

Passport Shortage Breeds Corruption

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Getting out of Zimbabwe is now a prized activity, so it comes at a high price.

Anyone visiting the passport office in the capital Harare will have encountered the hordes of people trying to get documents so that they can leave a country where the economy is in freefall and the political impasse makes the prospects of recovery remote.

They are also likely to be familiar with the corruption engendered by a shortage of passports, the low pay of public servants and the sheer desperation of their customers.

I learned this the hard way, when I was invited to attend a week-long seminar in South Africa at the beginning of May.

My passport expired in 2005, and although I submitted an application for a new one in early 2006, I am still waiting.

The registration authorities resumed issuing passports only recently after getting an injection of funding from Zimbabwe's central bank. The registrar-general, Tobaiwa Mudede, said recently that his office had a backlog of 300,000 applications.

The passport office at Makombe Complex is packed with Zimbabweans all trying to get the documents they need to leave the country. Professionals are abandoning ship, heading for Britain, Canada, Australia and the United States, while poorer people visit neighbouring states to trade.

With no passport in sight, I joined the many people applying for an Emergency Travel Document or ETD – a temporary permit valid for six months. I assumed the procedure would be simple enough, as I had a formal letter of invitation.

I soon realised my mistake.

ETDs are intended for emergencies only, but the Makombe Complex office issues at least 100 a day, often to people planning to cross into Mozambique, Zambia, Botswana and South Africa to buy cheap goods for sale back home. Friends abroad help by supplying fake letters of invitation and false addresses.

The booming demand generated by the cross-border trade – itself a product of Zimbabwe's dire economic circumstances – has opened up a lucrative seam for corrupt passport officials.

At the core of the business is a syndicate of men and women who appear to control the number of applications issued per day. By doing so, they create an artificial shortage, making applicants willing to pay a premium to get the right document.

The speed at which you get your ETD then depends on your willingness to pay an extra “fee”, or on having the right connections.

The application form is of course free of charge, but even that is hard to come by. When I got to Makombe Complex, the forms had run out.

At this point, I was approached by a young man who told me his name was Adam and said he could help me get an ETD for 300,000 Zimbabwe dollars, ZWD. It is hard to translate this sum – at the official rate it would work out as 1,200 US dollars while at the parallel market rate it is just about eight dollars – but bear in mind that it represents a month’s wages in Zimbabwe.

Adam told me to go to a particular office and see a woman called Maggie. “You can get your ETD in three hours,” he promised, as we exchanged details.

When I got to the right office, I asked for Maggie. Somebody pointed her out to me among a bevy of ladies chatting idly behind their desks. When I mentioned Adam’s name, she handed over a photocopy of the form with a nonchalance that belied her knowledge of what was going on. “Fill in the form and take it to Window 7,” she said coldly.

At Window 7, located outside the complex, people shove their way forward to submit completed application forms or to collect their ETDs.

After 40 minutes of pushing, I submitted my form, two passport-size photos and the letter of invitation explaining the urgency of the application. The form was stamped, and I was packed off to yet another office, where I paid the official fee of 5,000 ZWD. Then I had to go back to Window 7, where I was told to return the following day to collect the ETD.

My mobile phone rang three hours later. It was Adam. He gave me the name of a building in town, an office number and the name of a woman to whom I was to give the 300,000 ZWD as payment for the express service.

I queried this, since I had not actually received the ETD. “You got the form,” came the answer. “You would never have got it otherwise. We want to process your ETD.”

I did not go and pay. After two hours, Adam phoned again to find out whether I had settled the bill. I said I was not going to pay 300,000 ZWD for an application form. He said he was prepared to send someone over to collect the money if I wanted. “It’s up to you,” he said and hung up.

The following day, I was at the ETD collection window early in the morning, along with the usual crowds. The collection times are indicated as 9 am, 11 am and 2pm. I waited for my name to be called out but nothing happened all day.

“Check tomorrow,” said Maggie casually, when I enquired at her office. It was the same story every day for a week.

Meanwhile, I was pestered about the outstanding payment every two or three hours.

I saw many other people collecting their ETDs although they had submitted their applications after I did. From the conversations taking place, I could tell money was changing hands somewhere.

I was running out of time, as I would still need to get a South African visa processed afterwards. It was becoming evident that it was up to me to achieve progress.

On the Tuesday of the second week, I telephoned a senior government official whom I know and told him my story. "No problem," he said. "Let's meet at the passport office tomorrow morning."

As soon as we entered the office where Maggie worked, everybody greeted my friend warmly, although no one seemed to recognise me at all. He explained that I was a colleague of his and needed to travel abroad urgently.

Maggie asked for my application form as if I was a complete stranger. When I reminded her that I had submitted an application the previous week, she feigned surprise.

"Go to the collection window while I check what happened," she said. She quickly dialled the extension, and as we got to the collection point, the ETD was being processed.

I took it, thanked my influential friend, and left in disgust.

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