

The Virgin Islands Consortium

U.S. Freezes Immigrant Visa Processing for 75 Countries, Citing Public Assistance and Self-Sufficiency Concerns

The State Department announced a Jan. 21 pause on immigrant visa processing for applicants from 75 countries, targeting permanent visas tied to family reunification and employment as officials reassess screening standards focused on public assistance use.

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The U.S. State Department announced Wednesday that it will pause immigrant visa processing for applicants from 75 countries, a sweeping move the department said is intended to reassess screening procedures amid concerns about high rates of public

assistance use among migrants from those nations.

According to a statement posted by the U.S. State Department on January 14, the suspension will take effect January 21 and applies to family-based and other immigrant visas. The pause does not affect non-immigrant visa categories such as tourism, business, or student visas.

Immigrant visas are issued to individuals seeking to live permanently in the United States, most often through family sponsorship by U.S. citizens or lawful permanent residents, as well as through employment and other limited categories. Unlike tourist or student visas, immigrant visas lead to lawful permanent resident status, commonly known as a green card. The State Department's pause applies to these permanent immigration pathways, affecting family reunification and long-term migration, while leaving temporary travel, student, and visitor visas unaffected.

State Department spokesperson Tommy Pigott said the action targets countries where available data indicates immigrants are more likely to rely on U.S. welfare programs. He explained that the move aligns with the administration's emphasis on self-sufficiency in immigration policy and is intended to ensure that new immigrants do not become a financial burden on American taxpayers.

The decision follows a November 2025 internal State Department cable that instructed consular officers to apply stricter "public charge" standards during visa reviews. Under those guidelines, officers are directed to weigh factors such as an applicant's health, age, English proficiency, financial resources, prior benefit usage, and overall likelihood of requiring public assistance.

State Department officials said the pause will remain in effect until revised screening procedures can ensure that immigrants admitted to the United States will not, in the department's words, extract wealth from the U.S. system. The policy builds on broader immigration measures advanced under the Donald Trump administration, including prior visa suspensions and revocations tied to security and vetting concerns.

The list of affected countries spans multiple regions and includes Afghanistan, Albania, Algeria, Antigua and Barbuda, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bahamas, Bangladesh, Barbados, Belarus, Belize, Bhutan, Bosnia, Brazil, Burma, Cambodia, Cameroon, Cape Verde, Colombia, Côte d'Ivoire, Cuba, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Dominica, Egypt, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Fiji, Gambia, Georgia, Ghana, Grenada, Guatemala, Guinea, Haiti, Iran, Iraq, Jamaica, Jordan, Kazakhstan, Kosovo, Kuwait, Kyrgyzstan, Laos, Lebanon, Liberia, Libya, Macedonia, Moldova, Mongolia, Montenegro, Morocco, Nepal, Nicaragua, Nigeria, Pakistan, the Republic of the Congo, Russia, Rwanda, Saint Kitts and Nevis, Saint Lucia, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan, Syria, Tanzania, Thailand, Togo, Tunisia, Uganda, Uruguay, Uzbekistan, and Yemen.

Among them are several Caribbean nations, including Antigua and Barbuda, the Bahamas, Barbados, Cuba, Dominica, Grenada, Haiti, Jamaica, Saint Kitts and Nevis, Saint Lucia, and Saint Vincent and the Grenadines. Observers note that many of these island economies rely heavily on tourism and remittances, and the suspension could disrupt family reunifications and economic migration patterns, with ripple effects for U.S.

communities that maintain close ties to the region.

Economically, analysts say the suspension could affect U.S. industries that depend on skilled workers from the listed countries. State Department officials counter that the measure prioritizes what they describe as sustainable immigration practices over short-term labor needs.

International responses have varied. Governments in affected countries, including Brazil and Nigeria, have expressed concern about the impact on their citizens. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees has urged careful implementation to avoid unintended humanitarian consequences.

No legal challenges have been filed as of press time, though legal experts anticipate potential lawsuits arguing that the pause violates administrative procedures or equal protection principles. The State Department said it plans to release additional guidance in the coming weeks as assessments continue, but has not provided a timeline for when immigrant visa processing may resume.