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Embassies complain about Angola's immigration policy

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In Angola, passports get lost at the immigration office and work permits are granted months or even years too late. This is not the end of the horror stories among expats and tourists. The embassies of the EU, US, Norway and Brazil have now made an official complaint.

Receipts needed to temporarily replace and collect permits or passports are not handed out. Some expat managers have been forced to go into hiding, on the run for the police and couldn't leave or get into the country. People spent hours behind bars. And some have been taken to the airport with a police escort and were kicked out as though they were criminals.

Companies regularly have to pay tens of thousands of euros in fines or bribes when employees don't possess the proper documents – one day without a legitimate visa or work permit will cost you around 150 euro. Angola ranks 163 out of 183 countries on the 'Ease of doing Business' list of the World Bank's report 'Doing Business 2011'. Visa and work permit issues undoubtedly influence that figure.

Shared limit

For the EU, US, Norwegian and Brazilian embassies, enough is enough. They recently decided to write a joint, official letter to the Angolan Ministry of Foreign Affairs. "The Minister of Foreign Affairs' shares our concerns and will try to find out what is going wrong within the Ministry of the Interior and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs," the Dutch Ambassador Mr Van Honk says.

He has lived and worked in various African countries, but says he has never experienced a situation as extreme as in Angola. "Still, I don't think it's the Angolan government's intention to maltreat expats", he adds.

Angolans first

Angola has a history of 25 years of communism and its civil war only ended in 2002. "As a result, it still faces many institutional complications", the ambassador explains, pointing to the fact that respect for authority is still all-dominating in Angolan society, and that like other countries with a history of communism, Angola is not yet service-oriented.

Moreover, Angola is the world's fastest growing economy, which has attracted huge numbers of expats and investors. Angola wants to 'Angolanise'. "And Angolan companies want to educate Angolans rather than attract educated expats" says Isabel, a key account manager who works for an international oil and gas company in Luanda.

Proud and disorganised

But the expats that do get hired in Angola, get a three-year work permit that has to be extended annually. After the three years expire, they have to hand over their job to an Angolan. The problem according to many is that there are not enough qualified Angolans to make this scheme work. Angola needs expats, but does not want them.

"Angolans are proud and nationalistic," Isabel says. "They want to develop their own country. But I think the expat's complaints don't have anything to do with the Angolan government.

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Immigration is just clumsy and disorganised."

"Angola's desire to want to create jobs for Angolans is legitimate," says Ambassador Van Honk. "But the question is: Is this done in a reasonable way? The problem lies with the mediocre guy at immigration who makes mistakes."

Dirty and clean corruption

Although many Angolans benefit from their country's immigration policy, there are also a few who suffer. Technician Paulo has a European wife. "Organising the paperwork to get her the right visa was incredibly time-consuming", he says. "The people at immigration don't seem to know the law, and know its possibilities. Even as an Angolan, you won't get anywhere if you don't know the right people and pay bribes."

There is 'dirty' corruption and 'clean' corruption when it comes to getting the right documents, he explains. "Clean corruption is when you follow the normal path and pay people you know. Dirty corruption is buying a false document from a so-called 'black ghost' in the Kazenga neighbourhood. These people are specialised in falsifying documents."

Unwanted managers

Angola's immigration policy has another side effect. There are stories of Angolan employees who secretly report an unpopular expat manager to immigration. In one case the manager went into hiding, after which the company had to pay a bribe of 25,000 dollars. In another case, the expat in question was simply fired. "Angolans hate it when expats enter Angola and don't want to integrate", Isabel explains. " And they know how they can get rid of them."

"Our suggestion is: simplify the procedures", Ambassador Van Honk advises. "If someone can enter with a three-year contract, then why not give him a three-year work permit that doesn't need to be extended every year? Make it twice as expensive, then you won't lose a cent. We have offered technical assistance, and said that we want to solve this problem together. We want to show the government that there is an alternative."

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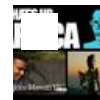
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