

US Introduces Visa Application Fee

By Paul Norton
The Moscow Tribune

Just as America and Russia appeared ready to come to terms over an issue that has rankled citizens of both countries — the visa application process — the US is planning to charge Russian visa seekers \$20 per visa application.

Embassy spokesman Mike Mellan told *The Moscow Tribune* the non-refundable application fee will be introduced Dec. 1. The embassy currently accepts visa applications without charge.

Money generated by the fee will be set aside to pay for the introduction of high-tech, machine-readable visa stamps for Russian passports. The stamps, which function like the magnetic strip on a credit card, is designed to speed processing at immigration points.

Meanwhile, US Ambassador Thomas Pickering has said he will ask his government to liberalise the American Embassy's heavily criticised visa application procedure for Russians, and both sides say they will seek agreement on visa procedures to deal with complaints against both the Russian and US consular services.

The Americans have been under fire for months for what critics charge are unfair denials of visas to Russian citizens, including the son of a prominent human rights activist, and alleged rude treatment of applicants by consular officials. For their part, the Russians have been charged with slowness in pro-

cessing visas for Americans and demanding money to speed up the process.

Several leading Russian politicians, including Defence Committee chairman Sergei Yushenkov and Vladimir Lukin, the former ambassador to the US who now heads the State Duma Committee on International Affairs and Sergei Kovalyov, President Boris Yeltsin's top human rights official, declared a boycott on contacts with American officials and visits to the US after the son of human rights activist Pavel Prigorenko was denied a visa to visit his sick mother.

After meeting with Yushenkov on Wednesday, Pickering said he would ask the US government for help in improving the process. Yushenkov told reporters he will drop his boycott on American trips.

Pickering also told State Duma officials that Moscow Mayor Yuri Luzhkov promised his support in the American effort to expand the consular office, which is overloaded by applicants, *Izvestia* reported.

The paper quoted him as saying that the UPDK, the Russian bureaucracy in charge of diplomatic facilities in Moscow, has been slow to deal with requests by the embassy for permission to expand.

Neither Luzhkov's office nor the UPDK would confirm the report.

Each day, some 400 to 500 Russian citizens queue for visas at the American consular office, according to the Russian Foreign ministry. Between 20 and 25 per cent of them have their applications rejected.