

# PQ Digest | 26.03.18 – 30.03.18

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27<sup>th</sup> March 2018

## Passport Applications Administration

**153. Deputy John Brassil** asked the **Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade** if his Department will make special arrangements to provide additional staff, working hours and supports to the Passport Office to address the large backlog in passport applications; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13565/18]

**Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Simon Coveney):** The Passport Service is currently processing over 70,000 passport applications. These applications are going through the normal checking, processing and security stages. The target turnaround time for applications made via the online passport application service is 10 working days plus postage. The majority of online applications are currently being processed within 5 working days, well ahead of this target. The award winning online service currently accommodates adult renewals and passport card applications and it is planned to further extend this service to other categories of renewals by the end of 2018. I would urge applicants wishing to renew their passports, whether residing in Ireland or overseas, to avail of the online passport application service where possible.

The average turnaround time for renewal applications submitted through Passport Express is currently 14 working days, one day ahead of the target turnaround time of 15 working days. Other types of application submitted through Passport Express, such as first time applications or applications to replace lost, stolen or damaged passports take longer due to additional security checks.

In recent weeks we had higher than average turnaround times for some categories of application owing to high application volumes and disruption caused by adverse weather conditions and the subsequent closure of the Dublin and Cork passport offices for 2 days. However as outlined the turnaround times have considerably reduce and in many cases are now shorter than the published target times. My Department continues to closely monitor the level of passport demand to ensure that all resources are effectively deployed. Measures taken by the Passport Service include the recruitment of additional staff and the use of targeted overtime.

The number of Full Time Equivalent (FTE) staff permanently employed by my Department and assigned to the Passport Service stood at 322 at the beginning of the year. This compares to 310 FTE staff assigned to the Passport Service at the same point last year. This year, since these figures were released, over 20 additional permanent staff have started with the Passport Service.

In addition to this, in order to respond to seasonal demands and application increases, the Passport Service received sanction for 220 Temporary Clerical Officers (“TCOs”) to be appointed to the Passport Offices in Dublin and Cork this year. The vast majority of these TCOs are already in place with the remaining TCOs expected to be fully trained and in place by the end of March at the latest. Targeted overtime for the Passport Service was also sanctioned to increase processing capacity.

In managing increasing application volumes, my Department's approach has not been merely to recruit or assign additional staff but to continue to implement service improvements in order to provide an exceptional service and minimise the impact high application volumes have on turnaround times. The Passport Reform Programme is delivering major upgrades to the passport service technology platforms and business processes as well as significant customer service improvements. The award winning online passport application service will continue to make a major contribution to the effective management of application volumes by allowing existing resources to be more effectively deployed within the Passport Service.

## Passport Controls

**156. Deputy Noel Rock** asked the **Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade** his plans to allow the new public services card to be used as an alternative to a passport; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13679/18]

**Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Simon Coveney):** Passports are internationally recognised travel documents which attest to the identity and nationality of the bearer. The International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) is a UN specialised agency which defines in detail the required format for a passport. For example in a type 3 document (a standard passport book) the machine-readable zone must span two lines, and each line must be 44 characters long. The following information must be provided in the zone: name, passport number, nationality, date of birth, sex, and passport expiration date.

The Passport Service launched the Passport Card in October 2015. This credit card sized document complies with ICAO specifications and can be used by adult Irish passport holders for travel to 31 countries in total including the EU/EEA and Switzerland and incorporates the very highest levels of cutting-edge security measures. Since its launch, the Passport Service has issued over 90,000 passport cards to Irish citizens residing in the state and across the world. I would encourage all adult citizens who hold a valid passport to consider applying for a passport card.

## Direct Provision Data

**318. Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the **Minister for Justice and Equality** further to Parliamentary Question No. 216 of 21 March 2018, the name, location and intended future use of the direct provision centre that was closed down earlier in 2018 leading to persons being transferred to other centres. [14151/18]

**Minister of State at the Department of Justice and Equality (Deputy David Stanton):** The Reception & Integration Agency (RIA) is responsible for the provision of accommodation within its State accommodation portfolio for protection applicants while they await a decision on their claim for international protection. RIA had contracted the provision of an accommodation centre at Georgian Court, 77-79 Lower Gardiner Street, Dublin 1. This contract was due to expire on the 19th February 2018.

RIA were advised prior to the expiration of the contract that the contractor was not seeking an extension to the contract or intending to engage in any public procurement process to continue to provide accommodation services to RIA at Georgian Court beyond the 19th February 2018.

As a consequence, Georgian Court ceased providing accommodation services to RIA on the 19th February 2018 and all residents of Georgian Court who were still in the protection process were transferred to alternative accommodation within RIA's portfolio. The future use of the premises is a matter for the owners of the property.

## 28<sup>th</sup> March 2018

### Syrian Conflict

**42. Deputy Darragh O'Brien** asked the **Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade** his views on whether the EU and the international community are doing enough to end the conflict in Syria, which has just marked its seventh anniversary; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14253/18]

**Deputy Darragh O'Brien:** Does the Tánaiste believe the EU and the international community are doing enough to end the conflict in Syria, which has just marked its seventh anniversary? Almost 500,000 people have been killed since 2011, while more than 13 million people require humanitarian assistance, including nearly 3 million trapped in besieged and hard-to-reach areas. Are there proposals for a change in the EU response?

**Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Simon Coveney):** The UN special envoy for Syria, Staffan de Mistura, is leading political negotiations to end the conflict based on the 2012 Geneva communique and UN Security Council Resolution 2254. Ireland and the EU fully support this process. The EU provides direct assistance to the UN-led Geneva peace talks and has launched, in co-ordination with the UN, an initiative to develop political dialogue with key actors from the region to identify common ground. Ireland strongly welcomed the adoption of UN Security Council Resolution 2401 on 24 February. This resolution calls for an immediate ceasefire and unhindered humanitarian access.

The international community must redouble efforts to press for the immediate and full implementation of the ceasefire, and unimpeded humanitarian access to populations in need. EU Foreign Ministers discussed the situation in Syria at their informal meeting on 15 February and again at the Foreign Affairs Council meetings on 26 February and 19 March. The EU and its member states have to date mobilised more than €10.4 billion for humanitarian assistance inside Syria and in neighbouring countries, making the EU the largest donor to the effort. The EU hosted a donor conference for Syria in April 2017 at which pledges totalling €5.6 billion were made, and will host another donor conference on Syria in April 2018.

Since 2012, Ireland has contributed over €95 million to the humanitarian effort in response to the conflict in Syria. Ireland will make a further pledge of humanitarian support in 2018 at the Brussels donor conference next month. Ireland also provides political and financial support to a broad range of measures to ensure full legal accountability for all war crimes and crimes against humanity committed in Syria. However, the direct answer to the Deputy's question is we never can do enough until the conflict is over. In the years ahead, history will judge the international community harshly in terms of how the conflict developed over a long period and the number of civilians who have lost their lives as a result.

**Deputy Darragh O'Brien:** I agree wholeheartedly that we can never do enough in this regard but the problem is the conflict has moved into its eighth year. The indiscriminate attacks on, and bombing of, eastern Ghouta is a carbon copy of what happened in Aleppo when the international community effectively stood by, although it does care about it. We must examine how the veto works at the UN Security Council and Russia's role as a member of the council while also being a major player in the region and a major supporter of the Assad regime. It is more worrying that the war has become a global war being fought out in Syria involving different global partners. The conflict has become more complex and the longer it goes on, the less opportunity there will be to end it in the short term.

I wonder, on foot of his discussions with colleagues in the region - I know he has visited the region - what the view is there. Is there any chink of light or any hope at all in regard to the stalled talks? While I know it is difficult to include Assad in those talks, perhaps there is an attempt to include members of the regime to try to bring about a ceasefire, or are we really just waiting for Assad to effectively win the war and wipe out the opposition?

**Deputy Simon Coveney:** I was at the UN Security Council when it met a number of weeks ago. The first item on the agenda, raised by Secretary General Guterres, was eastern Ghouta and he made a personal appeal to all of the states represented around that table to implement an immediate ceasefire. He described what is happening there as hell on earth, and I think many of us who have looked at video coverage and television footage of what was happening at that time in eastern Ghouta, particularly those of us who are parents, found it pretty hard to watch. There is a huge effort to try to make this ceasefire work and stick.

Having said that, I think the Assad regime feels it is victorious and needs to finish the job militarily. Of course, that is resulting in ongoing conflict and military activity that is impacting, in a pretty dire way, on many civilians, particularly women and children.

We will continue to push hard through the Foreign Affairs Council and UN structures to ensure that the EU voice is very strong and clear on this, which it is. However, I believe we have some way to go yet.

**Deputy Darragh O'Brien:** I am fully aware of the constraints Ireland operates under and the small level of influence we have, but it is important this is kept to the top of the agenda. In the context of Ireland seeking a seat on the UN Security Council in 2020 and given the failure of the latter to halt the Assad regime and its allies, such as Putin's Russia, will the Tánaiste be seeking changes to how the Security Council operates or has he thought about such proposals, particularly on the use of the veto and if it is employed by one of the

combatants in the context of a combat situation? We need to look at that into the future. Has the Tánaiste any thoughts on this issue? It might also give him an opportunity to update the House briefly on how that campaign for us to secure a seat in 2020 is going.

**Deputy Simon Coveney:** It is going reasonably well but this is a very competitive race and Norway and Canada are significant competitors. There are three countries going for two places but I think there is a very strong case to be made for Ireland as the only EU country putting its name forward. At that time, the only EU representative on the UN Security Council will be France, as a permanent member, so there is a very strong case to be made. We are a small, neutral country and we are not afraid to speak our mind. We use the UN to raise significant concerns from a humanitarian perspective in terms of consistency with international law. I think that will be a very compelling and strong case.

We support the reform of the UN generally but also of the Security Council. We would support a French approach which suggests that, in cases of humanitarian crises, a veto would not be used - that is, when the Security Council is responding to significant crises, vetoes would not be used where there is a need for collective action on a humanitarian basis. That is something we should pursue. There are broader changes we would also like to happen in regard to the Security Council but that one in particular would be very helpful.

## Syrian Conflict

**134. Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the **Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade** the steps that will be taken to address the refugee crisis in Syria and Iraq; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14495/18]

**Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Simon Coveney):** The situation in Syria continues to be one of utmost concern. The conflict, which is now in its eighth year, has cost over 400,000 lives. Over 13 million people are in need of humanitarian assistance inside Syria, including close to 3 million people trapped in besieged and hard-to-reach areas. Over 6 million people are displaced internally, and a further 5.5 million have fled to neighbouring countries and the wider region. The recent increase in violence in Syria, in particular the vicious siege of Eastern Ghouta which has cost the lives of hundreds of civilians, underscores the extent to which an end to the violence is urgently needed in order to relieve the suffering of the Syrian people. Ireland fully supports the UN-led political negotiations to end the conflict based on the 2012 Geneva Communique and UN Security Council resolution 2254, which calls for an end to violence; release of political prisoners; formation of a transitional governing body with executive powers and a constitutional reform process. The EU provides direct assistance to the UN-led Geneva peace talks and has launched, in coordination with the UN, an initiative to develop political dialogue with key actors from the region to identify common ground. Ireland strongly welcomed the adoption of UN Security Council Resolution 2401 calling for an immediate ceasefire and unhindered humanitarian access on 24 February. However, the regime's bombardment of civilians and civilian infrastructure, including homes, hospitals and schools, has continued in defiance of this resolution. The international community must redouble efforts to press for

the immediate and full implementation of the ceasefire, and unimpeded humanitarian access to populations in need.

Since 2012, Ireland has contributed over €95 million to the humanitarian response to the Syria crisis, including €25 million in 2017 alone. The EU and its Member States have to date mobilised more than €10.4 billion for humanitarian, stabilisation and resilience assistance inside Syria and in neighbouring countries, making the EU the largest single donor to the effort. The EU will host another donors' conference for Syria in April of this year at which Ireland will announce its pledge to the humanitarian effort in response to the Syria crisis in 2018.

The EU is also supporting the Turkey Refugee Facility in response to the almost 3 million refugees being hosted in that country, and €3 billion has been committed to this by the EU between 2016 and 2019, with Ireland contributing €22.9 million. €15 million of this has already been provided to date.

In addition, Ireland is also supporting refugee hosting communities in Lebanon and Jordan. Ireland has already contributed €9.67 million in direct humanitarian assistance to Lebanon channelled through UN and NGO partners, and €5.89 million to Jordan through the Jordan Humanitarian Fund. Under the terms of the Irish Refugee Protection Programme (IRPP), administered by the Department of Justice, Ireland has also committed to accept up to 4,000 refugees from the region. To date, almost 2,000 people have already arrived. In Iraq, the UN estimates that 11 million people are in need of humanitarian assistance, as the country begins to recover from the atrocities committed by Da'esh. The current number of internally displaced persons requiring humanitarian assistance stands at almost 3.3 million, of which 1.6 million are living outside of camps in host communities. In addition, there are an estimated 240,000 Syrian refugees in Iraq. The EU is working to support the Iraqi government on stabilisation and reconciliation.

Since 2014, Ireland has provided over €10 million in humanitarian assistance to Iraq, including €2 million in 2018 for the UN Iraq Humanitarian Pooled Fund. Via our annual contributions to the EU budget, Ireland also supports the EU's humanitarian response to the situation in Iraq. The situations in both Syria and Iraq were discussed by EU Foreign Ministers at the Foreign Affairs Council on numerous occasions in recent months. At the Foreign Affairs Council in January, Foreign Ministers adopted the new EU strategy for engagement with Iraq, and initiated a formal exchange on migration with Iraq. EU Foreign Ministers discussed Syria at their informal meeting on 15 February, at the Foreign Affairs Council on 26 February, and again at Foreign Affairs Council on 19 March, at which they had a discussion with UN Special Envoy Staffan de Mistura.

Through the EU, Ireland has long advocated for and supported the development of durable solutions for refugees and internally displaced persons, and in tackling the root causes of displacement. Through our engagement with conflict-affected countries, refugee hosting countries and our EU counterparts, Ireland supports conflict resolution and development in Syria, Iraq and the wider region.

