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U.S. VISA GLITCH CONTINUES TO STALL WORKERS, STRAIN FARMS

Computer problem strands thousands of foreigners who need to reach the country for business, other purposes

By Miriam Jordan
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A computer hardware problem continues to cripple U.S. visa processing around the globe, stranding tens of thousands of foreigners who need to reach the country for business, weddings and funerals and other purposes.

A few hundred agricultural workers who were stalled near the Mexico-U.S. border have entered since the problem began. But many more remain there, farmers said, unsure if they will get visas before crops rot.

"We are talking about a situation now where we are falling further and further behind," said Daren Gee, a major California strawberry grower. He said 200 seasonal workers he has arranged to employ had been delayed 19 days as of Friday, costing him \$25,000 to \$30,000 a day mainly in potential revenues.

The problem, discovered earlier this month, won't be resolved at least until next week, the State Department said, adding that 100 technicians are working around the clock to address it. The glitch affects the flow of applicants' biometric information, such as fingerprints, to a central database.

The department said it had started to prioritize visas for urgent humanitarian cases and agricultural workers.

On a State Department Facebook page, Americans expecting workers, family and friends vented their frustration. One woman, who said her relative from Honduras needs to attend a funeral and remains stuck, wondered if that was considered urgent. A department official told her to have the relative contact the local consular office.

Lynne Watanabe of Tucson, AZ, who is due to get married next week, said her fiancé has been stuck in Johannesburg, South Africa. She contacted the offices of Arizona Sen. John McCain and Rep. Mike Bishop.

"They have made inquiries but receive the same responses as everyone else – that we just have to wait," she said in an interview.

Worldwide, U.S. visa-issuing posts handle 50,000 applications a day. Until the system is fully functional, they are unable to issue visas for applications received on or after June 9.

In Brazil, an estimated 16,000 visas are in the pipeline. The U.S. Embassy in India said all nonimmigrant visa interviews scheduled in New Delhi and four consulates between June 22 and June 26 had been canceled and that new appointments would be required.

Bernard Wolfsdorf, a Los Angeles immigration attorney, said many immigrants "wait all year" to visit relatives in the U.S. "This is the peak travel season, so the hardship for families is magnified," he said.

Businesspeople are also stuck, their passports in possession of U.S. authorities. "They are holding my passport so I have been grounded this week from traveling" anywhere, said David Lummas, who works for a British multinational company and is currently in Bangkok, Thailand.

The most visible impact is in farm fields, where ripe berries and other produce await picking.

Growers use a visa program, H-2A, to bring in more than 100,000 workers each year. Many journey days to reach the border in time to collect visas and cross.

"The vans are there, the buses are waiting. But we can't seem to get workers across," said Mr. Gee, the strawberry farmer.

Several disgruntled people posted on the State Department's Facebook page that they hoped consular employees are working weekends. "We sure aren't enjoying ours," one man wrote.

A letter to Secretary of State John Kerry and Homeland Security Secretary Jeh Johnson prepared by California Representative Jeff Denham and signed by 24 members of Congress, including from Washington State, California, Texas and Michigan, called for "immediate urgent action" to "mitigate this catastrophic situation." It urged the government to process laborers who previously had passed security checks and worked in the U.S.

Marcos Balbão of Campinas, Brazil, said he will incur a \$459 fine to cancel each airline ticket if visas aren't issued in time. The most precious potential loss: He timed his trip to attend a U2 concert in Chicago July 2, for which he has tickets.