

# The Moscow Times.com

News

Front Page
Current Issue
News
Business
Stock Market
Photobook
Metropolis
Travel Guide
Archive Search
Reprints
PDF Edition
Jobs & Career
Conferences
Classifieds
Subscribe
E-mail Sign-Up
Advertising
About/Contacts

Friday, Aug. 15, 2003. Page 1

## U.S. Visa Mess Dashes Summer Dreams

By [Robin Murray](#)  
Staff Writer

For Alina Ibraimova, 21, this summer was supposed to be the fulfillment of a childhood dream to visit the United States.

Ibraimova, an ecological science student at Ulyanovsk State University, had wanted to work at a summer camp in Maine, meet new people and perfect her English.

"When I was still in grade school I always dreamed of going to America," she said in a recent interview. "When I started attending the university, I learned about the Camp America program for students. Many of my friends have gone for the summer and came back impressed.

"I prepared for it for a whole year and hoped the summer would come quickly," she said.

She raised the \$700 needed to apply for a summer program and was assigned a job at the Walton camp in the north of Maine, where she was supposed to start work at the end of May.

"I had to pass tests, which I did very well, but then there were delays," she said. "I was finally told to expect my visa on July 15, but they didn't give me a visa."

The reason given by the U.S. Embassy was that she had not signed her visa application form.

"I could not believe it. My plans and expectations were ruined. I don't know if I'll ever get to the United States now," Ibraimova said.

Instead, she found herself among at least 3,600 students who never made it to their summer jobs in the United States due to new visa policies at the U.S. Embassy. The visa mess -- which comes amid new, post-Sept. 11, 2001, security measures at the embassy -- has led to war of words between the embassy and the agencies that arrange summer work.

The embassy says it processed a record 10,550 summer work and travel applications and more than half were approved. Student agencies accounting for 8,500 of the applications said, however, that only 4,915 have been approved and another 650 students were only asked to come in for interviews this month -- meaning that they would not be able to travel to the United States since studies begin in about three weeks.

The outcome is a far cry from the 10,000 students that the embassy in May predicted would be granted visas this summer. A record 8,000 students went to the United States last summer.

The United States this year introduced new security measures intended to fight terrorism and illegal immigration, and this clearly had an impact on the Moscow embassy's ability to cope with applications for the summer programs.

But student agencies said the reasons that the embassy gave for rejecting applications -- usually a lack of signatures or signatures written in capital letters -- were purely bureaucratic and had nothing to do with security or illegal immigration concerns.

Armen Karapetyan, director of the Moscow office of IEC, one of the largest student agencies and the one used by Ibraimova, said the embassy rejected 2,400 applications

### Hot

- Policymaker on exports of oil pr
- Federal Energy approves ceilin; tariffs (RBC)
- Chechen citizen recompensed fc
- Russian Foreign terrorist acts in
- RBC-Composit close) (RBC)



Only  
Ser  
Cer

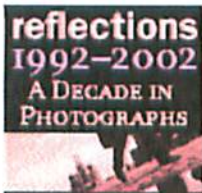
For all  
TheMoscowTi  
services:  
Archiv  
PDF I  
Press  
Print Su  
Password  
User Re

10 YEARS  
THE  
199

A series of arti  
the 10th anni  
August 1

Search Site

GO!



ВЕДОМОСТИ.  
Деловая газета.

The St. Petersburg  
Times

The Moscow Times  
Business  
Review

from IEC, 99 percent because of a lack of signatures.

The DS2019 application does not clearly state whether students should sign before submitting the form or when entering the United States.

"We never -- and we have been in this business for years -- had our students sign them prior to submitting to the embassy," Karapetyan said. "The IEC students who were granted visas this year also had not signed the form."

He said that when he first approached the embassy about delays in May, when some of the first students were supposed to leave, he was told that the embassy staff was overwhelmed with applications.

"I think it [the missing signature] was just an excuse to avoid processing a large bunch of people," he said.

The embassy insists that the blame lies with the student agencies -- but has nevertheless agreed to process at no charge next year the applications of those who missed out this year. Every student had to pay a nonrefundable \$100 application fee.

"Problems with fraudulent applications and a number of students failing to return in previous years led to the requirement by the embassy that all students sign the form prior to visa issuance, signifying that the students accepted the terms of the summer exchange programs," the embassy said in a written response to questions.

The embassy said its offer to next year process at no charge applications of those who missed out was not an admission that they had not processed this year's applications.

"Every application we received was processed," the statement said. "Our decision to allow many of the students to reapply next year without repaying the fee was an attempt by us to avoid punishing the students because their program organizers failed to properly advise them."

Earlier, the embassy blamed student agencies for failing to submit applications by an April 1 deadline, saying none had filed by that date and the deadline had been extended to June 17.

Many agencies said they had no knowledge of any April 1 deadline, were not able to submit applications for much of May because of holidays, and that they only learned of the embassy's decision to stop accepting applications on June 17 after that date.

Karapetyan said the snafu cost IEC "several hundreds of thousands of dollars" and U.S. sponsors suffered even larger losses.

"We as a Russian agency are not keeping any of the students' money," he said. "A few U.S. partners are keeping some small sums of money, but this is much less than they are entitled to."

Paul Christianson, head of U.S. sponsor organization Interexchange, said he has had to dole out refunds to the tune of \$1 million.

"We are not that large an organization, and it was pretty impactful on us," he said.

This year's problems have cast the entire work program into doubt, said Elizabeth O'Neill, vice president of work-exchange programs for the Council on International Educational Exchange, or CIEE.

"This was a very difficult year in Moscow and unless there is increased transparency and greater throughput, which other embassies around the world achieved, we remain concerned for the future of the programs in Russia," she said.

The CIEE is the largest international agency involved with the summer work program and has long worked with the U.S. State Department as a member of the umbrella group the Alliance for International Educational and Cultural Exchange.

Christianson, whose agency is also a member of the alliance, said the number of rejections this summer was higher in Russia than almost anywhere else in the world.

He said the embassy could have helped matters by opening lines of communication with sponsors and student agencies.

"We did not know that they had not processed 1,930 applications until July 15, when they handed them back to us," he said.

Agencies said they had no interest in assisting illegal immigrants or ineligible candidates get to the United States as they would go out of business if they were found doing this. Twenty-four agencies in Russia are accredited with the embassy and their U.S. partners are accredited with the State Department.

In the meantime, the agencies and the embassy are planning to discuss this year's results and look for a way to make sure matters improve next year.

Asked how this year's performance can be improved, Karapetyan said: "Students will have to make their applications earlier, U.S. sponsors have to provide DS2019 forms earlier and local organizations are going to have to screen the students to make sure they are really going to universities. And the embassy will have to hire extra staff."

**Related Article**

**Fewer Students Go to U.S. This Year (Jul. 14, 2003)** [Archive Access Required](#)

<a href="#">Back</a>	<a href="#">Email it</a>	<a href="#">Next</a>	<a href="#">Print</a>	<a href="#">Top</a>	<a href="#">Email Us</a>
----------------------	--------------------------	----------------------	-----------------------	---------------------	--------------------------

© Copyright 2002, The Moscow Times. All Rights Reserved.

Visit our reprint rights page [here](#).  
Request [reprint rights](#) for this article.