



Biden's Consulate Closures and Travel Bans Limit Legal Immigration and Travel, Impeding Economic Recovery from COVID

Charles Frantes

September 9, 2021

As of mid-August, 62 percent of US consulates remained fully or partially closed, even though vaccines are now widely available and all travelers to the US must receive negative COVID tests, a recent report from the CATO institute revealed. Meanwhile, Biden continues perpetuating his executive order travel bans that have prevented legal immigrants and travelers in many countries from entering the US.

Recently, over 1,000 non-citizen postdoctoral research assistants with PhDs sent a letter to the federal government asking for a solution to Biden's travel bans that would allow for J-1 students and H-1B Specialty Occupation Visa holders in the banned countries to enter the US. It highlights how the bans are preventing highly skilled workers from around the world from coming to the US. The letter states:

“We, as immigrant and non-immigrant researchers affiliated with academic and non-academic institutions across the U.S., hope to highlight the current circumstances that put thousands of international students, postdoctoral scholars, junior faculty, and researchers at an unprecedented level of unease and discomfort.”

Biden continues to maintain his January 5th "Proclamation on the Suspension of Entry as Immigrants and Non-Immigrants of Certain Additional Persons Who Pose a Risk of Transmitting Coronavirus Disease." Biden's executive orders effectively banned legal immigrants and travelers in Europe and many countries including Brazil, South Africa, and India from entering the US, with a few exceptions. Has this really helped prevent the spread of COVID when US citizens have been allowed to travel freely to and from those countries since June and negative COVID tests are required upon entry? Biden's refusal to reciprocate open travel from Europe has also angered some EU officials, who are now advising European nations to reinstate a ban on non-essential travel from the US.

The postdocs' letter further states that:

“Remarkably, such a 'science-based' approach does not apply to certain categories of entrants, including U.S. citizens, lawful permanent residents, members of the U.S. Armed Forces, and F-1 or M-1 visa-holding students (while it does apply, for instance, to J-1 students and H-1B Specialty Occupation Visa holders),”

and

“Strikingly, students holding F-1 or M-1 visas are not subject to the proclamation and are therefore able to travel internationally. While we do understand the economic boon that international students provide for academic institutions, there is no scientific rationale behind their privilege which further discriminates against, for instance, international postdoctoral scholars or students holding J-1 visas.”

A data table provided by the State Department on non-immigrant visa processing statuses and visa wait times for U.S. consular posts abroad reveals the notably slow rate at which the Biden Administration is reopening consulates. According to the CATO report, at the current rate of reopening, the State Department’s consulates will not be fully open until early 2023.

The table also lists wait times for various non-immigrant visas at open consulates, which are greatly increasing. "The wait times have grown from 95 days in April to 189 days in August for business and tourist traveler visas, from 25 to 38 days for student and exchange visitor visas, and from 40 to 51 days for all other non-immigrant visa categories," the CATO report revealed.

Some highlights: a person applying for a visitor-business traveler visa in Paris, France will wait an average of 300 days, in Calgary, Canada 379 days, and in Bogotá, Colombia 565 days.

As the US economy continues to recover from the COVID-19 pandemic with over 10 million open jobs, it will benefit from welcoming people (that test negative for COVID) who are looking to come to the US legally, whether it be for tourism, business, higher education, or much-needed employment. The Biden Administration should reopen all US consulates immediately and end its COVID travel bans on certain legal immigrants and non-immigrant visa holders and applicants.