

Thursday, January 22, 2004

'Those Without Fingers Are Exempt'

U.S. Consul General Jim Pettit faced criticism over new rules requiring Russians and other visitors to give fingerprints to get American visas, but he promised that it will be easier to get visas this year.

"Doesn't it seem to you a lack of hospitality to take fingerprints and blatantly oppose the whole world?" a participant asked Pettit during a live question-and-answer Internet forum Tuesday.

"Many think that this is a violation of human rights," Pettit responded. "But isn't a photograph also such a violation? This is just one method for certifying a person's identity."

Another participant took a more light-hearted approach.

"How does the scanning process work if one doesn't have fingers?" he asked.

"Those without fingers are, by law, exempt," Pettit said.

Pettit also said the visa process will be faster this year and that the average wait for a visa should be no longer than 10 days. This comes as welcome news after thousands of Russians found themselves waiting months for visas last year. The U.S. Embassy said at the time that it was struggling with a backlog of applications as it tried to implement post-Sept. 11, 2001, security measures.

"We're convinced that this year the entire procedure should be much better," Pettit said.

As part of the security measures, all U.S. nonimmigrant visa applicants between the ages of 14 and 80 are required to begin providing prints of their left and right index fingers as part of their applications by Oct. 26, 2004. The U.S. Embassy in Moscow starting taking fingerprints Dec. 9.

Pettit said by telephone that predictions about a broadly negative Russian reaction to the new rules had been overplayed.

"There had been in the press word that there would be a negative reaction," he said. "We have not observed that among our applicants, nor have we noticed a drop in applications."

So far only two out of thousands of applicants have outright refused to have their fingerprints taken, Pettit said.

Some of those who have gone through with the procedure said it did not add any time or hassle. "The finger scan wasn't a problem at all," said Sergei Kutikov, who owns a Moscow-based travel agency and received a U.S. visa on Dec. 24. "It took less than a minute. And there was a really good-looking embassy officer taking the prints."

Tatyana, a travel agent with Andrew's Travel House, said her clients regard the finger scans as just another hurdle in an already overly bothersome process. She gets about one call a day asking about fingerprinting. But she described most callers' attitudes as resigned.

"Our customers are interested in the process," said Tatyana, who declined to give her last name. "They're not nervous, and I can't say they're angry. They have come to expect these kinds of difficulties with American visas."

In the past, Moscow has issued a tit-for-tat response whenever the U.S. ratchets up visa requirements. But so far, there are no indications the government will do so in this case.

Asked for comment this week, a Foreign Ministry spokesman referred to a November statement by the ministry, which said the U.S. move "does not help improve bilateral relations with regard to visas."

"Nothing has changed for us," the spokesman said.

Pettit said he has heard no word from Russian officials on the possibility of requiring fingerprints from Americans wanting Russian visas.

Russians have the right to do whatever it takes to ensure border security, Pettit said. But, he said, "we think it would be inappropriate to institute a procedure such as fingerprinting simply to punish the United States. This would not constitute a serious approach to border security."