

The United States has imposed a temporary visa ban on Rwanda and other East African countries as part of a broader suspension of visa screening and issuance for citizens of 75 nations, the State Department said.

The measure, which takes effect Jan. 21, 2026, pauses the issuance of immigrant and non-immigrant visas while U.S. authorities review how applications are assessed. The suspension will remain in place until the Department of State completes the review and determines whether visa processing can resume.

A directive sent to U.S. diplomatic missions worldwide and obtained by Fox News instructs consular officers not to issue visas under existing rules during the review period. U.S. officials said African countries account for the largest share of those affected.

State Department spokesperson Tommy Piggott said the decision is intended to prevent individuals who fail to meet U.S. immigration standards from entering the country.

“The Department will use the authority it has to address immigrants who do not meet the required standards and who may become a burden on the state, benefiting from the generosity of the American people,” Piggott said.

All East African countries are among those affected, potentially disrupting travel for students, workers, families and business people seeking to visit or relocate to the United States.

A U.S. visa ban refers to restrictions or suspensions on the issuance of visas to foreign nationals. Such measures can apply to entire countries, specific visa categories including tourist, student, work or immigrant visas or targeted individuals. Visa bans may be temporary or partial, depending on policy objectives.

Historically, U.S. administrations have imposed visa restrictions for a range of reasons, including national security concerns, immigration compliance issues, foreign policy pressure, human rights considerations and public health emergencies. In addition to countrywide measures, the U.S. has also applied targeted visa restrictions against specific individuals accused of corruption, human rights abuses or security threats, without affecting the general population.

Rwanda’s inclusion in the current suspension comes as the country records

improved global travel access for its citizens.

According to the latest Henley Passport Index, Rwanda's passport climbed six places, from 76th in 2025 to 70th in early 2026, its highest ranking to date. The index measures passport strength based on visa-free access, visa-on-arrival opportunities and document security standards.

Across East Africa, passport strength varies. Kenya holds the strongest passport in the region, followed by Tanzania and Uganda. Rwanda ranks in the middle, while Burundi, South Sudan and Somalia remain among the lowest-ranked globally.

Globally, Singapore tops the Henley index with visa-free access to 192 destinations, followed by Japan and South Korea. Afghanistan ranks last.

While Rwanda and some of its neighbors continue to expand global mobility, the U.S. visa ban highlights how immigration policy reviews can affect students, skilled workers, families and businesses, underscoring the broader economic and diplomatic impact of visa restrictions worldwide.