

SA wants 'visa-free' status returned

The South African government has approached British authorities to negotiate the possible reinstatement of South Africa's "visa-free" status that was stripped in 2008, said home affairs director-general Mkuseli Apleni on Friday (22 February).



The UK revoked South Africa's visa-free status because of rampant corruption in the Department of Home Affairs, where officials had given passports to people smugglers and foreign asylum seekers - raising the risk of suspected terrorists entering the UK via South Africa.

Apleni said the Cabinet decided to re-negotiate South Africa's visa-free status with the UK after expressing satisfaction that the Department of Home Affairs had since 2008 taken "drastic steps" to root out corruption, clean-up the national population register and redesign the security features of South African passports.

"We now have one to the world's safest passports that cannot be forged," he said. "The process of issuing passports is more credible and has stringent checks and balances to ensure that applicants are genuinely South Africans."

South Africa leapt to the top of the British government's visa "hit list" in 2008 after a British trial heard that at least 6,000 illegal Asian immigrants had been smuggled into the UK on South African passports. UK immigration experts said at the time that a South African passport was "no longer worth the paper it's written on".

The decision affected almost half a million tourists, business people and family visitors travelling to the UK who suddenly had to apply for visas.

Best practices

Apleni said that South Africa had followed best international practices to monitor travellers' movements at all its entry and exit points.

At OR Tambo International Airport in Johannesburg, the fingerprints of every traveller using a South African passport are already being double-checked against the national population register to ensure that the passport holder is a South African citizen. This measure has led to several people with authentic South African passports acquired fraudulently being caught and denied permission to leave the country.

"This has eliminated the problem of people leaving South African shores as South Africans and landing in Europe with a different identity, which posed a serious challenge for immigration officials there and compromised South Africa," Apleni said.

He said immigration officials at South African ports also worked with transport agencies - and airlines in particular - to ensure that the details of people entering South Africa were authentic. The lists are electronically sent to South Africa before a plane leaves an airport anywhere else in the world.

"We make sure we know who is landing in South Africa, from where and using what mode of transport," he said. "We also cross-check during the arrival that names and passports correspond so that we are sure of visitors, the purpose of their visit and citizens.

"This has also affected our neighbouring states even though we have visa-free status, except for Madagascans and Angolans, since South Africa now requires a transit visa if (a traveller's) destination is not South Africa."

Apleni added: "We believe that these international standards and benchmarks will satisfy our British counterparts and that they will view the request for the restoration of the visa-free status for South Africa favourably."

Meanwhile, Home Affairs Minister Naledi Pandor on Friday (22 February) signed a visa waiver agreement to facilitate better access for senior government officials and diplomats with the Benelux states (Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg), Italy, Panama and Spain.

Such an agreement is signed between two countries to enhance economic, cultural and humanitarian ties.

The agreement does not cover business travellers and ordinary South Africans, although Panama indicated that it would soon offer free visas to South Africans as it had added the country to its list of favoured trade partners.

Source: *Business Day* via I-Net Bridge

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