

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

September 14, 2020

The Honorable Michael Pack
Chief Executive Officer
U.S. Agency for Global Media
330 Independence Avenue SW
Washington, D.C. 20237

Dear Mr. Pack,

We write to express concern about reports that you have decided not to renew visa extensions for foreign nationals working as journalists in the United States for Voice of America (VOA) and other entities.¹ Despite repeated inquiries to your agency, we have not received a response on this or numerous other issues including other staffing decisions, and it is our understanding that some of these journalists have already had to return to their home countries after their visas expired.

Failure to expeditiously extend these visas is counterproductive and runs counter to each of your stated objectives for the U.S. Agency for Global Media (USAGM). Furthermore, you are potentially putting the lives of these journalists in danger by forcing them to return to countries where political leaders may target them for their work on behalf of an American media outlet dedicated to truth and transparency.

According to news reports, you have chosen not to extend visas held by foreign-born journalists despite calls by managers to do so.² These journalists report stories and help ensure that USAGM entities can share their reporting globally in 47 different languages. That reporting is often the only unvarnished, transparent and reliable news many people in foreign countries can access. VOA reports that you are assessing on a case-by-case basis the J-1 renewal applications of 62 contractors and 14 full-time employees at VOA as well as an unknown number of journalists at Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, Radio Free Asia, the Office of Cuba Broadcasting, and Middle East Broadcasting Networks.³

Failing to renew these visas constitutes more than callous treatment of a class of employees and contractors who have put their unique skills and insights to use in service of the USAGM's

¹ David Folkenflik, *U.S. Broadcasting Agency Will Not Extend Visas For Its Foreign Journalists*, NPR (Jul. 9, 2020), <https://www.npr.org/2020/07/09/889301025/u-s-broadcasting-agency-will-not-extend-visas-for-its-foreign-journalists>.

² Paul Farhi, *Voice of America faces loss of international journalists as new overseer lets visas expire*, Wash. Post (Jul. 9, 2020), https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/media/voice-of-america-faces-loss-of-international-journalists-as-new-overseer-lets-visas-expire/2020/07/09/42f09844-c192-11ea-b4f6-cb39cd8940fb_story.html.

³ Jessica Jarreat, *Visa Delays Could Hamper VOA News Coverage, Journalists Say*, VOA (Jul. 11, 2020), <https://www.voanews.com/press-freedom/visa-delays-could-hamper-voa-news-coverage-journalists-say>.

mission. Precisely because of their reporting on foreign countries, including their candid assessments of authoritarian governments, many foreign national employees and contractors would be at risk in their countries of origin.⁴ It is unacceptable that you would risk the safety of these individuals without a compelling justification.

A decision not to renew these visas would also needlessly undermine USAGM's effectiveness. VOA has long expended considerable time and effort to recruit foreign nationals because of their crucial language skills, their contacts abroad, and their understanding of the cultures and histories of foreign countries.⁵

Your visa review has already been counterproductive in another sense. By applying the Trump administration's inhumane and self-defeating approach to immigration within your organization, you are only compounding the concern voiced by observers, including recently the Committee to Protect Journalists, that USAGM agencies under your leadership are focused not on journalism but instead "on promoting the political agenda of the current administration."⁶ We have yet to receive any explanation, for example, of your decision to fire all the heads of the organization's networks and grantees.⁷

Recently, more than a dozen journalists who have served VOA sent a letter expressing their concern over your leadership, following an interview with a partisan news outlet where you undermined the credibility of your own agency, saying that your own staff could pose a "security risk". This fundamentally undermines the mission of USAGM and plays directly into the hands of our adversaries, to say nothing of imparting a devastating blow to morale of your own team.

With these concerns in mind, we respectfully request written responses to the following questions by September 30, 2020:

1. In your June 18, 2020 message to USAGM staff,⁸ the first of three goals you identified was "to raise employee morale at the agency." How does refusing to extend visas of foreign national employees and contractors, potentially putting their lives at risk, improve morale, particularly since many of these individuals have worked side-by-side with U.S. employees for years?

⁴ Lindsay Underwood, *National Press Club and Journalism Institute call for renewal of VOA journalists' visas*, National Press Club (Jul. 10, 2020), <https://www.press.org/newsroom/national-press-club-and-journalism-institute-call-renewal-voa-journalists-visas>.

⁵ Paul Farhi, *Voice of America faces loss of international journalists as new overseer lets visas expire*, Wash. Post (Jul. 9, 2020), https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/media/voice-of-america-faces-loss-of-international-journalists-as-new-overseer-lets-visas-expire/2020/07/09/42f09844-c192-11ea-b4f6-cb39cd8940fb_story.html.

⁶ Committee to Protect Journalists, *CPJ sends letter to U.S. Agency for Global Media head encouraging unbiased coverage*, (Jul. 8, 2020), <https://cpj.org/2020/07/cpj-sends-letter-to-u-s-agency-for-global-media-head-encouraging-unbiased-coverage/>.

⁷ Matthew Lee, *Undaunted, US global media chief plows ahead with changes*, Wash. Post (Jul. 13, 2020), https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/undaunted-us-global-media-chief-plows-ahead-with-changes/2020/07/13/d75cded0-c4c0-11ea-a825-8722004e4150_story.html.

⁸ Michael Pack, *CEO Message to Staff* (Jun. 18, 2020), <https://www.usagm.gov/2020/06/18/ceo-message-to-staff/>.

2. The second of three goals you identified in that message was “to make sure there are no issues getting in the way of [staff’s] ability to report the news.” How does refusing to extend visas of foreign national employees and contractors enhance the ability of those individuals, their colleagues, and USAGM to fully report on stories developing around the world?
3. The third of three goals you identified in that message was, “most importantly... to make the agency more effective.” How does pushing out or undermining employees and contractors with exceptional language skills, contacts abroad, or unique insights into foreign countries improve the effectiveness of the agency?
4. In that message, you further stated that you would “confer extensively” with “the talented and dedicated men and women of USAGM” and that you would “consult with all stakeholders, including Congress.” Please describe your consultations with USAGM staff and with members of Congress on this issue.
5. How many foreign national employees and contractors of USAGM entities other than VOA require visa extensions? Do you intend to extend the visas of any such individuals?
6. A USAGM spokesperson has stated that the visa review is aimed at improving agency management, protecting U.S. national security and ensuring that hiring authorities are not misused. How would a failure to renew these visas protect U.S. national security?

Thank you for your attention to this important matter. We look forward to hearing from you by September 30.

Sincerely,



Robert Menendez
United States Senator



Eliot L. Engel
Member of Congress



Edward J. Markey
United States Senator



Bill Keating
Member of Congress



Richard J. Durbin
United States Senator



Tom Malinowski
Member of Congress



Patrick Leahy
United States Senator



Adam B. Schiff
Member of Congress

/s/ Chris Van Hollen

Chris Van Hollen
United States Senator