



Trump curbs immigrants from 6 nations in election-year push

Colleen Long and Nomaan Merchant

January 31, 2020

The Trump administration announced Friday that it was restricting immigrants from six additional countries that officials said failed to meet minimum security standards, as part of an election-year push to further clamp down immigration.

Officials said immigrants from Kyrgyzstan, Myanmar, Eritrea, Nigeria, Sudan and Tanzania will face new restrictions in obtaining certain visas to come to the United States. But it is not a total travel ban, unlike President Donald Trump's earlier effort that generated outrage around the world for targeting Muslims.

Trump signed a proclamation on the restrictions Friday; they go into effect Feb. 21

The announcement came as Trump tries to promote his crackdown on immigration, highlighting a signature issue that motivated supporters in 2016 and hoping it has the same effect this November. The administration recently announced birth tourism restrictions, is touting the sharp decline in crossings at the U.S.-Mexico border and citing progress on building the border wall.

“It is fundamental to national security, and the height of common sense, that if a foreign nation wishes to receive the benefits of immigration and travel to the United States, it must satisfy basic security conditions outlined by America's law enforcement and intelligence professionals,” the White House said in a statement.

Kyrgyzstan, Myanmar, Eritrea and Nigeria would have all immigrant visas suspended; those are applicants seeking to live in the U.S. permanently. They include visas for people sponsored by family members or employers as well as the diversity visa program that made up to 55,000 visas available in the most recent lottery. In December, for example, 40,666 immigrant visas were granted worldwide.

Sudan and Tanzania will have diversity visas suspended. The State Department uses a computer drawing to select people from around the world for up to 55,000 diversity visas. Nigeria is already excluded from the lottery along with other countries that had more than 50,000 natives immigrate to the U.S. in the previous five years.

Nonimmigrant visas were not affected — awarded to those traveling to the U.S. for a temporary stay. They include visas for tourists, those doing business or people seeking medical treatment. During December, for example, about 650,760 nonimmigrant visas were granted worldwide.

The new restrictions were swiftly met with criticism from immigrant advocates who slammed them as a new Muslim ban.

Sudan and Kyrgyzstan are majority-Muslim countries. Nigeria, the seventh-most populous nation in the world with more than 200 million people, is about evenly split between Christians and Muslims but has the world's fifth-largest population of Muslims, according to the Pew Research Center.

Omar Jadwat, director of the American Civil Liberties Union Immigrants' Rights Project, said the previous visa restrictions should not be expanded.

"President Trump is doubling down on his signature anti-Muslim policy — and using the ban as a way to put even more of his prejudices into practice by excluding more communities of color," he said. "Families, universities, and businesses in the United States are paying an ever-higher price for President Trump's ignorance and racism."

Nigeria has nothing in common with the other nations, said David Olowokere, chairman of the engineering technologies department at Texas Southern University in Houston. The Nigerian economy is Africa's largest, with a 2019 gross domestic product of almost \$445 billion.

"You can't develop as rapidly as Nigeria without having some growth problems," said the Nigerian-born professor. "But you can't put Nigeria in the same category as those other countries.

"I can tell you that any Nigerian would think that this does not make any sense," Olowokere said.

Rumors swirled for weeks about a potential new ban, and initially Belarus was considered. But Secretary of State Mike Pompeo was headed to the Eastern European nation as the restrictions were announced, and Belarus was not on the list.

Acting Homeland Security Secretary Chad Wolf said Homeland Security officials would work with the countries on bolstering their security requirements to help them work to get off the list. Wolf said some nations were able to comply with the new standards in time.

"These countries for the most part want to be helpful, they want to do the right thing, they have relationships with the U.S., but for a variety of different reasons failed to meet those minimum requirements," Wolf said.

The current restrictions follow Trump's travel ban, which the Supreme Court upheld as lawful in 2018. They are significantly softer than Trump's initial ban, which had suspended travel from Iraq, Iran, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, and Yemen for 90 days, blocked refugee admissions for 120 days, and suspended travel from Syria. The government suspended most immigrant and nonimmigrant visas to applicants from those countries. Exceptions are available for students and those with "significant contacts" in the U.S.

Trump has said a travel ban is necessary to protect Americans. But opponents have argued that he seeks to target Muslim countries, pointing to comments he made as a candidate in 2015 calling for a "total and complete shutdown of Muslims entering the United States until our country's representatives can figure out what is going on."

The seven countries in the ban include nations with little or no diplomatic relationship to the U.S. and five majority-Muslim nations: Iran, Libya, Somalia, Syria, and Yemen.

Wolf said immigrant visas were chosen because people with those visa are the most difficult to remove after arriving in the United States.

The initial ban was immediately blocked by the courts and led to a monthslong process to develop clear standards and federal review processes to try to withstand legal muster.

Wolf said officials examined countries for compliance with minimum standards for identification and information-sharing, and assessed whether countries properly tracked terrorism or public safety risks. Officials looked at whether countries used modern passports, shared information that the U.S. could validate on travelers and identified possible criminal suspects in a way that the U.S. could see before entry. They evaluated responses and ranked nations.

Government agencies then discussed whether countries had different, but important, contacts with the U.S. and then decided on restrictions.

“Really the only way to mitigate the risk is to impose these travel restrictions,” Wolf said.

The announcement had been expected around the third anniversary of the Jan. 27, 2017, enactment of the first order.

David Bier, an immigration policy analyst with the Cato Institute, a Libertarian think tank, said the expansion had no foundation and had “even less of a rational basis than all its prior iterations.”

“This list of nations has no foundation in the security factors on which it was supposed to be based,” he said. “It’s just another arbitrary exercise designed to keep out legal immigrants.”