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US about-turn on visas in 24 hours

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KUALA LUMPUR, Tues. - In an about-turn within 24 hours, the United States embassy today confirmed that Malaysians were among citizens of 27 countries subject to tighter entry requirements into the country.

In a statement today, it said all male visa applicants aged between 16 and 45 from the countries would be subject to a 20-day waiting period with immediate effect.

The move contradicts the statement by embassy commercial affairs counsellor William Zarit yesterday denying reports that the country had tightened entry requirements for Malaysian Muslims.

The embassy said most diplomatic and fiancee visas would not be subject to this process.

"This procedure is being implemented on an interim basis to enhance the security of our visa issuing process.

"This does not indicate any change in visa eligibility. Persons who qualify for non-immigrant visas under existing laws will continue to receive them; however, the processing time will be increased," the embassy said in a statement issued through its Press office.

The embassy named the other countries affected as Afghanistan, Algeria, Bahrain, Bangladesh, Djibouti, Egypt, Eritrea, Indonesia, Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Oman, Pakistan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, United Arab Emirates, Yemen and the territories of Gaza and the West Bank.

In view of the delays that the new procedures might cause, the embassy urged all applicants for non-immigrant visas to apply for their visas "as far in advance" of their planned travel dates as possible.

Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar had earlier this morning said that Wisma Putra was still awaiting confirmation from the US embassy on the matter.

"We were told that they have yet to receive any instruction (from the State Department) on the matter.

"We told have them that they should let us know (the outcome) fast as the situation needs to be clarified.

"But up to now, they have not received any instruction from their State Department, hence we take it that the Press report (a Bernama report from Washington which announced the restrictions) has yet to be substantiated."

Syed Hamid was speaking to reporters at a briefing on discussions held between Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and his Moroccan counterpart Abderrahman Youssoufi in Putrajaya.

He was asked to comment on the meeting between Wisma Putra officers and the representatives of the US Embassy, including its ambassador Marie T. Huhtala yesterday on the visa issue.