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Washington raises pressure on India over U.S. human trafficking visas

WASHINGTON | By [Jason Szep](#)

The U.S. government is stepping up pressure on India to end a controversial policy of placing restrictions on passports of Indian nationals rescued from forced labor or human trafficking in the United States, a U.S. State Department official said.

In the next few months, the issue will be raised with Indian authorities during a number of high-level meetings, said the official, who declined to be identified.

This has already started to happen. The official said at a consular-level meeting on Nov. 3, U.S. officials asked Indian officials to scrap the policy. It was also raised at meetings on the sidelines of the United Nations General Assembly in New York in September.

Since March, Indians who have received U.S. T visas have faced new restrictions. T-visa holders face long delays in renewing passports at Indian consulates in the United States. Reuters reported exclusively last week that they must also provide confidential information to the Indian government that they had previously submitted to the U.S. authorities, including details about who had trafficked them, according to the documents, legal advocates and interviews with T visa holders.

Human rights advocates say the restrictions undermine U.S. government efforts to help Indians rescued from forced labor in the United States, including hundreds recruited to work in U.S. Gulf Coast shipyards after Hurricane Katrina hit in 2005.

"There is still a misunderstanding on the part of the Indians of what a T visa is and what the legal standard is for a T visa to be issued here in the United States," said the U.S. official in an interview. "We have a number of high level visits that are going to be happening over the next quarter and some before that, at which we'll raise the issue again."

The Indian embassy in Washington said on Nov. 2 "many individuals seek to misuse the trafficking visa route to emigrate to the U.S." and that "appropriate measures are taken in such cases." India, however, is mindful of hardships "faced by genuinely affected persons" who receive T visas and provides them with consular services, it added.

Between July 2014 and March 2015, the crackdown by the Indian authorities was harsher. At least 20 passports of Indians stamped with U.S. T visas were confiscated by authorities at Indian airports, preventing trafficking victims who returned home to collect their families from flying

back to the United States. That has now stopped but the new restrictions are still making life very difficult for some of those with the visas.

In July, one of the biggest employers of Indian workers on the Gulf Coast, Alabama-based oil rig repair company Signal International LLC, agreed to pay \$20 million to settle claims that it misled and exploited Indian guest workers brought to the United States.

A March 3 high court ruling in India found India's confiscation of passports with T visas unconstitutional. A March 16 memo from the Ministry of External Affairs reviewed by Reuters told "all missions and posts" to relax some aspects of the policy but not repeal it.

The problems with T visas follow the December 2013 arrest of an Indian diplomat, Devyani Khobragade, for visa fraud and underpaying a domestic worker who was later issued a U.S. T visa. Her arrest and subsequent strip search provoked an outcry in India over her treatment by U.S. authorities.

The T Visa crackdown was widely seen as part of the Indian government's diplomatic retaliation for the Khobragade incident, which New Delhi treated as an affront to its national pride.

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