

US Labour Secretary Denies Plan To Kill H-1B Visa

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US Labor Secretary Hilda S Solis has denied that a new programme launched by the Obama administration is aimed at killing the H-1B visa programme even though she declared the H-1B technical skills training grant competition "is to prepare American workers to replace foreign workers in high growth areas". Solis told *rediff.com*: "No, that is not our focus here (to ultimately kill the H-1B programme). These monies have come available because they are fees that we receive when people enter into the programme - the employer pays these fees." H-1B visa programme has over the years brought hundreds of thousands of Indian skilled professionals to the United States. "The intention has always been with this money to plough back that money so that we could train American workers here. So, it is not competing with the original goal of the H-1B programme." In a teleconference with journalists and company executives and representatives of high tech and information technology associations, Solis said the competition would "provide up to \$240 million in funds as a part of this administration's commitment to get this country back to work and provide opportunities for all Americans". She said: "This grant competition is unique in that it provides an opportunity to work directly with the business community as part of private and public partnership to help ensure that they can get the skilled workers they need.

"These grants will help provide Americans workers the skills they need to succeed in high technology, high-growth and high-skilled jobs," she added. Solis said: "The competition also addresses the need of the long-term unemployed, who sometimes see their skills erode as they search for work. As such, at least \$60 million will go to applicants that focus specifically on the long-term unemployed. "We expect to fund between 75 to 100 grant proposals ranging from \$1 to \$5 million in two rounds of funding." At least a \$150 million will be awarded to applicants that provide what we call 'on the job training' and at least \$60 million that will be awarded to grantees that provide training for jobs in the health care industry."

But then in remarks, which proponents of the H-1B programme who have been calling for the visa numbers to be increased so that more skilled Indian and other foreign workers can be employed by high-tech companies in the US, raised deep concerns that this project is targeted to make the H-1B programme vestigial, Solis said: "But what's really unique about this grant is that the funding comes from fees that are paid through by the H-1B programme".

"A major intent of this competition is to prepare American workers to replace foreign workers in high-growth areas - industries like information technology, communication and broad-band technology, and advanced manufacturing," she said. "Others will include healthcare, allied health and professional and health information technology occupation."

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Reiterating the administration's intent to replace foreign skilled workers with American workers, Solis said: "We are making great progress everyday in our economic recovery and with all the talent we have in this country, there is no question the best jobs should go to American workers." One industry source, whose Indian company based in the US hires Indian skilled workers for IT companies in the US faced with a shortage of skilled professionals, told *rediff.com*: "The irony of the administration competition and programme is that we are now being charged prohibitive fees for each visa application and now they are apparently using all those monies to train American workers to replace foreign professionals, totally in disregard of the globalized world and international agreements on services.

It's also ironic that in some ways, that taking the money from us and then ultimately trying to kill the H-1B programme is akin to killing the goose that laid the golden eggs!" the source said. Todd Cavanaugh, president and CEO of the Computing Technology Industry Association, said the association was elated over the programme launched by Solis to replace foreign workers with American workers and said: "Businesses will be able to compete for the grants and use the funding for training and up-scaling their incumbent workers." "Because of the dynamic nature of the information technology and technology industries," he said, "it is critical to be able to provide opportunities for ongoing training and certification in higher level IT skills to keep the workforce and the industry at large competitive."

Cavanaugh said: "These grants will help many IT companies - small, medium and large - address that need during these challenging economic times." "IT workers need high level training in areas like information security, project management and new areas like health-care IT, the Cloud, and in the future, around things like green IT," he said. Cavanaugh said: "As these newly trained workers progress into higher level positions with higher wages, they leave opportunities for others to fill their previous jobs, including the currently unemployed and dislocated workers wanting to enter the IT industry." "So, what we hope to see is a better and more current skilled IT workforce, more competitive American IT industry, more certified IT workers, promotions and higher paying jobs for IT positions for the unemployed and displaced workers," he said.

Meanwhile, Solis told *rediff.com* that she was unaware of Congressional legislation that was aimed at going after companies that allegedly abuse the H-1B and L-1 (intra-company transfer) visa programmes, introduced by the likes of Senators Charles Grassley, Iowa Republican and Richard Durbin, Illinois Democrat, and the campaign being waged by the likes of Senator Charles Schumer, who has even described venerable Indian IT heavyweights disparagingly as "chop-shops". She told *India Abroad* that she was also not cognizant of the recent remarks by Assistant Secretary of State for Consular Affairs, Janice Jacobs, who had recently visited India and had acknowledged that there was a crackdown by consular officers in India because of alleged abuses in denying H-1B and L visas to Indian nationals even though they had jobs in the US and their applications had been approved by the Department of Labor.

Solis said: "What I would tell you is that we'll have to look into that case. I have not heard that. This is the first time I am hearing that. "So, I'll work with the other agencies that are involved - the other federal agencies - and we'll get back to you," she said. Jacobs, during a recent interaction with journalists at the Foreign Press Center, asked about the apparent summary denial of H-1B and L-1 visas by American consulates in India in what is being described as a massive crackdown, said: "On the issue of H-1B visas out of India, we - over 50 per cent of the H&L visas that we issue worldwide are issued in India. So those two programmes, I think, have really benefited Indian nationals over the years.

"You talk about a crackdown. What I can tell you is that our consulates or the Embassy in India had become aware of certain abuses of those two categories of visas, and they are taking measures to make sure that those abuses do not continue," she said. Jacobs, however, said: "There's an awful lot of outreach with the business community in India. We have a very good relationship with NASSCOM and other business groups there. "We have - I even spoke to them when I during a recent visit to Delhi. So we are very interested in strengthening the economic partnership that we have with India, and I think these visas are part of that. "And so we don't want people who might try to abuse the system to spoil it for everyone else. So we do a lot of presentations and outreach on trying to explain what the procedures are, what the requirements are, just to make sure that everyone is sort of playing by the book so that we're all - we're able to issue visas to qualified applicants," she said.