

Hearing: House Foreign Affairs Committee

07/21/2020 10:00 AM EDT

[Representative Joaquín Castro](#)

Good morning. Congressman.

Unidentified

It is services lady, can you on virtually is set up and everything we can go ahead and start if you already. It has been a few quick instructions. Then turn it to you in a moment. In accordance with House rules and regulations, the host will mute all pretense and other than Chairman Castro, all participants are asked to keep themselves muted when not actively engaged in the discussion, but helpful.

It echoes or other discussions insist on speaking, but no Rotary mute themselves will do so to limit and ground audio members and witnesses are responsible for meeting themselves anytime they wish to be heard. It may take a few seconds for a microphone to mute. So please keep that in mind when speaking a timekeeper will monitor the time for this hearing.

If you're joining virtually, you can view the timer by switching your personal view and the upper right corner of your screen to grid view. If you're on a computer, you can also pin the timer by right, clicking or hovering your cursor over the timer icon and pressing the thumbtack. With that, we're ready to begin.

Chairman Castro, if you could please count down from five so that the system displays your video, then please pause for five additional seconds. All the recording begins and then start the proceeding.

[Representative Joaquín Castro](#)

Thank you 5432 1. The Subcommittee on Oversight Investigations will come to order. Today's subject is Consular Affairs in the Kobe 19 crisis, assessing the State Department's response to the pandemic without objection without objection. The chair is authorized to declare a recess of the committee at any point and all members will have five days to submit statements, extraneous material and questions for the record subject to the length limitation in the rules to insert something into the record.

Please have your staff email, the previously mentioned address or contact full committee staff as a reminder to members, staff and all others physically present in this room. Per recent guidance from the House, the Office of the attending physician mask must be worn at all times during today's proceedings except when a member is speaking at a microphone.

Please also sanitize your seating area. The chair views these measures as a safety issue and therefore, an important matter of order and decorum for this proceeding, please keep your video function on at all times, even when you're not recognized by the chair. Members are responsible for muting and muting themselves.

And please remember to mute yourself after you finish speaking, consistent with House Resolution 965 and the accompanying regulations, staff will only mute members and witnesses as appropriate when they're not under recognition to eliminate background noise. Okay The Kobe 19 pandemic has upended our lives in ways that seemed unimaginable just a few months ago.

We can all remember late March when the entire world seemed to be changing by the minute. Now Americans across the country are faced with both a health and economic crisis that is far from over and in

many places in our country only getting worse. Unprecedented is a word that probably gets overused, but it certainly applies to the situation at the U.S. Department of State.

The U.S. Department of State faced many challenges during the pandemic. The U.S. government certainly has a long history of repatriating citizens but never before had so many Americans in so many different countries and regions needed to be repatriated. At the same time, the challenge was not simply arranging enough flights to get Americans home.

Many Americans were located in rural areas and internal lockdowns in those countries often made it very difficult to get people to the cities where flights were leaving from. There were numerous instances where people needed to take boats in order to reach buses that took them to cities. To get on flights.

Often the State Department had to negotiate each of these travel plans individually with host governments. The effort was not seamless, especially in its early days. I heard from many people who were stuck abroad and felt as though they weren't getting the support from the State Department that they needed.

There were major technology issues with the step program. There were also larger issues such as the announcement banning traveling to and from Europe, which caused a panic resulting in overcrowded conditions in airports during a pandemic. Overall, though, the State Department's repatriation effort has been a success.

State Department brought over one hundred thousand Americans home safely from one hundred and thirty six different countries and territories. This achievement is a testament to the hard work and dedication of our diplomats and civil servants who work tirelessly and often at great personal risk to themselves and their families.

The State Department also did a good job of keeping Congress informed of the repatriation efforts, which allowed us to communicate with our constituents back home and many of members of Congress. As you all know, to the witnesses. We're receiving requests from constituents often for their family members who were somewhere abroad.

It's often difficult to convince folks of the value of the State Department. I think the repatriation campaign is a fantastic example of the tangible impact on how diplomats improve the lives of Americans. When faced with an unprecedented crisis, it was the U.S. State Department. They got Americans home safely.

Of course, we cannot simply rest on our laurels. One issue that will play consular affairs for years to come is a lack of funding. Normally, the Bureau of Consular Affairs is funded entirely by fees collected for services like issuing passports and visas. Even the best of times, money is tight because the bureau can only charge what it costs to perform. These consular services and hundreds of millions of dollars must be transferred to the Treasury and now travel has been nearly non-existent since late March and is likely to remain significantly reduced in the coming years.

Today's hearing is an opportunity to discuss the bureau's fiscal situation as well. There are also other challenges that we must address. One is that many Americans now owe thousands of dollars for the repatriation flights at the State Department arranged to get them home with the economy in tatters because of the pandemic.

Many of these folks are unable to pay for these flights even as countries begin opening up. Tourism, travel restrictions against Americans remain in place in almost every country, including among our closest allies in Europe. I hope we can discuss what the State Department is doing to remove these travel restrictions.

This -- this is work that is urgent as in many Americans still remain in places other than their home the United States and they'd like to get here and folks would like to be able to travel and see relatives in other

nations as well that are not right Now not allowing Americans to travel. Finally, I think there's a danger that the Trump administration will attempt to use this pandemic as an excuse to advance its anti-immigrant agenda.

We saw this with the attempt to deport many foreign students, a move that provoked so much outrage. The administration reversed itself and this is unlikely to be the last attempt to use a pandemic for political purposes. While safety must remain paramount, not only at home, but also for diplomats and public service and embassies public servants in embassies around the world.

We cannot forego the openness that has made this country remarkable. This is true not only for moral reasons but also because immigration and tourism helped propel our economy, which is obviously in dire need. So there is a lot of ground to cover and much to discuss. But before introducing our witnesses today from the State Department, I'd like to turn it over to our ranking member Lee Zeldin of New York for his opening comments.

[Representative Lee Zeldin](#)

Thank you, Chairman Castro and thank you to our witnesses for being here today. During the early stages of the coronavirus pandemic, the State Department was faced with the ultimate challenge to protect and bring home American citizens abroad. As of June 2020, the State Department coordinated the repatriation of over 100,000 Americans on the eleven hundred and forty flights from 136 countries and territories.

They work 24/7 to repatriate American citizens from around the globe using every available resource from chartering flights to partnering with U.S. commercial airlines to printing emergency passports to make sure every American citizen who wanted to come home could. With the help of the State Department, our office was able to bring many constituents home.

Some of the stories are incredible briefly share with you too. A former Marine and his wife were taking a vacation in Peru. When everything shut down under martial law, Peru's hotels shut down, leaving them stranded with no way out. The State Department worked with them calling hotels to find space for them to sleep and make sure they were near the airport and ready to go. The moment the plane arrived. Another one of my constituents was in the Canary Islands when the corona virus pandemic hit.

His mother was being hospitalized in an ICU with pancreatitis in the Canary Islands and Spain. Working with the State Department, we were able to secure a medical jet to transport his mother to the United States. I'd like to take the opportunity to thank those at the State Department for stepping up to the plate during these unprecedented times.

We would like to hear from our witnesses today on the lessons they learned in the earliest days of the global repatriation effort. Specifically, I'd like to hear about the challenges faced in countries like Peru, where there were a significant number of American travelers who struggled getting home. We want to ensure future repatriations can be carried out more smoothly.

Over ten thousand Americans were repatriated from Peru, including constituents from my district, but the process was not easy. The Peruvian government was blocking the return of U.S. citizens until it received assurances that its own citizens could leave the U.S. essentially holding American citizens hostage.

That is unacceptable and must be met with a forceful diplomatic response that the U.S. will not tolerate this kind of threat as part of our oversight mandate, it is critical that this committee evaluate the strategies that were effective and look into possible ways to enhance states abilities To repatriate American citizens in crisis, additionally, the State Department has expressed concerns to this committee that it continues to see projected losses in fee revenues.

Congress must ensure that agencies that rely on these revenues from visa and passport fees have the personnel to handle the backlog. I look forward to hearing from our witnesses on how Congress can help thank again the chair for scheduling today's hearing and I yield back.

[Representative Joaquín Castro](#)

Thank you Ranking Member Zeldin. I'll now introduce our distinguished witnesses and thank you all again for coming to testify our witnesses. For today's hearing are Ian Brownlee, the principal deputy assistant Secretary of state for consular affairs and Karen King, the deputy assistant Secretary of state for overseas citizens services.

And I'll now recognize each witness for five minutes and without objection, Your prepared written statements will be made a part of the record and I'll first call on Mr. Brownlee for his testimony.

Ian Brownlee

Chairman Castro ranking members, Elden members of the Subcommittee, thank you for this opportunity to testify today. I'd like to thank all of your officers for your help and the support you gave us as we worked together to repatriate those thousands of your constituents. Our fellow Americans, this has truly been an all of government effort.

We've coordinated with the CDC, DHS components d o t, d, O.D and the Congress to bring home over 110,000 U.S. Citizens and Lawful Permanent Residents worldwide. Throughout this outbreak we provided first daily then twice weekly briefings to both the House and the Senate. To keep you updated on our progress in helping your constituents overseas.

Thank you also for the additional appropriations and legislative authorities you provided in recent supplementals supporting our ability to continue our work. Without that assistance, we would not be able to continue helping those U.S. citizens and lawful permanent residents overseas to help manage the changing workload and to support our staff overseas.

The Department of State established a repatriation task force including sub units focused on Congressional inquiries and cruise ships at our posts overseas officers and normally adjudicated visas shifted to American citizens services work, allowing the department to focus resources on our number one priority overseas, providing assistance to U.S. citizens, Mr. Chairman, thank you for your recognition of the Foreign Service and civil servants.

But I'd like to add to that my thanks to our locally employed staff and eligible family members who played a key role in exercising everything we did during the repatriation of these U.S. citizens. On March 20th, the department temporarily suspended routine visa processing and we began to significantly reduce passport operations.

These dual actions were taken for the health and safety of both our employees and our customers. We projected more than 50 percent drop in visa fee revenue and a similarly dramatic decline in passport fee revenue due to cover 19 with total projected losses of over 1 point. \$4 billion this fiscal year.

We also foresee a continued strain on fee revenue throughout the next fiscal year, thanks to the temporary expenditure authority provided in the cares act. We've used the carry forward balances from certain fee revenue to maintain constant operations this fiscal year. However, we are on track to substantially deplete balances in those accounts by the end of this fiscal year. Most of the Department's consular funding comes from fees collected for visa applicants and our current fee authorities allow us to use a portion of these fees

to cover the costs of providing essential services to U.S. citizens abroad. See a fee for service model relies on a stable flow of visa and passport applicants to fund those activities and extraordinary activities such as large scale repatriations.

The pandemic has severely disrupted consular fee revenue. A normal income is three point, \$5 billion annually relative to f y 2019. We expect a drop of more than 1 point, 4 billion this year and a comparable loss in the next fiscal year to continue offering emergency and routine services to U.S. citizens overseas including overseas voting assistance this election year. We need additional authority such as that requested in the FBI 2021 budget to better achieve full cost recovery and to maintain continuity of operations for these essential services until the anticipated recovery of demand currently projected for f y 2023 specifically regarding U.S. citizen services.

The administration's f y 2021 budget proposes allocating the cost of providing U.S. citizen services to security surcharges applied to certain visas. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, Mr. Zeldin. I look forward to answering your questions and those of the other members of the subcommittee, my colleague, Deputy Assistant Secretary, Catherine King, will speak more about our assistance to U.S. citizens.

[Representative Joaquín Castro](#)

Thank you, Mr. Brownlee.

Unidentified

This king think you need your microphone.

Karin King

No worries, chairman Castro ranking, member Zeldin thank you for the opportunity to testify today. I am proud to be here representing not only the office of overseas citizens services, oh yes, here in Washington, but the consular officers and locally engaged staff worldwide who assist U.S. citizens every day. Under challenging circumstances. I assure you you will not find a more dedicated team of public servants anywhere. Since the first news of the novel Corona virus outbreak in China, 6 has been at the center of an around the clock effort to inform U.S. travelers of the risks related to code. It and to bring home those caught overseas.

The global consular teams work during the cobra outbreak is giving Congress and the American public an opportunity to see the broad range of actions overseas and consular officers in the field take every day to support U.S. citizens overseas. Although the cobra pandemic is unprecedented, we are not new to the business of repatriating citizens in need.

We are not new to the business of communicating accurate, actionable lifesaving advice to citizens, protecting health and safety of U.S. citizens abroad and helping them get home when they are in need has always been my office's core mission. S. Brownlee described the extraordinary efforts the department's task force undertook to expand our capacity to support our citizens overseas and OCD is deeply grateful for the way in which the entire department mobilized during this crisis.

Oca staff comprise the core task force staffing and I pledge to you and the citizens we serve that O.C continues to monitor the provision of services to Americans worldwide and will continue to support repatriation efforts when and where needed. O.S, Yes, officers are in constant touch with their colleagues at embassies and consulates overseas and they provide policy and logistic call crisis management guidance around the clock more broadly. S maintains close contact with other state department offices as well as the interagency partners that comprise the cobia task force.

We are fully prepared to flex as needed to support any renewed demand for repatriations and we will call on the larger Bureau of Consular Affairs to bolster US AS NEEDED. US officers maintain the consular information program that is the foundation of our efforts to protect U.S. citizens. Our products include travel, advisories, country information pages and timely alerts issued directly by our overseas posts.

These products provide U.S. citizens with fact based information designed to enable Americans overseas to make well-informed decisions regarding their safety. Our travel advisories in particular have also become invaluable to professionals in the travel, insurance and private security sectors. The travel advisory system assigns each country an advice level ranging from one exercise normal precautions to four, do not travel derived from metrics based rubrics that assess crime, terrorism, kidnapping hostage, taking civil unrest, natural disaster health and other risk. The covered pandemic poses unprecedented health and logistical risks for travelers, and we are working closely with experts at the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, CDC to ensure that our travel advisories take into account the latest data in each country.

In tandem with CDC, OCR has issued an unprecedented level for do not travel global travel advisory in March. With conditions improving in some countries, we are following CDC lead and returning to previous countries specific travel advice levels. As much as I hope, we are never again confronted with a crisis requiring us to repatriate more than 100,000 U.S. citizens.

We are ready to do so if needed. In fact, we are already working on how we would do it better rethinking and innovating in the face of challenges is critically important and we are currently engaged in a lessons learned effort to identify action items that won hearts. Our responsiveness and effectiveness.

I second Pete S. Bradley's request to work with you to ensure funding for O.C s is not exclusively reliant on revenue sources outside of the department's control. The services we provide to U.S. citizens are just too important. Our office has the privilege of safeguarding the safety and security of U.S. citizens overseas.

I'm proud to lead a team of foreign affairs professionals that serve our country and fellow citizens incredibly well. I reiterate my thanks to the chairman and ranking member for this opportunity. To address you, I look forward to answering your questions.

[Representative Joaquín Castro](#)

Thank you, Ms. King, we appreciate your testimony very much and I will now recognize members for five minutes each and pursuant to House rules all time yield. It is for the purposes of questioning our witnesses because of the hybrid format of this meeting, I will recognize members by committee seniority alternating between Democrats and Republicans.

If you miss your turn members, please let our staff know and we'll circle back to you. If you seek recognition, you must UN mute your microphone and address the Chair verbally. And I'll start now by recognizing myself. The Bureau of CoUNselor Affairs is typically fUNded through the fees it collects for performing consular services.

Obviously, the pandemic has drastically reduced demand for consular services. We understand as you mentioned that the Department expects revenues to decline by one point for one point, \$5 billion in fiscal year 2020 and fiscal year 2021 with a continued decline expected in fiscal year 2022. This is an astonishing amount of money given that in recent years revenue has been about \$4 billion.

And so as I mentioned, you describe some of the fiscal situation, particularly Mr. Brownlee, but let me ask you, what actions is the bureau taking to account for these dropping revenues and what would be the impact of these falling revenues? In other words, what's the longer term impact of this?

Ian Brownlee

Thank you. Thank you very much for your question, sir. We are approaching this as you correctly note, astonishing decline in revenue down essentially two paths. One is we are seeking into effect now immediately savings in our expenditures and we have identified some or we make sure I get the number correct here. We have identified some three hundred and fifty nine million dollars in savings from the -- from the FBI 20 budget.

[Representative Joaquín Castro](#)

Do you have a sense of where those savings are coming from?

Ian Brownlee

A rough sense, a very rough sensor, we have contract for example, we have contracts overseas where we have, what we call greeters assistants, who move people through visa waiting rooms. Obviously in times of greatly reduce visa demand. We don't need people moving through waiting rooms. There are similar sort of services.

We're looking at a number of other projects as well, both domestically and overseas where we can hold off on spending money or just not spend it all. But we're looking at a fairly significant reduction in this year's spending. We are also consider what we have. We have used the money. Thank you very much to the Congress for the -- the authorities given to us in the cares act.

To go into prior Onyx, an expanded balances that have been carried forward. So without getting into great detail, our fees bring in funds from a number of different sources, visa fees, passport fees, some some surcharges, we had the broadest authority to spend.

[Representative Joaquín Castro](#)

What we call the M.R v fee, the machine readable visa fee, that was the one that was carrying us with the -- the -- the systemic decline in Visa demand that was taking place even before the coded crisis hit. We were facing a problem and we've been requesting authority to spend, for example, the passport security surcharge.

To expend those funds to support our -- our das Kings operations overseas, well, I have can I interject? Just a second, I have one more question after this. I got about two minutes left, but on this issue, let me ask you this. Are Americans going to have a different experience utilizing your services because of this?

What is that going to look like?

Ian Brownlee

Is it going to take longer or what are you anticipating? Thank you, sir for the question. With regard to our services overseas, it is our -- our key priority. We are not going to put Karen's operations out of business because of this. We are going to make sure that those operations continue unabated, consistent with what we can do safely, bringing the number of people into a waiting room that sort of things they may see some change in that respect.

Health considerations may require us to restrict the number of people in a waiting room. With regard to domestic services passport services, we have -- we initiated the provision of the education of passports beginning, I think it was on June 11th. And early June, we began -- we brought in and we declared our entire staff to be mission critical that brought approximately 50 percent of the staff back into the office to do adjudications.

And we have made significant, very significant progress in reducing the backlog that had developed in March, April, May and early June.

[Representative Joaquín Castro](#)

So to know, Well, thank you for that and I've got about 45 seconds left, 40 seconds left, but let me ask you some countries have started to not allow Americans to travel to their countries. Can y'all tell me how many nations are currently not allowing?

Ian Brownlee

Americans to travel to their countries, no sir, I cannot tell you that off the top of my head, but I will get you that answer, sir.

[Representative Joaquín Castro](#)

Sure, okay, Thank you. I'll turn over ranking member Zoltan. Thank you Mr. Chair.

[Representative Lee Zeldin](#)

Congress informed the committee yesterday that of the five hundred eighty eight million of emergency money provided to the department in the cares act, four hundred sixty two million has been notified for use, but only one hundred and four million has been obligated. What are the plans for the remaining 126 million that has not been notified? Thank you, Mr. Zeldin for the question.

Ian Brownlee

I am going to have to take that sir. I am aware of what we are doing in the Bureau of Consular Affairs. We are grateful for the support given to the Bureau of Consular Affairs in the cares act. But on the broader departmental question, we're going to have to get back to you, sir.

[Representative Joaquín Castro](#)

Thank you. Go ahead. I'm asking, yes.

Karin King

I would just say that in terms of moneys to be used for U.S. citizen repatriations, we are using all the money we need for repair patrick Asian purposes.

[Representative Lee Zeldin](#)

Would either of you have any comments as to why only one hundred and four million has been obligated so far?

Karin King

I would say again where we have needed to use the funds specifically for repatriations and for evacuations, we have used that money. So to the degree we haven't used more of it, it is because we haven't yet had the need to do so great. Thank you.

[Representative Lee Zeldin](#)

The state has said it is using their repatriation loans programs, a program account to help U.S. citizens pay for costs associated with commercial rescue flights operated by private air carriers.

Unidentified

How much funding has the State Department obligated from the repatriation loans program account for this purpose, I am going to have to get back to you with a specific number. I know that we have met our authorization.

Karin King

And so at this point, we are using k funds for repatriation purposes, but I will have to get back to you with where we are with a specific number today.

[Representative Lee Zeldin](#)

With respect to individuals who lack the means to repay such loans, what actions, if any, does the State Department take the State Department works with the Department of Treasury. So when somebody is repatriated, there is a hold put on their passport until they have repaid the loan.

Karin King

And we work very closely with Treasury to get the loan repayment.

[Representative Lee Zeldin](#)

Any insight though the sheriff an individual lacks the ability to repay the loan. The passport will remain held until they are able to repay the loan. In January 2020, state announced the launch of the Center for analytics to improve data management and analytic efforts to support diplomatic missions abroad.

The head of the center of the first ever Chief Data Officer, Janice Dejan, Moe said she had developed a repatriation briefing book to support the repatriation task force. Would you be able to discuss the way this technology aided your efforts to track and analyze data repatriation requests? And flight information?

Ian Brownlee

Thank you, Mr. Zeldin for your question. Yes, I find it very useful as the head of the repatriations task force that became required reading for me the repatriations briefing book initially was coming out three times a day as the efforts continued, the frequency decreased, but it was extraordinarily useful in seeing where trends were Developing?

What region of the world, for example, the Western Hemisphere remained -- remained a key focus for us. But as time went on, we saw, for example, there were more people trying to get out of Europe. We were intrigued to find there were relatively few people trying to come out of East Asia Pacific region. It was very, very helpful to us in deciding where to devote resources.

As we move forward, I thank you both.

[Representative Lee Zeldin](#)

I think that the last answer kind of might -- might have answered my last question, but I'll ask anyway. In case you have any other insight on it. What work has the State Department's covered 19 data analytics team done to evaluate changing conditions around the world to help ensure state's preparedness in responding to new localized outbreaks of cover.

Ian Brownlee

Nineteen, Thank you, sir for the question. We are continuing to track conditions around the world, mainly through our ACA sections coming back to the office of overseas citizens services to ascertain where people, U.S. citizens are expressing some degree of interest in returning to the United States. And it's important to recognize that some degree of interest phrase in there. We have relatively few people these days who are saying I need to go. Now we have people who say, well, if conditions change, if conditions worsen, what have you. I would like to go to. We are closely tracking that number. The Center for Data Analytics is helping us do that and that allows us to determine whether we might need to lay on additional flights to this place or that place.

[Representative Lee Zeldin](#)

Thank you. And I just want to say thank you to both you, Mr. Brownlee, Miss King to your teams. There are a lot of challenges with regards to the pandemic, but your accessibility and the efforts around the world certainly were noticed, I believe on both sides of the aisle here in Congress and by many of our constituents I yield back.

[Representative Joaquín Castro](#)

Absolutely, thank you, ranking member. We'll go now to Mr. Malinowski, New Jersey. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

[Representative Tom Malinowski](#)

Thank you to you both for being here with us and just to reiterate Mr. Sheldon's point that that the department has been very responsive, very, very present when we've needed help with a particular constituent. That said, we need help and there are -- there are some concerns I have about where we are right now in terms of providing services to people who need them.

I would just give you a couple of of examples. I have a constituent, an American citizen who -- whose wife made a very difficult journey to Addis and in Ethiopia in March for a visa appointment, it was understandably canceled in March, but it's a little bit harder for me to explain to that family why now in July.

We still cannot tell them when this American citizens wife might get an expedited appointment. She has DHS paperwork, everything in order. Another case. I have an American citizen child in my district who's Indian father was here on an H1 b. Visa happened to go back to India in March because his father, his father had passed away, went back for the funeral and his appointment for his H1 b renewal was canceled again, understandably in March, but a little bit less understandable, a little bit harder to -- to explain To that child, why in July, we still can't tell him when his father might be able to get that appointment.

So I guess my -- my question is why is it that at this point, especially with the resources we've given you, we cannot conduct expedited interviews in these relatively few cases where there is an American family that was broken up here. We are meeting by video conferencing. Here you certainly have that capacity technologically to conduct interviews, you have legal authority to waive the personal appearance requirement in cases where the national interest argues for it or if there is an unusual or exigent circumstance.

When can we expect progress in this area to either of you who is to take?

Ian Brownlee

Thank you, Mr. Malinowski for your questions. I agree the separation of families is heart rending. I'm pleased to say that he was last Wednesday, July 15th, we sent instructions to the field on how to resume routine visa operations. This will be largely dependent upon the condition, the diplomacy strong you understand.

When I say that the phase of diplomacy is strong in which a particular post is for those posts that are in the later phases, 2 and 3 will be subject to essentially chief of mission. The emergency action committee can decide that's where they are. The Post may undertake a routine visa services consistent with good health practices, safety, et the Posts that are at phases 0 and 1 may come into the department to request permission to conduct certain sorts of visa applications.

Then visa adjudications, so for example, we're seeing requests coming in from some post to begin doing student visa applications. So this -- this is getting underway. Now. One of the difficulties we're finding is that this is not a static situation. I was briefing at DCM headed to a European post just yesterday as our conversation began.

We were discussing how his his soon to be post was it phase two, one of the staffers from the EU, our bureau broke in part way through the conversation and said, I'm sorry, there's the post just asked to go back to phase 1, 2.

[Representative Tom Malinowski](#)

But what about the -- but what about waiving the in-person requirement, you've done that apparently?

Ian Brownlee

I think we have -- yes, sir, we've done this with regard to certain workers for example the agricultural workers coming out of Mexico, the H two A's, why not students and scholars why not other categories. We would be happy to take the question under advisement, sir. With regard to specific specifically with regard to those constituents, we are looking at everything we can do to get visa operations moving as quickly as possible.

[Representative Tom Malinowski](#)

I mean, let me just close with a final comment that I find almost painful to make, but we all first and foremost want to protect the safety of U.S. government employees. If I were a foreign service family with kids wanting to enroll them in school right now. I can think of a large number of countries where I would feel safer than the United States of America.

If we were going to apply that phasing system to ourselves, we would not actually rank very highly. And I wonder whether we can do more to take that into account as hard. It is to acknowledge how poorly we are doing in response to this crisis domestically in making these sorts of determinations. And with that I yield back.

Thank you very much. Thank you, Mr. on asking.

[Representative Joaquín Castro](#)

All right, I'm going to ask a few questions because as you can imagine, the bells rang for votes and folks are scrambling to go vote and then we have one or two people who are interested in asking some questions. Hopefully that will give them a chance to come back. If not, we'll probably recess for about 10 or 15 minutes and give them a chance to come back at that point.

So I want to ask you because we have been and still are affected by this pandemic, what safety protocols you're now taking in terms of when you deliver the services. When Americans take advantage of the services that you offer, what protocols are put in place that offices are, you know, putting up to ensure the safety of the officers for example.

Ian Brownlee

Thank you, Mr. Chairman for the question. We're using protocols very similar to those you're using here, sir. We're keeping people at a safe, remove one from another. We are not -- we were only letting so many people into, for example, a visa waiting room. We have not yet begun expedited passport service where we have people being exposed at the physical counter, yet we are doing everything we can to begin moving our processes as quickly as possible, consistent with with good good conduct and safety.

[Representative Joaquín Castro](#)

And is there a mechanism for officers to communicate their concerns and to work through scheduling options that give them more confidence in performing their work? Yes, sir, there is.

Ian Brownlee

I participate in, I think there thrice weekly meetings with the deputy undersecretary for management where we discuss what it will take to reopen various aspects of the State Department domestically. And so going back to Mr. Malinauskas observation, we obviously had the domestic diplomacy strong undertaking and we are looking at at individual regions around the country National Capital Region.

We have passport operations all over the country. As the conditions change in those areas, we decide whether we may more or less reopen there.

[Representative Joaquín Castro](#)

Okay, and given the backlog of visa applications that built up all embassies and consulates were closed, how will the State Department prioritize visa applications once offices are reopened?

Ian Brownlee

Thank you, sir. What we are doing is that we sent instructions to the field just six days ago now telling them as I said earlier to Mr. Malinowski, how they may go about reopening depending on which phase of diplomacy strong they are now for those posts. For example, New Zealand that's really wide open, they may they may move.

[Representative Joaquín Castro](#)

Let me interrupt you for just a second because we lost our quorum because people have gone to vote. So we're going to recess here for just a bit.

Unidentified

All right.

[Representative Joaquín Castro](#)

The committee will come back to order and I know that we were in the middle of the answer to one of my questions. But if you had anything further to add on as an answer to that question and when you're done, I will turn it over to -- let me see David, actually, Ted and then David, I see I see David, so any final words on that answer or were you?

I think I -- I think I substantially done. Thank you sir. okay. Mr. Smith Illini, Thank you, Chairman, Castro and thank you to our witnesses for being here during the peak of the first kind of surge of the coronavirus back in April.

[Representative David Cicilline](#)

There were many governors that were pleading for more health care workers and at the same time, the New York Times was reporting that foreign health workers had been lining up to take jobs at American hospitals but had been prevented from doing so. And they described the roadblocks that included their inability to get visas not being allowed to travel to the United States even if they had a visa.

And in other cases, foreign health workers inside the country were not allowed to extend their visas. So my first question is what is Counselor Affairs doing to ensure that foreign health workers are able and willing to help during this health emergency are able to get visas and travel to United States or remain here in the United States?

Ian Brownlee

Thank you very much for your question, sir. I can address what we are doing with regard to those foreign health workers who are overseas, seeking visas to travel to the United States with regard to those who are in the United States already seeking to extend their stay. I would have to refer you to the Department of Homeland Security specifically U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, which is responsible for the extension of a period of stay in the United States with regard to those who are overseas right from the beginning.

We have prioritized giving visa appointments, giving visa interviews to certain classes of people, including health workers coming to, to address help us address the cobra 19 panic that may have been some confusion in the initial weeks. But since then, the assistant secretary for consular affairs has made it clear and has in fact acted upon that clarity that we need to make it possible for these health workers to come here, assuming they have the necessary work authorizations.

Thank you, sir.

[Representative David Cicilline](#)

Thank you. And on July 6, ICE announced that students taking only online classes would not be eligible for student visas. Then on July 14th, they rescinded this policy. My question is where any applicant denied student visas between July 6th and the 14th on the basis of ISIS announcement? And if so, will those applicants be given and notified of an opportunity to reapply? Thank you very much for your question, sir.

Ian Brownlee

I do not know the answer specifically. I will have to get back to you on that one.

[Representative David Cicilline](#)

OK, I appreciate that Ms King, as you know countries around the world and including some of our most important allies are beginning to allow people to travel to their countries again and with very few exceptions the United States has remained on a list of countries who are Not welcome a more cynical person might say it. While President Trump has thankfully failed to build his wall along our border with Mexico.

It's horrendous response to the corona virus has erected a different kind of war one that prevents Americans from leaving our own country. And what I'd like to know is what role the State Department is playing with our allies and other governments around the world to address their concerns so that Americans can travel again and particularly had these governments provided specific metrics to the United States.

Will have to be met in order for Americans to be allowed to travel to their countries. Thank you for the question.

Karin King

I know that many countries, especially in Europe are looking epidemiologic glee at whether or not it is prudent for them to allow U.S. citizens in at this time. And I know that we are having very close conversations with governments throughout the world to see whether we can reach agreement on the comfort levels that they might have with allowing U.S. citizens in. I will tell you what my office is doing.

We are working on our travel advisory to bring it down from the global level for which right now advises U. S. citizens against traveling anywhere in the world. We are working very closely with CDC, which is also looking at risk levels overseas for U.S. citizens so that we can provide accurate advice. And I'm hoping that in the near future, we will be at a point where there will be some countries where we can again advise U.S. citizens that although it may not be completely safe to travel, we will no longer be saying do not travel yet.

[Representative David Cicilline](#)

I appreciate that. My question really relates to countries that are prohibiting U.S. citizens from traveling to those countries, not policy in the United States, policies of our allies. And to the extent that there are metrics that they are furnishing the United States that must be met before U.S. travel is permitted.

It would be useful to know what those metrics are, I think would help guide our response here in the United States. And so if we have specific metrics from allies or other countries saying you must meet these metrics before you allow Americans to travel here, it would be very useful for Congress to know that and to see those metrics. And I ask you make them available to us since they exist and with back our regional bureaus are working very closely with governments, again, specifically the governments in European countries to see what their basis is for deciding whether or not U.S. citizens may enter.

Karin King

And I know in Europe, in the Shannon countries, particularly, they are looking at epidemiological markers very similar to what CDC is looking at in determining whether foreigners should be allowed into the United States. So if there is a desire for more details on what those markers are, I'm happy to talk to our regional bureau colleagues about the details.

[Representative Joaquín Castro](#)

Thank you. I do think that's an important question. Mr. Sweeney asked which is you know we know now that there is a growing list of countries that have prohibited Americans from traveling there and people have family members in these countries that they like to visit at some point obviously. So it will be important for us to understand what it's going to take to allow Americans to get back to those places.

So we'll follow up with you all on that. With that, I'll go to Mr. Lew of California.

[Representative Ted Lieu](#)

Thank you, Mr. Chair and thank you to the witnesses for your dedicated public service. We all really appreciate that. I have two areas that are incorrect. First, I want to start out by thanking Secretary Brownlee and your great work with repatriation. I know that we had about 20 some constituents that need to be repatriated.

We work with your task force and they were all repatriated. And so thank you for that. My question related to that issue is, and I'm sorry, this has been asked before, I was told that some airlines and perhaps U.S. airlines as well were not politically helpful in this effort. So I wonder if that was true and if it was what ways can we make sure that they're more helpful next time?

Ian Brownlee

Thank you very much, Mr. Lew and thank you. Thank you for your kind words about the efforts of the task force. It was a remarkable effort bringing together people from across the state department across the U.S. interagency and frankly across the globe. So we're -- it is remarkable to be involved in such a -- such an undertaking with regard to the airlines.

We found that as the -- the -- the confusion of the border closings took place, our economic bureau undertook conversations with U.S. legacy carriers and others to see whether they would be available to conduct flights into certain areas. We -- in some cases they were unable or unwilling to go into areas, in other cases they were.

So for example, the legacy carrier, the follow on to the legacy carrier Eastern Airlines, a U.S. small U.S. company proved to be very, very helpful in going into areas in the Caribbean, Central America and northern South America when we sought to bring people out of, for example, India, the question became more complex and I don't think I would characterize the airlines as U.S. airlines as being uncooperative.

It simply wasn't commercially viable for them to fly from the United States to India to pick up half to pick up a load and then bring it back again. And this got them into the problems that arose from such things as crew rest regulations the need to fly. Two crews from say San Francisco to New Delhi. So in the end there we ended up going with Air India which didn't have those same crew rest issues. They could -- they could initiate their travel in India, pick up a plane load of people, bring them to the United States.

So there was -- there was much confusion, but I don't think that I would characterize the airlines as uncooperative. Thank you, sir.

[Representative Ted Lieu](#)

No, I appreciate that. So in a second study like what I talk about is what do we call this virus. So let me start by saying that what China did at the beginning and suppressing information about this virus is not defensible and we should rightly criticize China for doing that. At the same time, this virus already has an official name, covered 19. It has an unofficial name. Corona virus and the CDC has said that we should not attach

ethnic identifiers in this virus because it could lead to discrimination and we already see across America that there have been approximately 1,900 hate crimes incidents against Asian-Americans, including Asian-Americans family in Texas.

Those stab because the perpetrator thought they were spreading this virus and I understand you can't control what the press United States says. But when the President or other ministry officials use terms like Chinese virus or Kong flu, it does fuel hatred against Asian-Americans and it leads to hate crimes against Asian-Americans.

So I just want all of you to understand that words do matter and when you stick ethnic identifiers in front of a virus that affects everyone, it can lead to very harmful effects against Americans who happen to be of Asian descent. And my question to you is, is there any official state Department policy on what you call this virus and before you answer, I also want to say that.

You know, we don't call the swine flu with a North American virus even though it started in North America. The Spanish flu did not start in Spain. It likely started in Kansas. So there is no reason to call this. The Chinese virus, if you want to say the virus came from China, I think that's fine. That's very different than how some other people use terms and flame people against Asian Americans.

If you could ask my question about why there a policy or what you call this virus?

Ian Brownlee

Debbie, great within the Bureau of Consular Affairs, sir, we refer to the carrier of the virus as the novel Corona virus. The disease that novel Corona virus causes is called Kovic 19. There was a pandemic generated by the widespread infection by Cobra 19. Thank you. I appreciate that.

[Representative Ted Lieu](#)

And I urge all three agencies to do what you all do and I hope the United States understands, he is President for not just some Americans, but all Americans and that he understands his words can cause hatred towards a certain subset. And I wish you would just call this virus by its official name with that I yield back.

[Representative Joaquín Castro](#)

Thank you, Mr. Lew. Mr. Lew makes an important point as well that the President's language has been incendiary and how he's described this virus and attacks against Asian-Americans. As you'll probably have seen, have skyrocketed during this pandemic in no short measure because of how the President has described this virus and others as well.

With that, I'm going to go over to Debbie Dingell, but first I need to read just a few lines. I ask unanimous consent for Representative Debbie Dingell of Michigan to participate in this hearing and ask questions after all subcommittee and committee members have done. So here I no objection. I'll go to Debbie Dingell of Michigan.

[Representative Debbie Dingell](#)

Thank you, Chairman Castro and to ranking member Zeldin for meaning it's important hearing to discuss the covered pandemic and its impact on the state department's cancer programs. As today's witnesses have outlined covered 19 pandemic has resulted in the evacuation of 100,000 Americans and over 1,000 flights from 136 countries and territories.

And quite frankly, a number of them from my district. However, these evacuations can come at a substantial cost for Americans abroad as they are required to pay the equivalent of a ticket on a commercial flight from the area in which they are evacuated. Additionally, the State Department will put a hold on the individual's passport until the amount is repaid.

This result in costs is often very surprising to individuals at the amount of it in Ferguson burdensome and several of my constituents discovered when being evacuated from the Caribbean in 2017. So this is before cope, they had to pay hundreds and thousands of dollars in reparations loans. Each that's why Congressman Jim McGovern and I have introduced the leave no Americans behind act, which would end the State Department's practice of charging these fees.

Mr Brownlee, I'd like to ask you some questions. Can you provide details on the total costs of the repatriation efforts? Specifically how much did the entire campaign cost the State Department?

[Representative Joaquín Castro](#)

What were the cost of the flights? I'm sorry.

Ian Brownlee

Pardon me, thank you, Mrs, dingle For your questions. I have here in front of me information that indicates that in repatriating me over 190 -- I'm sorry, 1,000,000 people. The department spent over 100 ninety five million dollars specifically over 100. And \$96 million.

I have a breakdown beyond that if you're interested, but that it's a total of one hundred and eighty six million dollars how we arrived at the individual costs of a particular flight that is governed by by law and regulation. We are required by law to take a promissory note from anybody for whom we put onto one of these K fund chartered flights.

The amount of that promissory note is fixed by the Bureau of administration within the State Department. And essentially what it comes down to is what one would have paid for a ticket if one had showed up at the airport in say, Santo Domingo looking for a flight to the United States the day before the crisis hit.

So the immediate pre prices pre crisis flight price as the effort to repatriate people, it continued. We expanded our lift capacity by bringing in commercial carriers as well. In some cases they were able to do this for less than what we would have charged. In other cases, they found they could only make money by doing by charging more than we would have charged for a corresponding flight.

In any case, we left nobody behind for reasons of money, either people could come back using a promissory note. I'm more of the case on charter flights or the American Citizen Services section in the country in question could issue the person a repatriation loan. And we issued a very significant number of repatriation loans or have issued a very significant number of Patrick repatriation loans during this crisis.

As of -- I'm sorry, I don't have the exact date, but we hit our -- our Congressionally mandated cap on the repatriation loan program of about 5 point, \$6 million about a month or two ago. And since then we have been -- we haven't issued I think some two million dollars approximately in repatriation loans coming out of the K fund.

I hope this answers your questions, ma'am.

[Representative Debbie Dingell](#)

I have a lot more questions. I appreciate the information. I'm going to have to be fast because I'm down to 45 seconds, but you know that a number of individuals are unemployed that they're now having very real financial situations. How do we help them in repaying these now in many other countries who assisted in the repatriation of their citizens didn't charge their citizens or their family members to return home.

So in the State Department's assessment of actions we've taken during this time, are you looking at charging citizens that emergency or something under consideration to change or how you help people in these dire times?

[Representative Joaquín Castro](#)

And you all can give a full answer on that. We're waiting for where maybe one more member that's got questions. So go ahead. And if Debbie, you have another question, go ahead to -- well, let's get the answer to that one.

Karin King

The requirement to obtain reimbursement from U.S. citizens and pursuant to issuing a repatriation loan is a matter of statute. So the U.S., the Department of State does not have a choice in that matter. Again, our -- our goal in consular affairs is to make sure people get out of harm's way, absolutely as quickly as possible, and that in some cases does require the repatriation loan program.

But we are not in a position to forgive those loans given the statute.

[Representative Debbie Dingell](#)

So that's right, we need the leave, no American behind like that human I have introduced have introduced. So individuals who boarded the State Department charter flights had to sign promissory notes promising to pay this State Department back and some of them are now finding they don't have a passport, not that anybody really should be traveling right now, but they need it for other reasons. And they're hitting credit issues etc.. How much in dollar value right now these things out there in promissory notes. Ma'am. Thank you for the question.

Ian Brownlee

We understand that some seven and a half to eight million dollars in repatriation loans are outstanding in terms of promissory notes. We're going to have to get you that we're going to have to get you that information, ma'am.

[Representative Debbie Dingell](#)

Thank you and I do thank you all. I've had a lot of desperate people and you've got multiple times more that in the last few months. These are tough jobs and we want to make sure our Americans are safe and brought home safely and you probably don't say thank you enough to people who are trying to help our fellow Americans.

[Representative Joaquín Castro](#)

All right, thank you. Thank you, Representative Dingle and we've got one more member who's going to be coming. Of course. Again, remember people are voting and coming back and forth and so it'll -- it'll take about five minutes. Ted, do you have any other questions you wanted to ask, just check with the members that are here not work in recess for five minutes, but just want to make sure there aren't any other questions that folks wanted to ask.

Yeah, good Miss. okay. All right, we'll recess for about five minutes. I promise in about 20 minutes. You'll be out of here all right committees in recess. All right, the committee will come to order and now recognize it's Omar. Thank you, Chairman.

[Representative Ilhan Omar](#)

Thank you so much for being here with us, Mr. Bradley Brownlee, my office heard from several people who had approved visas and were unable to travel due to the Corbett pandemic. We also heard from people who were in the middle of an approval process and those whose time limits expired during the pandemic. It doesn't seem fair to me that people might lose their visas or have to pay additional fees.

Through no fault of their own, will the State Department automatically extend people's deadlines or visas to accommodate them when those things expire through no fault of their own and can you guarantee that those -- they won't be able to pay additional fees for this for their cases?

Ian Brownlee

Omar, thanks very much for that question. This is an important issue. We understand that we were required back in March to close down visa operations. I'm very pleased to say that beginning six days ago we sent instructions to the field on how they could begin the individual posts around the world can begin resuming visa routine visa operations.

We recognize that a great many people had paid for visa appointments and those visa appointments were cancelled. We recognize that a great many people had done there. For example, panel physician examinations, those that the results of those examinations will have expired. We are formulating guidance to the field right now on how to deal with these various issues.

We are very cognizant of the fairness issue that people paid in good faith for certain certain services and did not receive them. We also recognize that there were time limitations on -- on various other documents that were not always within the control of the State Department. So for example, some would be petitions that had been approved by U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services.

We're looking at this closely right now and I hope you to give you a more fulsome answer in the near future.

[Representative Ilhan Omar](#)

Wonderful, we'll -- we'll follow up. Thank you so much. I know how anxiety inducing it is for people who have waited for a long time to have gotten the opportunity and lose it. So thank you Miss King. I just wanted to talk a little bit about repatriation. First of all, we all recognize how incredibly difficult and unprecedented this retribution effort was.

And I am amazed by the hard work and passion of the embassy staff and career officials. I know it wasn't easy and I know there will be a lot of lessons learned to prepare us for a will truly global event like this one in the future. How would you characterize the differences between the different countries in terms of our communication with those countries doing this effort and are there countries where we didn't have adequate notice of their own plans to close airports and restrict flights? Thank you very much.

Karin King

Thank you for your kind words for my team. First of all, very much appreciated. In terms of the repatriations, I think one of the main problems that we did encounter was lack of advanced notice from a

number of countries. I certainly feel that if we were to do something differently in the future, we would have all of our embassies reach out immediately to the host governments to find out what their intentions were in terms of closing borders.

We were very much focused on where the epidemic was threatening U.S. citizen lives overseas, which was obviously China in the beginning. And then moving into Europe, obviously where we saw a lot of issues with Americans unable to come home was in Latin America where a number of countries, for example, Peru did shut down the border it with very little notice.

And then we were in a position of having to request exceptions to bring in our rescue flights. In our case fund flights. We saw a similar phenomenon in Morocco there. We were very successfully able to get them to delay closure of their airport while we were able to get in rescue flights. So I don't think that there was any one specific country I think throughout the world.

We saw this phenomenon.

[Representative Ilhan Omar](#)

I think one of the -- one of my concerns involved cases in Venezuela and in this case, it looked like we were letting politics get in the way of doing our duty to protect U.S. citizens. And I know oftentimes, you know, we -- we have to prioritize the safety of our citizens and our ability to reunite them with -- with their families here at home.

So I hope in the future as we learn from this, that we work to try to create that, that priority and substitute our ideology and politics for the reality of what it means to have our citizens back home. Thank you and I yield back.

[Representative Joaquín Castro](#)

Thank you, Mr. Omar and that concludes the member questioning again. I want to thank our witnesses from the State Department for your testimony and making you think you made an important point at the end here in your last answer where you talked about some things that we might have done differently or approach differently next time.

I think all of us do not hope for anything like this pandemic or anything close to it in the near future or really ever. However, it is important that at some point we take stock of lessons learned and what we could do better, what we should do differently next time and I hope that the State Department will work internally to put that kind of document together.

But then at the right time also share it with Congress. With that I want to say thank you and this meeting is adjourned.