

# FCCC Visa Survey 2012 Findings

(December 2012)

The FCCC has compiled the results of this year's annual survey of visa issues for foreign correspondents. A record 119 respondents filled out the survey.

The picture is no better than last year and in some respects worse, although anecdotally there appears to have been some improvement in recent months.

The Chinese authorities do not appear to have been processing applications for J1 resident visas and J2 visitor visas any more quickly than in the past, leading to unacceptably long delays; we are also disturbed by the number of threats by officials to annul foreign correspondents' visas as punishment for their reporting.

*"A police officer at the visa office said to me "I am warning you, we can very well not give you your visa; we decide", accusing me of having obstructed the police in their work by being present outside the court where an activist was on trial." – European correspondent*

The most disturbing event this year was clearly the expulsion of Melissa Chan, Beijing correspondent for Al Jazeera's English language channel, the first expulsion of a foreign correspondent from China for 14 years.

During the annual visa renewal process at the end of 2011 Melissa was refused the standard 12 month visa, and given a two month visa instead, which was extended for one month until she was obliged to leave China at the end of March 2012.

At no point did any Chinese official explain formally to Melissa why she was being punished, other than to indicate that the government had been displeased by a documentary about the 'laogai' system that Al Jazeera had aired. Melissa had had nothing to do with that program.

Twelve foreign correspondents said they faced difficulties, such as threats or unusual delays, in renewing their Foreign Ministry press credentials (without which they could not apply for a new visa) or in renewing their visas at the end of 2011.

Seven of them said there were indications that their previous reporting had led to the difficulties. The other five were all members of the FCCC board, or had stood for election to the board. The Chinese Foreign Ministry has repeatedly made it clear it regards the FCCC as an illegal organization.

*"The Foreign Ministry said directly that they were unsatisfied with articles I had written (containing information about leaked Communist party documents); they said I had committed a crime." – Martin Goettske, Beijing correspondent for "Information", a Danish daily.*

*"I was told at the International Press Centre (which issues foreign press credentials) that the*

*delay in my visarenewal was a consequence of my FCCC activities.” – Tomasz Sajewicz, FCCC board member.*

The FCCC is aware of 29 reporters who were threatened with the non-renewal or cancellation of their visas since the end of 2011. Seven of them were warned during the annual visa renewal process; the other 22 were threatened in the course of their work. 13 of these cases occurred at the Chaoyang Hospital, while blind legal activist Chen Guangcheng was being treated there.\*

*“I was one of a group of reporters who chased a US embassy official into Chaoyang Hospital and was told that I could lose my visa if I committed a similar offence again.” – International news agency reporter*

*“I was told they had the power to not-renew my visa if I didn’t change my attitude. This referred to events at Wangfujing (in Spring 2011) and the chat I had afterwards with the police, when I was argumentative and said they had their facts wrong. Since then, they have labeled me a troublemaker.” – European journalist*

There appears to be little or no reduction in the number of cases of excessive delay in the provision of visas. This year 20 reporters have had to wait more than four months for their new J1 resident visas; seven of them are still waiting. Last year’s survey, covering two years, found 27 reporters who had been obliged to wait more than four months for their visas to be approved.

Of the 20 who waited more than four months this year, five received their visas only after waiting more than six months, and three are still waiting. This is an improvement over the situation this time last year, when 13 reporters were still waiting for their J1 visas after more than six months.

This year, seven organizations were obliged to cancel 13 planned reporting trips or permanent postings because of undue visa delays. This compares with the last survey, covering two years, during which 20 organizations had abandoned 28 reporting trips or permanent postings because applications for the necessary journalist visas had been rejected or ignored by the Chinese authorities.

The FCCC is pleased to note statements by Foreign Ministry officials that they will process applications for press credential renewal with alacrity this year, given that the procedure has begun later than usual.

\*The FCCC learned of these 13 cases at the time. Only three of the journalists concerned responded to the FCCC survey. Methodology: In October 2012 the FCCC emailed a link to an online survey to 259 correspondent members representing 134 media organizations from 29 countries. We received 119 responses as of Nov 3. Some respondents did not answer all questions.