

## U.S. Green-Card Lottery Scrutinized After Blunder

By Miriam Jordan

The State Department's Inspector General is reviewing the government's green-card lottery after this year's results were scratched and thousands of people who had been told they won a chance for a U.S. resident visa were later notified they would have to re-enter the drawing.



A record 15 million people from around the world submitted entries to the so-called diversity visa program lottery, which each year offers a quick path to permanent U.S. residence for 50,000 people selected by random draw.

Under the lottery program, visas are made available to applicants from countries with low rates of immigration to the U.S. Lottery winners have a chance at moving to the U.S. without a family member or an employer as a sponsor, the most common routes to obtaining a green card.

In early May, the State Department notified 22,000 people that they were chosen. But soon after, the State Department said the electronic draw would have to be held again because a computer glitch caused 90% of the winners to be selected from the first two days of applications instead of the entire 30-day registration period.

Disappointed applicants, who hail from the Middle East, Africa and Europe, created a Facebook page dubbed "22,000 Tears" and began collecting signatures for letters to the State Department and U.S. lawmakers in protest.

Kenneth White, an immigration attorney in Los Angeles, contacted the State Department in mid-May requesting that the 22,000 winners be allowed to go forward with their

applications and that a second drawing be held for the remaining slots, arguing it would still be a random drawing.

"We have asked the Department of State to honor its commitment, made in writing, to all those who were selected for further processing," said Mr. White in an interview. "Thousands of people were devastated by the news of the invalidation."

On Friday, Mr. White received an email from Erich O. Hart, the general counsel for the Office of Inspector General of the State Department. "The Department has asked the Office of Inspector General to review the Diversity Visa Lottery matter and we have agreed to do so," said the email which was seen by The Wall Street Journal.

An official with bureau of consular affairs, which administers the program, said Sunday, "We would certainly work closely with the OIG if there is a review."

David Donahue, a Deputy Assistant Secretary of State who oversees the program, said the original draw was voided because it "did not represent a fair, random selection of entrants as required by U.S. law," according to a State Department website.

Iva Zafirova, 29, of Bulgaria, one of the disappointed winners, had been applying each of the past 10 years. "I was very excited," said Ms. Zafirova, who holds a Master's degree in information management technology from Harvard University. "One moment you think that a part of your life is solved. The next moment, you are back to square one."

She and other disenchanted applicants say it is unfair to disqualify the 22,000 people who were notified they were selected.

"People who have been affected by this wrong decision are spread all over the world," said Ahmet Yilmaz, 43, from Turkey. "I don't think there is a precedent to such a wrong voiding in the history."

Launched in 1990 to promote diversity in the immigrant population, the green-card lottery is now open to people from almost anywhere in the world, except countries that already boast a large number of nationals in the U.S., including Mexico, China, India and the Philippines. No special skills are required beyond a high-school diploma. Lottery winners eventually qualify for U.S. citizenship.

The number of entries has been rising each year. This year's total is more than 2.5 times greater than five years ago, when the lottery attracted 5.5 million entries. Immigration scholars say the increase is probably explained by the spread of Internet connectivity and increased awareness of the lottery, which costs nothing to enter.

Critics say the program poses security risks, lures uneducated immigrants and enables individuals with no connection to the U.S. to get into the country more quickly than those sponsored by relatives and employers. Rep. Bob Goodlatte (R., Va.) has introduced legislation to abolish it.

Results of a new draw are expected around July 15, according to the State Department.