

US visa backlog: Indians wait a year for interviews

US government audit says high demand and limited consular staffing contributed to delays



WASHINGTON

APPLICANTS in India waited an average of 346 days for a US visitor visa interview in fiscal 2025, more than eight times the 42-day average before the pandemic, according to a federal audit released on Monday (US local time).

The Government Accountability Office found that demand had outpaced consular staffing in India. The 346-day figure is a historical average for obtaining an interview. It does not describe the time taken to decide an application after an interview or the wait facing someone who applies today. According to the federal audit, India received an estimated 1,455,255 applications for nonimmigrant visas in 2025. The State Department had 68 consular officers working on such visas in the country, which makes it about 21,401 applications per officer. Those figures cover several temporary visa categories, while the 346-day wait refers specifically to visitor visa interviews, it said.

The comparison with other large visa markets was stark. The average visitor visa interview wait was 34 days in China and 32 days in Brazil. Mexico, which had a similar number of applications per officer to India, recorded a 283-day wait. India was seventh among the 10 countries with the longest average waits.

The auditors visited New Delhi, along with Mexico

City, Beijing and Sao Paulo. State Department staff in India and Mexico said high demand and too few officers after the pandemic had hampered their ability to clear backlogs. Across the four countries, officials identified staffing relative to demand as a principal factor behind interview delays.

Space was another constraint. The audit said there were too few interview windows in New Delhi for the number of officers needed to handle demand. Auditors also saw hundreds of applicants waiting outside the US embassy and in secondary waiting areas. A planned move to a new building on the embassy compound would leave the number of windows unchanged, the report said.

Officials also cited the work involved in assessing some applications and the role of paid visa agents. Some agents reserve appointment slots as they become available and sell them to clients, according to State Department officials interviewed by the auditors. The department has changed its scheduling system to counter that practice.

The State Department has tried other ways to ease the pressure. In fiscal 2024, a Washington-based unit remotely handled 80.6 per cent of New Delhi's visitor visa cases eligible for an interview waiver. Staff in New Delhi also worked extra Saturdays to process applications.

Trade pact close, but US tariff changes pose fresh hurdle, says Jaishankar

EAM says negotiations have reached an advanced stage but Washington's new Section 301 process remains a factor

NEW YORK

A trade agreement between India and the US, if concluded, would contribute to "better" bilateral ties, External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar said, noting that expectations of rapid progress in negotiations had been "tested" against a much more complex ground reality. Jaishankar addressed prominent members of the Indian-American and diaspora community as well as policy experts on Monday at a special conversation hosted by the Asia Society, as the high-level week of the 81st session of the UN General Assembly concluded in New York.

During a conversation moderated by former American diplomat and distinguished fellow at the Asia Society Policy Institute Daniel Russel, Jaishankar was asked about India-US relations, particularly developments related to trade and tariffs over the past year, and what would have to happen to put the bilateral relationship on a "better track".

"Well, I think if I stand back and look at the relationship... I note that much of the world has had a more difficult relationship with the US. I mean that may not be a consolation, but that's a reality," Jaishankar said. He said one of the issues facing India-US ties was the trade negotiations.

Pointing to the "stakes" and "complexity" involved, Jaishankar said, "Bear in mind, India is a society of small producers, small agriculture producers, small factories. Apart from the per capita gap between India and the United States, the nature of production, nature of society is very different."

"A trade negotiation required a certain amount of ... patience and detailing to see it through... The expectation that it could rapidly move forward, I think, was tested against a ground reality which was much more complex," he said.

ON TRADE WITH US

"The 301 process is still in the works, it's still unfolding. So the issue for us is at what point do you close out an agreement which is very, very far advanced

ON TIES WITH CHINA

"If you asked me, compared to where you were in 2025, is the relationship better today? I would say yes. Compared to 2024, even more so

ON INDIA-JAPAN TIES

"Japanese businesses increasingly saw value in having more than one source of production. Ours with Japan is more investment centric. Japanese firms were looking at ways to use Indian talent and work with Indian companies



Union External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar during an event at Asia Society, in New York

Jaishankar added that "today, we have reached a situation where there is more or less an understanding on the trade agreement". India and the US had in February announced the finalisation of the framework for the first phase of the bilateral trade agreement. However, changes in the US tariff landscape have led to further negotiations on the pact.

The US Supreme Court had earlier struck down US President Donald Trump's reciprocal tariffs imposed under emergency powers, prompting Washington to adopt a different tariff framework. In July, the US imposed an additional 10 per cent tariff on imports from India under Section 301 of the Trade Act, following a probe into

India's measures concerning goods produced with 'forced labour'.

The two sides have since continued negotiations on their bilateral trade agreement amid the changes in the US tariff regime.

Jaishankar, alluding to comments by Commerce and Industry Minister Piyush Goyal, said the issue now was what had changed on the American side and how the new Section 301 process would affect the agreement.

"The 301 process is still in the works, it's still unfolding. So the issue for us is at what point do you close out an agreement which is very, very far advanced," Jaishankar said.

"But the period that it took to reach it, that did cre-

ate bumps last year for the relationship. So presumably, if that agreement is closed out, that would be one point which would contribute to a better relationship," he said. Jaishankar also said that, to some extent, bilateral ties were impacted and influenced by developments within the US. "For many years mobility was seen as an economic gain. Now, today the economics of mobility and the politics of mobility are at odds with each other," he said. He said foreign policy or diplomacy today was not just conducted by states, leaders, ministers or diplomats. "In a social media era, there is a very big public opinion factor," particularly how it plays out in democratic societies, he said.

Japan firms eye India for semiconductors, advanced manufacturing

NEW YORK

JAPANESE companies are showing greater interest in setting up operations in India, including in semiconductors and advanced manufacturing, as the two countries expand their investment and security ties, External Affairs Minister

S. Jaishankar said in New York.

Speaking at a New York event, EAM Jaishankar said investment, more than trade alone, defined the economic relationship between India and Japan. He said Japanese businesses increasingly saw value in having more than one source of production.

"Ours with Japan is more investment centric," he said. That investment relationship was growing as companies looked to diversify their supply chains, he added.

EAM Jaishankar identified semiconductors, chemicals and other forms of advanced manufacturing as areas of interest. He said

Japanese firms were looking at ways to use Indian talent and work with Indian companies. "I can see Japanese companies really setting up shop in India," he said, referring to operations built around those skills and partnerships.

The minister said the relationship was also grow-

ing in defence and security. India and Japan were maritime powers with interests in the Indo-Pacific, he said, and their long history of good relations gave that co-operation a firm base.

Japan had been viewed favourably across India's political spectrum for decades, EAM Jaishankar said.

Solar manufacturing: India bets on domestic market amid US trade risks

Rhodium Group report says \$12 billion was invested in 2025, followed by another \$4 billion in H1 2026

NEW DELHI

INDIA's solar manufacturing boom has accelerated sharply with \$16 billion invested in 18 months and the domestic market can absorb additional supply as it faces fresh export headwinds from US trade measures, a new report has said.

Investment in Indian solar manufacturing surged from about \$85 million in 2018 to \$12 billion in calendar 2025, with a further \$4 billion committed in the first half of 2026, according to the 'Clean Investment Monitor' report of the Rhodium Group, a US-based market research and analytics firm

specialising in renewable energy.

The module manufacturing capacity has expanded rapidly from about 2.5 GW in 2014 to 242.7 GW. Back in 2014, India had no cells, and it currently holds 40.5 GW of cell and 2.5 GW of wafer capacity, the report said, noting a mismatch between module and cell capacity.

The report added that the gap should narrow as an additional 40 GW of cell capacity and 24 GW of wafer capacity are likely to come up.

The report attributed the growth to the government's mandate to use locally made modules (ALMM-I) and



cells through an approved list of models and manufacturers (ALMM), with efforts underway to extend the ALMM to wafers.

The policy was expanded to cover nearly all solar pro-

jects in India, except limited exemptions, notably certain net-metering and open-access projects that have been given a commissioning window till December 31.

The US, an important

export market for some Indian solar manufacturers, could impose anti-dumping and countervailing duties causing a major headwind. The US International Trade Commission is yet to determine whether the imports have caused material injury to local industry, thereby inviting the duties.

India's export of modules and cells to the US was worth about \$1.2 billion in 2025, or amounted to 13 per cent of the value of modules and cells produced. The report said the India's large and growing market can absorb the additional supply, even though margins may get squeezed.

Albanese seeks deeper India-Australia economic ties

Australian PM says he and Narendra Modi are keen to expand economic and business cooperation

NEW YORK

THE India-Australia partnership is "underutilised", Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese has said, asserting that he and Prime Minister Narendra Modi are "very keen on rectifying that".

Albanese, who is scheduled to visit India in December, made the remarks during a conversation hosted by Asia Society here last week on the sidelines of the high-level UN General Assembly session. "We have a lot in common as well. We're both Commonwealth nations, and we have language and universities being established there. There's a lot more we can do though. It has been underutilised, the relationship and partnership, but both PM Modi and I are very keen on rectifying that," he said. Albanese said he would travel to India on his way to the US to attend the G20 Summit, to be hosted by President Donald Trump in Florida on December 14-15. His India visit will include a 'G'day Namaste' event, a cultural, business and sporting showcase featuring the Business Council of Australia and other stakeholders. Albanese said he will be taking a "whole lot of businesses" to Mumbai and "it will finish with, as things in India always does, with a cricket match" in Chennai between a Victorian and Western Australian team. The conversation was moderated by former Australian prime minister and Global President and CEO of Asia Society Kevin Rudd, who observed that the India-Australia relationship appeared to be



File photo of Australian PM Albanese and Prime Minister Narendra Modi

going places. "India will be the third largest economy in the world. They already have the largest population in the world," Albanese said. Crediting Modi for India's expansion of access to energy, the Australian prime minister said more people had been connected to energy in India under his leadership than had occurred in "any decade in any country or any region in human history".

"He is someone who we have a strong relationship with. I think there's a lot more can be done in our economic partnership," Albanese said. Recalling that Modi and he have each visited the other's country twice as prime ministers, Albanese also spoke about the large public gatherings during the Indian leader's visits to Australia. "There's something rather extraordinary

about the way that politics is conducted from the Indian community. "If you think a Republican or Democrat convention is full of adulation for whoever the leaders are at any particular time, you haven't seen anything till you've seen a Narendra Modi stadium event. Even the last one was in Melbourne, and he filled a stadium," he said. When asked whether people at the event were also cheering for him, Albanese said, "Well, the good thing for me was that Prime Minister Modi asked them to cheer for me, and that was enough for a chant." Australians are a "pretty tough bunch," he said, adding that the only time 40,000 Australians would be "chanting my name" was because he was a friend of Prime Minister Modi. "But the excitement was extraordinary," Albanese said.

India-New Zealand trade set to surge as FTA kicks in on Oct 20

NEW DELHI

THE India-New Zealand Free Trade Agreement (FTA) is set to come into force on October 20, aimed at doubling bilateral trade by 2030. Indian exporters are set to receive duty-free access to New Zealand across all tariff lines.

This is expected to improve the competitiveness of Indian products in sectors including textiles and garments, leather and footwear, gems and jewellery, engineering goods and processed foods, according to an article in Khalsa Vox news website.

Removing customs duties makes Indian products cheaper relative to competing imports in the New Zealand market, potentially creating opportunities for exporters seeking to expand their presence there.

Another important aspect of the agreement is that New Zealand has committed to investments worth \$20 billion in India over the next 15 years.



The two countries have also set themselves the goal of doubling bilateral trade by 2030.

Once the FTA kicks in on October 20, the changes will unfold in stages. Some tariffs will disappear immediately, while others will decline over several years and certain agricultural concessions will remain subject to quotas and safeguards, the article observes.

For Indian consumers, the most visible impact could eventually be

felt in imported products such as kiwi fruit, apples and Manuka honey. However, the agreement does not throw open the Indian market across the board. Sensitive sectors, including dairy and several agricultural products, remain protected.

India has agreed to reduce or eliminate tariffs on around 70 per cent of its tariff lines covering imports from New Zealand. Some products will receive immediate duty-free access. These include wood, wool, sheep meat and raw hides.

Rather than allowing unrestricted imports at sharply reduced duties, India has created tariff-rate quotas for some agricultural products. These allow specified quantities to enter the country at lower tariffs while retaining safeguards around larger volumes, the article points out.

Kiwi fruit is one of the notable beneficiaries. In the first year of the agreement, up to 6,250 tonnes of New Zealand kiwi fruit will be eligi-

ble for duty-free entry into India. The quota will progressively rise to 15,000 tonnes by the sixth year. The concession, however, will be subject to conditions including a minimum import price and seasonal requirements.

However, in the case of apples for which also a quota has been fixed will attract a 25 per cent duty which is half the current 50 per cent tariff that is being levied. Here too, minimum import prices and seasonal conditions will apply.

The quota mechanism allows India to provide greater market access to New Zealand while limiting the potential impact of cheaper imports on domestic fruit growers.

However, an important aspect of the trade deal is that India has chosen not to open up its sensitive dairy sector to lower tariffs. Certain other agricultural products have also been excluded in order to protect the livelihoods of millions of small farmers across the country.