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Somalia: Identity documents and travel documents (January 2000 - June 2004)
Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board, Ottawa

Identity Documents

Information on Somali identity documents was scarce among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate.

According to a report prepared by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the Austrian Centre for Country of Origin and Asylum research and Documentation (ACCORD) on the Seventh European Country of Origin Information Seminar, which was held in Berlin, Germany, from 11-12 June 2001, identity documents were not being issued anywhere in Somalia in 2001 (UNHCR/ACCORD 11-12 June 2001, 146). In 2001, Somaliland authorities were, however, issuing drivers' licenses, which could be used to establish the identity of those who held them (ibid.).

In May 2004, the Home Office of the United Kingdom (UK) issued an "Operational Guidance Note" on Somalia, in which it stated that it is impossible to verify the authenticity of any documents presented by Somalis who apply for asylum in the UK because there is no central government or authority in Somalia that keeps official records of the population or of the issuance of such documents to enable verification (Sec. 5.3.1). Additionally, the official records that had been kept prior to the collapse of the government were destroyed during the civil war (UK May 2004, Sec. 5.3.1). While the UK Home Office acknowledged that "[s]ome local administrations such as Somaliland and the TNG [Transitional National Government] authorities issue documents (birth certificates, passports etc.), [it also pointed out that] these are not issued under any internationally recognised authority and are not verifiable" (ibid.).

Additional and corroborating information on Somali identity documents could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate.

Travel Documents

In September 2002, the United Nations Integrated Regional Information Networks (IRIN) reported that according to the Minister of State for Foreign Affairs of the TNG, Muhammad Mahmud Shiil, there was a "widespread forgery of Somali passports" (4 Sept. 2002). In an effort to counter this, a new passport

office was established in Mogadishu within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which was to issue passports with a new dry seal to prevent forgery and duplication (IRIN 4 Sept. 2002). Information on the status of this office could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate.

In its report, IRIN also indicated that, generally, persons wishing to acquire an unofficial passport would do so unofficially by going to the Bakaara market and paying a fee (IRIN 4 Sept. 2002). Similarly, in May 2004, the UK Home Office declared that

[a] range of Somali documents, including passports, can be easily obtained both in Somalia and in many other countries in the region through unofficial channels. [S]uch documentation is often openly on sale in markets. Little weight can therefore be attached to any claimed Somali document and they should not be accepted as sole proof of identity or nationality (UK May 2004, Sec. 5.3.3).

Considering the lack of means for verification and the ease with which fraudulent documents may be acquired, foreign governments have implemented various bans on the Somali passport (*Angered Somali Weyn* 13 May 2004; ECRE Apr. 2003; *HornAfrik* 24 June 2004; *ibid.* 8 May 2004; UK May 2004). For instance, during the period November 2002 through February 2003, the Egyptian government banned Somali nationals from acquiring visas due to "irregularities occasioned by Somali groups travelling abroad" (*HornAfrik Online* 18 Feb. 2003).

According to an April 2003 report prepared by the European Council on Refugees and Exiles (ECRE) in conjunction with the United States Committee for Refugees (USCR), "Somali passports and other travel documents are suspect" (73). The report also pointed out that Denmark did not recognize Somali passports or travel documents, and that although several Somali diplomatic missions continued to operate in Europe,

...issuing travel documents is "normally their only source of income." The German...Foreign Ministry has reportedly requested the Somali embassy in Bonn to stop issuing official documents. A brisk sale in Somali travel documents reportedly also occurs in the markets of Eastleigh, the Somali quarter of Nairobi (ECRE/USCR Apr. 2003, 73).

As of July 2003, the UK ceased to accept Somali passports as valid travel documents, irrespective of whether they were issued before or after 1991 (UK May 2004, Sec. 5.3.3). This includes passports issued by Somaliland and the TNG, neither of which is recognized by the UK (*ibid.*).

In May 2004, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) banned the issuance of visas to persons travelling on a Somali passport (*HornAfrik Online* 8 May 2004). It is unclear as to why the UAE government took this action (*ibid.*). However, as at 24 June 2004, the UAE had not removed the ban, while the Somali Minister of Foreign Affairs, Yusuf Hassan Dheg, admitted that "there are some mistakes found in Somali passports and also incorrect issuing of Somali passports by some members of the Somali embassy in the UAE" (*ibid.* 24 June 2004).

Just prior to the UAE's banning of them, the Kenyan government also banned Somali passports (*ibid.* 8 May 2004; *Angered Somali Weyn* 13 May 2004) because it considered the passports to be "null and void [since] there was no

government that was issuing them or anyone who can be contacted [for verification purposes], and...therefore the Somali travel documents were easily obtained by terrorists groups" (ibid.).

In May 2004, the UK reported that at that time most of the other 14 European Union (EU) countries also did not recognize Somali passports (Sec. 5.3.3).

During a presentation at the Ninth European Country of Origin Information Seminar in Dublin, Ireland, on 26 and 27 May 2004, a representative of CONCERN, a non-governmental organization based in Somalia, indicated that Somali embassies in Djibouti, the UAE and other countries are still functioning and are issuing Somali passports (27 May 2004). The representative spoke specifically about passports when asked about identity documents (CONCERN 27 May 2004). He noted that it is very difficult for persons wanting to travel on Somali passports to obtain visas from foreign governments, and cautioned that if a Somali passport contains a visa or other entry permit to a country that has banned the issuance of visas based on Somali passports or has banned Somali passports altogether, the passport should be treated as suspect (ibid.). Finally, he noted that when applying for asylum or refugee status in another country (i.e. in Western European, etc.), many non-Somalis pose as Somalis, when in reality there are very few genuine Somalis seeking asylum or refugee status in other countries (ibid.). Referring to this observation, a London-based researcher with Amnesty International (AI), during a presentation at the Ninth Country of Origin Information Seminar in Dublin, Ireland, noted that "governments should work with Somali organizations to research and identify genuine Somalis" (27 May 2004).

This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim for refugee protection. Please find below the list of additional sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

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