

# Visa wait time to reduce by June 2023: US embassy

The State Department has brought in new rules for several visa categories that allow more people to opt out of interviews

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New Delhi, 10 November

The average wait time for an US visa appointment is likely to improve to pre-Covid levels only by June 2023, according to American embassy officials in New Delhi.

High demand for US visas has pushed up processing time for visa appointments for most non-immigrant visas to historic highs, a situation that is expected to persist for the next six months.

“By next summer (June-July 2023), we expect to take in as many applications as we were accepting pre-Covid,” a senior US Embassy official said. This, he added, will reduce the overall pending appointments but may not necessarily reduce the processing time.

He added that new rules had been introduced for several visa categories to allow more people to opt out of interviews, getting slots for which has become difficult.

After the embassy resumed processing routine in-person B1 and B2 visa appointments, the Department of State authorised consular officers to relax the in-person interview requirement for certain categories of applicants. The interview waiver is applicable for visa types F, H-1, H-3 and H-4, non-blanket L, M, O, P and Q, and academic J visas until December 31, 2022.

Called a “dropbox”, the embassy is heavily banking on this latest intervention to bring down pendency. Currently, it is prioritising petition-based employment visas for temporary workers (visa types H, L, O, P and Q). This includes key visas such as H-1B. Officials said



## MANAGING THE QUEUE

■ **Tourist & business visas:** Interview waiver for repeat applicants visiting US within 4 years

■ **Student visas:** Interview waiver for applicants who have earlier been to the United States on short-stay visa

■ **Employment visas like H-1B:** 100,000 new interview slots

many Indian H-1B visa holders (tech workers) had managed to visit India only post-Covid, and were now going back to the US. “We recently launched 100,000 new interview slots for H and L categories. But wait times remain as high as nine months, although expected to reduce gradually,” the official mentioned above said.

According to travel agents, prior to Covid-19 it used to take US visa applicants a week to a fortnight on average to get appointments.

### Challenges galore

Wait times for short-term tourist or business visas (B1 and B2) will remain long in the foreseeable future, especially for first-time applications, another official said. “However, the rules for repeat applicants have been made easier. Applicants who have visited the US in the

past four years can use the dropbox feature. Earlier, this was restricted to applicants who had visited the US in the past one year,” he added.

Visa operations also continue to be hampered by the lack of trained personnel post-Covid. The embassy is considering deploying more Department of State employees to ease the process. Among the personnel, the vice consuls who conduct visa interviews are a key segment. Before the pandemic, there used to be about 90 vice consuls in India.

Another option would be to transfer visa application cases that have gone through initial vetting to Department of State resources outside India.

Pre-Covid, visa applications from India had risen to a high of 1.1-1.2 million per year. “India remains the number one priority for Washington DC. Given how stringent restrictions on movement remain in place in China, India may become the second largest recipient of US

visas in 2023, after Mexico,” the official said.

### Student visa

Student applicants are also expected to be accommodated when the college admission season nears. Most commonly, deadlines for US colleges and universities fall between November and December while academic sessions start in January.

Current rules allow students to apply for a visa 120 days before their classes start. As of Thursday, the wait times to get appointments for student visas (F, M and J) that require an interview are 42 days in New Delhi and Mumbai, and 43 and 92 days for visa types that don’t require an interview.

In a key move, the Department of State has relaxed the interview requirement for student applicants who have earlier been to the US on a short-stay visa. “Also, provided students consult with their schools at the earliest, and get their applications in order, the wait time is usually much lower than the time shown on the Department of State website,” one of the officials said.

He stressed that the embassy expects the number of student visa applications to rise by 10 per cent, the usual rate of annual growth prevalent before the pandemic. The US receives 82,000 student visa applications annually from India.

Officials said that comparisons with China were unfair given that visa demand continues to remain low due to continuing Covid restrictions. “China usually does 110,000-120,000 visa applications per year. But that figure has now come down to 50,000 as a result of the lockdowns,” the official quoted above said.