

"I came because the U.S. has big opportunity for work, to get an education and to live a better life than in my country," said the 29-year-old, who drives a taxi.

Zoltan Mesko, a rookie punter with the New England Patriots, came to the U.S. from Romania thanks to the program, after his family won a spot in the lottery when he was a child. Hundreds of winners have gone on to enlist in the U.S. armed forces.

Although the program accounts for a small percentage of the million or so legal immigrants who enter the U.S. each year, critics say it diverts scarce State Department resources from processing more important visa categories.

"It shows that the U.S. immigration system doesn't make sense," said Bernard Wolfsdorf, an immigration attorney. "We are allocating visas based on luck instead of knowledge."

Rep. Goodlatte of Virginia and others also voice concern that the program is inviting to terrorists, because people don't need to prove they have ties to the U.S. and are guaranteed permanent residency, which allows them to get almost any job -- even handling explosives.

Hesham Mohammed Ali Hedayet, an Egyptian who killed two people at an El Al airline counter in Los Angeles in 2002, was able to remain in the U.S. after overstaying his visitor's visa because his wife won the green-card lottery.

The State Department said those who get in through the lottery are subjected to the same stringent security review as other visa applicants.

Fraud is another challenge. The fervor for a shot at the American Dream prompted one Bangladeshi man to submit 2,800 entries, the State Department said; just one entry per year is allowed.

But if an entrant is disqualified one year, he or she can still enter the next year.

"All is forgiven, it's a new lottery," said one U.S. official.