

Update on COVID-19 and Travel To and From the U.S./Visa Appointments

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The U.S. has taken an aggressive stance to prevent the COVID-19 virus from spreading from international sources to U.S. individuals, workers and families. As of Sunday, March 15th, flights inbound to the U.S. have been stopped from China, Iran, countries in the Schengen Area of Europe, the UK and Ireland. Currently, there is no travel ban between the U.S. and Canada.

However, additional travel bans could be put into place quickly for travel from countries where there is a sharp increase in the pace/number of diagnosed cases of COVID-19, or if the number of cases in a given country or region reaches a critical mass. As we have seen over the past week, this can occur very swiftly. When recent bans have been announced by the U.S. government (e.g., the Schengen Area/Europe ban and the UK/Ireland ban), the ban has been publicized a few days in advance of implementation, giving individuals from these countries who need to travel to the U.S. the opportunity to do so if acting swiftly, subject to available travel options.

This trend of implementing travel bans to the U.S. from heavily impacted countries is likely to continue for now, as the global landscape for infection, diagnosis and contagion continues. While currently, there has been little communication from U.S. Customs and Border Protection regarding its specific measures to address the crisis at the country's northern border, Department of Homeland Security has acknowledged that even at land ports of entry, "CBP Officers and Border Patrol Agents continue to identify and refer individuals with symptoms of COVID-19 or a [recent] travel history to China or Iran...to CDC or local public health officials for enhanced health screening." We presume that this policy has been extended to individuals who have a travel history from the identified countries in the Schengen Area of Europe to the U.S. as well, and will likely shortly be extended to individuals traveling from the UK and Ireland to the U.S.

If a new ban is put in place for travel to the U.S. from a given country, it is likely to have an immediate impact on the availability of flights to the U.S. from that country, and could also limit or eliminate the availability of flights to that country from the U.S. For example, American Airlines—the second biggest airline in the world—said on Saturday that it would start implementing a phased suspension of nearly all long-haul international flights from the U.S. starting Monday, amid reduced demand and travel restrictions attributed to the ongoing COVID-19 outbreak. However, bans may or may not severely limit travel to or from the U.S. via land or sea ports of entry. A U.S. travel ban would not, alone, prevent any foreigner by law or policy from leaving the U.S. However, travel options to home countries identified in a travel ban may be impacted.

The U.S. Department of State has also begun canceling visa appointments at diplomatic posts worldwide, in light of the global COVID-19 pandemic. For example, even though India is not on the countries from which travel is banned,

the Department of State's U.S. Mission India posts canceled all immigrant and nonimmigrant visa appointments "from March 16, 2020 onward," on Friday, with a promise to make new appointments available "once Mission India resumes regular consular operations."

We are closely monitoring the situation, and will continue to post immigration alerts regarding U.S. government actions related to the COVID-19 crisis on this site, as close in time as possible to the occurrence of U.S. policy and other changes impacting the U.S. immigration landscape.

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