



Pressure on the UK visa system

Summary

1. Recent events underline the need for a robust visa system but the growing pressure on numbers is placing it under severe strain. In some countries this has serious security implications for Britain's security.

Introduction

2. One of the major weaknesses of the present immigration system is the failure to record the arrival and departure of overseas visitors. Much therefore depends on the assessment of the visa issuing officers as to whether the applicant is both genuine and will return home. This is now especially important since, from October 2000 a visa has conferred the right to enter the United Kingdom whereas, previously, immigration officers at the point of arrival determined the period and conditions of each person's stay. The potential weakness of the present system is illustrated by a tracking exercise conducted in Ghana which found that 37% of a sample of students issued with a visa could not subsequently be traced. [1]

3. Visa sections overseas have been coming under increasing pressure in recent years. According to a report by the National Audit Office (NAO) [2] 1.94 million visa applications were made in 2002/3. This represented an increase of 33% over the previous 5 years and 11% on the previous year.

4. The overall annual increase in visa applications masks a massive increase in applications from particular countries, some of which are sources of security concern or of large scale immigration (or both). Ten posts received over 40% more applications than the previous year. 35 posts (22%) found that demand for visas exceeded processing capacity [3]. As the table at Annex A illustrates [4], applications for non-settlement visas from Nigeria have increased by 50% over the past 5 years, of which 30% were refused. For Bangladesh the numbers have doubled with a similar refusal rate. Applications from Ghana have trebled with a 50% refusal rate.

5. In order to cope with this growing pressure of demand, the system is being "streamlined" and staff are being encouraged to take "pragmatic" decisions. The National Audit Office reported that "In many of the posts that we visited, entry clearance staff considered that the daily processing targets took precedence over control issues. Entry clearance staff were aware of the importance of control and understood the need for balance but, in some posts, staff told us that they did not have sufficient time to consider thoroughly applications that raise doubts or put together a robust case for refusal." [5]

6. As a result, an increasing number of visas are being issued at "Tier One".

This means that the applicant is dealt with at the counter by a locally engaged member of staff. The papers are later signed off by a UK based Entry Control officer (E.C.O.) but he, or she, does not interview the applicant. Locally engaged visa officers are often vulnerable to threat or inducement; there are procedures to try to counter this but cases of corruption are by no means uncommon.

7. This situation is of particular concern in countries of potential security risk. In Pakistan, 96% of visitor's visas were granted without interview - that is nearly 75,000 successful applicants in 2003/4. Applications for North Africa are much fewer but interview rates are even lower. In the same year, about 11,000 Algerians were granted visitors visas - all of them without interview.

8. The government's admission that 182 of the 717 persons arrested on suspicion of terrorism had applied for asylum, may well be relevant.^[6] Those concerned may well have entered as visitors (or students) and then claimed asylum to make sure that they could stay in Britain for several years while their cases were decided. If their cases failed, they could claim that they would be tortured on return to prevent their removal.

9. The NAO report recommended that UK visas should "give more emphasis" to control issues.^[7] This is now an inadequate response. By contrast, the United States has, since 9/11, insisted that all visa applicants are interviewed and there are no rights of appeal.

10. Clearly, the British visa system is seriously under resourced. A major improvement is needed, particularly in countries of security concern.

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NOTES

[1] NAO Report "Visa Entry to the United Kingdom" June 2004 Page 9

[2] NAO Report "Visa Entry to the United Kingdom" June 2004 Page 11. In 2003/4 applications totalled 2.1 million.

[3] NAO Report "Visa Entry to the United Kingdom" June 2004 Paragraph 3.7

[4] Parliamentary Answers 187 of 5 July and 191 of 21 July.

[5] NAO Report "Visa Entry to the United Kingdom" June 2004 Paragraph 2.9

[6] Parliamentary Answer 8 Feb 2005 , House of Commons Col 1414W

[7] NAO Report "Visa Entry to the United Kingdom" June 2004 Recommendations 23 (b)

Annexe A

Country	Non-Settlement Applications Received		% Increase	% Tier One *	% Refused
	99/00	03/04		03/04	03/04
Bangladesh	15,000	34,000	126	91	30
China	47,000	78,000	61	82	8
Ghana	27,000	82,000	203	91	54
India	170,000	232,000	36	100	15
Nigeria	70,000	108,000	54	91	31
Pakistan	70,000	84,000	20	96	11
Algeria	3,000	15,000	500	100	27
Morocco	7,000	7,000	0	90	9
Tunisia	7,000	5,000	-29	98	13

* Percentage of Non-Settlement visa applications dealt with at Tier One within 24 hours without the need for interview.