

## Inauguration of the visa centre of the Swiss Embassy in New Delhi, 21 March 2016 Inaugurating address by Ambassador Linus von Castelmur

Distinguished guests of the Ministry of External Affairs,  
dear colleges from other Schengen Embassies,  
dear Laurent Perriard, Deputy Director of the Consulate Directorate, FDFA,  
dear collaborators of the Swiss embassy,  
ladies and gentlemen

A very good evening and a warm welcome to the new visa center of the Swiss Embassy!

As we all know, Switzerland and India are old friends. It was with Switzerland that newly independent India signed its first friendship treaty in 1948. Since then our relations have grown even stronger and become more diversified, from investment protection to civil aviation, from scientific and technological cooperation to legal assistance, from double tax avoidance to social security, India and Switzerland have inked and implemented many bilateral treaties in order to expand and deepen our friendly bilateral relations.

One is still missing – the much wished for broad based trade and investment agreement we are negotiating since quite some time together with our EFTA partners Iceland, Liechtenstein and Norway. Let's hope that the negotiations will resume soon. Switzerland stands ready to show creativity and to walk the extra mile in order to find mutually beneficial solutions!

When it comes to tourism, Switzerland is a much preferred destination for many Indians. Thus it does not come as a surprise that India is one of the most important markets of overseas tourists to Switzerland and we witness a steady increase in visa requests from Indian nationals. Nearly every newlywed couple dreams of spending their honeymoon in Luzern, Interlaken or the lush alpine meadows where Sharuk Khan and Kajol were romancing in the Bollywood movies... But obviously, our country is also popular for group travelling, incentive groups and individual travelers.

In an effort to increase efficiency and thus offer an improved service to our clients, the decision was taken in 2014 to centralize visa the issuance for all India in Delhi and to close the visa section at our Consulate General in Mumbai. In 2015 Switzerland, was processing 113'000 visa requests, 24% more than in 2014. As of this year, all the visa requests deposited through a dozen VFS offices will eventually be sent to Delhi for the final exam and the issuance (or rejection) of the visa. In fact, this will become the biggest visa centre for Switzerland worldwide! I am convinced that our visa team will be able to deliver state of the art service to customers and I do expect that the numbers will continue to increase over the next few years.

In order to implement the centralization, we needed to create an appropriate work space to accommodate up to 40 employees. This building was previously housing the Climate Change and Development Division of the Embassy; in order to fulfill the requirements of a visa centre substantial changes were required. During the past eight months, walls were fortified to withstand earthquakes, individual offices were transformed into open spaces and the entrance zone got remodeled to welcome our visitors. It was indeed a sportive achievement to renovate this building in only eight months, to be ready just in time for the visa high season in spring 2016!

This amazing result, this great work has many mothers and fathers and I would like to thank several of them:

- First and foremost, Prisca Marti, Administrative Director of the Swiss Embassy, for her persistent efforts and constant supervision;
- Jodok Brunner from the Federal Office for Construction and Logistics in Bern for his inspirational guidance;
- Georg Hammann Swiss architect from Zurich for the creative solutions;
- Vikas Narayan architect from Delhi for his sustained implementation efforts;
- all the local companies involved in this complex project and last but not least all partners involved at headquarters in Berne and at our embassy.

Without their relentless effort and dedication it would never have been possible to open the center today. Thank you so much! I think this deserves a big round of applause!

Ladies and gentlemen, dear friends, in concluding let me assure you that the Embassy of Switzerland strives to continuously deliver high quality service for our customers who probably will not notice that their visas now are issued by the Embassy in Delhi instead of the Consulate General in Mumbai. Our external partner VFS is represented in 12 offices in India, from North to South and East to West, ensuring that the applications are swiftly transferred to Delhi. Anton Schwab is leading a team of currently 35 persons and works closely together with VFS, Switzerland Tourism and the Consular Directorate in Bern to ensure a smooth transition. We all wish you and your team well on this new journey!

Before we cut the ribbon and officially inaugurate the new Swiss visa centre in India, I hand over the floor to the representative of the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs, Mr. Laurent Perriard, Deputy Director of the Consular Directorate at the Swiss Foreign Ministry.