

tion outlining a rocky road toward peace.

That leaves only Syria and Lebanon. Lebanon has all but lost its independence since its civil war led to a virtual Syrian military occupation of the eastern part of the country, countered by Israeli influence over southern Lebanon through surrogates.

The first statements out of Damascus after U.S. President Bill Clinton's talks with President Hafez al-Assad were not encouraging, coming just one day after the historic Jordan-Israel agreement was signed.

Assad repeated the line that his country wants "full withdrawal for full peace," a reference to his demand that Israel return all of the Golan Heights captured in the 1967 war. Perhaps that was understandable since Assad did not want to appear in a generous mood after Hussein ignored Syria's wishes in signing a separate peace deal.

It seems unlikely, however, that Clinton would have given Assad, whose government is on a U.S. list of countries that support terrorism, the embrace of the first visit by a U.S. president in 20 years without some assurance of movement in the Syrian-Israeli talks.

The time would seem right. Jordan's signing emphasizes the defeat of Assad's policy of maintaining a unified Arab stance against Israel. The demise of the Soviet Union also deprived Syria of its key arms supplier.

Time seems to be working in Israel's favor too. Although only 64, Assad is reported to be in poor health. Getting credit for a peace settlement and ending Syria's pariah status must be appealing to him after 23 years in power. Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin's Labor Party government, which faces elections within two years, is far more inclined toward a settlement than the opposition Likud coalition.

Clinton's diplomacy, which obviously has a domestic component, seems designed to take advantage of that opening. As with North Korea, he is gambling that a U.S. emotional and economic assistance can be enticing enough to surmount the last major hurdle to peace, in this case in the Middle East.

Assad should seize the moment, and make his own peace with Israel. The alternative profits nobody.

## The Moscow Times

Derk Sauer, *Publisher*  
Annemarie van Gaal, *Director*

Marc Champion, *Editor*  
Jay Ross, *Managing Editor* ♦ Robin Lodge,  
*News Editor* ♦ Mark Whitehouse, *Business Editor* ♦  
Margaret Henry, *Features Editor* ♦  
Jo Boyce, *Night Editor* ♦ Robert Coalson, *Opinion*  
*Page Editor* ♦ Jeremy Weinberg, *Sports Editor* ♦  
J. Eric Jones, *Graphics Editor* ♦ Galina Anichkina,  
*Photo Editor* ♦ Brenda Gray, *Production Manager*

Jana Janus, *Advertising Director*  
Tjitske Speckmann, *Distribution Manager*

# The U.S. Visa Lottery

By Boris Altshuler

This summer Izvestia published an article which detailed the problems that Russians face applying for visas to visit the United States and accused embassy personnel of extreme rudeness. The American ambassador to Russia, Thomas Pickering, then responded with his own letter to the newspaper which appeared several weeks later. I would like to add my voice to this debate, based on my experience at the Movement Without Frontiers group of the Moscow Human Rights Research Center. That experience has convinced me that the current policy regarding non-immigrant visas at the American Embassy is a violation of the spirit of the American constitution and infringes on the rights of American citizens.

In addition to our group's regular clientele — refugees and people who have been refused permission to emigrate for reasons of state security — we have been seeing large numbers of people who were refused guest visas to the United States. Many of these people come to us literally in tears — not, they say, because they were denied but because they were accused of lying or because the demands for documentation changed from one visit to the embassy to the next. They report that after going to considerable trouble to produce the necessary documents, officials refused even to read them, stamping their passports "rejected" and not listening to any arguments. Some report being asked, "Are you a drug addict?" or "Are you a homosexual?" Some have been told to bring in personal letters for inspection.

It is not my intention here to accuse embassy employees of rudeness or incompetence. I fully appreciate the difficult position that they find themselves in and would like to approach this problem constructively.

Ambassador Pickering defended the embassy's practices, explaining that according to U.S. law, embassy officials "must consider everyone who applies for a non-immigrant visa to be a potential immigrant, unless the applicant manages to prove the opposite." The key is that applicants must demonstrate their "close ties" with their native countries so that the consular official can be certain that the applicant will return. On the other hand, Pickering also notes that, "We cannot spend more than four to five minutes on each application," because of the large demand.

The upshot is that every applicant is considered *a priori* to be dishonest unless he or she can prove otherwise in less than five minutes. In practical terms, these rules turn the application process into a mere lottery dependent on the whim of the embassy official. Let me mention a few cases that we have seen recently.

Galina, 78, applied to visit a relative who is an American citizen by birth and who recently lost his wife. Galina had already visited him in 1993 on a three-month guest visa. She has a husband and children in Russia. She was refused by an official who told her that her "previous stay in the

United States was too long." She had not, however, overstayed her visa, but the officer was unwilling to listen to her objections. Veronica, 62, wanted to visit her son, a student of Holy Trinity Seminary in Jordanville, New York. After she was refused a visa, Archbishop Laurus of the monastery repeated the invitation and wrote a letter of guarantee on her behalf. Nonetheless, on July 16, she was again refused and the archbishop's letter was ignored.

An elderly couple applied for a two-month visa to visit their son, his American wife and their two small children. They were refused three times despite considerable documentation establishing their economic links with Russia. One embassy official even told them: "You have only one son. Why do you want to just visit him? You should apply to immigrate. You will

The ironic thing about U.S. visa policy is that it does not seem to be very effective in combating illegal immigration.

be accepted."

"But we don't want to emigrate from Russia," the man told me.

On Oct. 3, Maria was refused a visa to visit her relatives despite letters on her behalf by U.S. Senators Richard Lugar and Dan Coats. "If you want to see your children and grandchildren, let them come to Russia," she was told at the embassy.

The ironic thing about the U.S. policy is that it does not seem to be very effective in combating illegal immigration. Pickering admits in his article that "approximately 15 to 20 percent of Russians granted tourist visas from the embassy in Moscow stay on in America after their visas expire." This alone should be enough to convince the Americans that they need a new approach.

The best solution, it seems to me, is to make the person who invites a guest to America more responsible for that guest's actions. They should be subject to a fine equal to the cost of finding and deporting a violator so that American taxpayers will not have to bear the burden of other people's dishonesty. With such a policy, all American citizens would be free to decide for themselves whom to invite and would not have such decisions dictated to them by bureaucrats in Moscow.

Of course, the policy for people applying without invitations would be more difficult and responsibility would indeed ultimately rest with the embassy. However, all of the people who have applied to our group for assistance have indeed been invited by people living in the United States. The point is that these people should not have to face a five-minute inquisition at the hands of a consular official.

Personally, I believe in the great respect of the American people for human rights and the tradition of the rule of law. I also trust that the dynamic nature of the American legal system will provide a solution to this problem, which reflects so badly on America and ultimately is a violation of the rights of the citizens of the United States.

*Boris Altshuler is a member of the Moscow Helsinki Group and chairman of the Moscow Human Rights Research Center. He contributed this comment to The Moscow Times.*