

US passport renewals taking months amid pandemic

- A Monitor Desk Report

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Dhaka: The US passport renewal process has been suffering delays during the pandemic. Many Americans are being forced to cancel international trips due to expired passports, and a long and frustrating renewal process. Though travel agents have always recommended giving the government a few months to process a US passport renewal, the timeline is now much more complicated. Processing times are currently up to three times longer for both routine and expedited passport renewal services compared to before the pandemic.

Due to a huge influx of requests as the world reopens, travellers who need to renew (either in person or via mail) will have to allow extra time to do so.

"We've seen varying timelines, but generally the passport renewal process can take anywhere from four to 18 weeks via mail, with in-person meetings even harder to come by," said John Spence, USA President for luxury tour operator Scott Dunn. The government's passport renewal website says travellers should be prepared to wait up to 18 weeks from the day their mailed-in passport reaches a processing facility.

Any traveller who can provide proof of necessary urgent travel, such as life-or-death emergencies, or can show that their trip is within 72 hours, though, are given the chance to score an in-person appointment, Spence said. "However, we wouldn't count on this unless it's a last resort," he added.

If you are able to get an in-person appointment at one of the government's 26 passport agencies or centers in the country, a passport agent will review your application and potentially issue a passport on the spot, if you're eligible for one. Or, the agent may ask you to return at a specific time to receive it, depending on the agency, their workload, and the date of anticipated travel.

Appointments at these centers have been so scarce, however, and in such high demand, that some who have been able to secure one have taken to selling them illegally to other travellers.

In a briefing on July 14, Deputy Assistant Secretary for Passport Services Rachel Arndt addressed the situation, condemning this behaviour. "We are aware of the issues and we are working to prevent them," she said. "The Department of State does not charge a fee to solely book an emergency appointment at one of our agencies or centers, so if anyone receives a request for payment for scheduling a US passport appointment, that should be considered fraudulent."

As a result, on July 21 the Department of State temporarily disabled the online appointment booking system for urgent travel service. No timeframe was specified as to when online booking for appointments will open back up. In the meantime, you must call to make an appointment (though Traveler editors have been unable to get through in recent days, with the call dropping off after the initial menu).

Note that the above measure only applies to the 26 passport agencies in the country, and not the many passport acceptance centers—found in libraries, post offices, and local government offices—which continue to take online appointments. Wait times at passport acceptance centers are aligned with mail-in timelines, meaning the process can take up to 18 weeks once you have had your appointment and your passport has reached the federal government.