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Infra hurdle for wider visa-on-arrival scheme

Nayanima Basu | New Delhi March 26, 2015 Last Updated at 00:40 IST

While the government is keen to increase the number of countries covered under the visa-on-arrival scheme to 150 from 44, lack of adequate infrastructure might emerge the single-most challenge in achieving this goal.

Plans to expand the country's visa-on-arrival scheme have been going on for over a year now.

Finance Minister Arun Jaitley made the government's plan explicit in the Budget when he said, owing to the "success" of visas on arrival issued to travellers, the government will increase the facility to 150 countries. But, he said, it will be done in stages.

Apparently, the plan is to begin with some of the key countries such as the United Kingdom (UK), China, Italy, Spain and France. This is because the inflow of tourists from these countries is substantial, a top official told Business Standard. Besides, "there is a direct correlation between visa relaxation for tourists and greater investment inflows. This also helps in boosting economic as well as strategic and diplomatic ties," the official added.

However, the problem lies in overhauling the country's rusty infrastructure, especially in the tier-2 and tier-3 cities.

The government also introduced Tourist Visa on Arrival enabled by electronic travel authorisation or e-visas to facilitate foreign travellers visiting India from the 43 countries. The proposal had been lying with the ministry of home affairs for almost a year. However, the present government passed it in November last year after coming to power in May.

But the main hurdle that the government might face in achieving this goal will be that of overhauling the infrastructure in airports that needs to be equipped with larger number of counters, trained manpower and quick delivery.

"We need to gear up our airports. It is not only in Delhi, Mumbai and Bangalore, the focus has to be on smaller cities, too. If we plan to expand the coverage to 150 countries, we cannot have queues in front of the visa-on-arrival counters, we need to upgrade the software and databases need to be ready. And we should be better equipped to deliver those visas in a quick and efficient manner," said former ambassador H H S Viswanathan and distinguished fellow at the Observer Research Foundation's Centre for International Relations.

WELCOME SIGNS

Visa-on-arrival is currently given to the following 44 countries:

- Australia
- Brazil
- Cambodia
- Cook Islands
- Djibouti
- Fiji
- Finland
- Germany
- Guyana
- Indonesia
- Israel
- Japan
- Jordan
- Kenya
- Kiribati
- Laos
- Luxembourg
- Marshall Islands
- Mauritius
- Mexico
- Micronesia
- Myanmar
- Nauru
- New Zealand
- Niue Island
- Norway
- Oman
- Palau
- Palestine
- Papua New Guinea
- Philippines
- Republic of Korea
- Russia
- Samoa
- Singapore
- Solomon Islands
- Thailand
- Tonga
- Tuvalu
- UAE
- Ukraine
- USA
- Vanuatu
- Vietnam

In the first phase, India proposes to expand the facility to

UK   CHINA   ITALY   SPAIN

Source: indianvisaonline.gov.in

Recently, the ministry of tourism has proposed to cover Chinese tourists under the scheme. The proposal seems to have once again got stuck with the MHA due to security concerns, according to officials.

"Terrorists or infiltrators do not apply for visas and enter a country, so the security aspect cannot be made the only reason to stop greater openness. Whatever strategic differences we have with China, we need to open revive our ties with it by showing liberalising the visa regime. This government is more open to a liberal visa regime because it is self confident," said Jayant Prasad, former ambassador of India to Nepal.

Security has been one of the main reasons why India's intentions to match global standards as far as granting on visa on arrival scheme is concerned, has not happened successfully. Successive governments have suffered from the apprehensions that liberalising the visa regime, even if for tourists, will lead to compromising the country's security aspects.

"Traditionally, visas used to be subjected to security conditions. There has been a thought that those countries having security threat will not apply for visas or will visit India. However, the same is not relevant in today's world. Today the topmost concern is economic aspect. Countries today want reciprocity. There used to be some resistance in visa liberalisation earlier in the garb of security, which is now fading away," underscored R U Das, professor, Research and Information System for Developing Countries (RIS).

According to Das, the government is working towards improving the infrastructure. He believes infrastructure issues will only be addressed when tourists starting flowing in leading to ramping up of visa counters and other facilities in the airports.

It is learnt that except for Pakistan, Sudan, Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, Nigeria, Sri Lanka and Somalia, all the 180 countries which host India's diplomatic mission, will be included in the ETA list.

There are plans to include all South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation or Saarc countries at a later stage.