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Democratic Republic of the Congo: Biometric passports with electronic chips issued since November 2015, including the application procedure and requirements, as well as the validity period (2015-July 2016)

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Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, Ottawa

1. General Information on Biometric Passports Issued Since November 2015

Congolese media report that a new biometric passport model that contains an electronic chip was officially unveiled by the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) on 10 November 2015 (Le Potentiel 13 Nov. 2015; Radio Okapi 10 Nov. 2015; Congo virtuel 10 Nov. 2015). Sources state that a new centre for the collection of personal data was also opened on that date in the offices of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Kinshasa (Radio Okapi 10 Nov. 2015; Groupe l'Avenir 11 Nov. 2015; Télé50 with the ACP 11 Nov. 2015).

Sources report that the new passport issuance system was implemented by the Belgian company Semlex (Semlex Jan. 2016; Le Potentiel 13 Nov. 2015; Groupe l'Avenir 11 Nov. 2015). In a press release posted on its Internet site, Semlex states that it is working [Semlex English version] "with [the DRC] to obtain a complete solution, which includes the creation of a national identification database along with staff training to maintain the system" (Semlex Jan. 2016).

Sources indicate that the passport issuance system was expected to be rolled out on 2 January 2016 across the country and at the country's embassies and chanceries abroad (Le Potentiel 13 Nov. 2015; Congo virtuel 10 Nov. 2015; Télé50 with the ACP 11 Nov. 2015). Sources state that the rollout was to be done [translation] "gradually" (ibid.; Le Potentiel 13 Nov. 2015). Semlex stated in January 2016 that [Semlex English version] "to assist with registration, 26 provincial centers have been created, and more than 60 embassies will be equipped with biometric registration stations" (Semlex Jan. 2016). Information on the number of provincial centers that were operating and the number of embassies that were able to offer biometric passports in July 2016 could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

However, Radio Okapi, the UN's radio station in the DRC (Radio Okapi 8 Apr. 2015), stated in January 2016 that the sale and issuance of the first new passports began on 19 December 2015 (Radio Okapi 8 Jan. 2016). Radio Okapi also stated in December 2015 that all passport applicants were expected to follow the new passport issuance procedure starting on 16 December 2015 (Radio Okapi 9 Dec. 2015). According to a press release posted on the Internet site, the Embassy of the DRC in Ottawa planned to start the new data collection procedure for passport applicants as of 10 March 2016 (DRC 7 Mar. 2016).

2. Characteristics and Content of Biometric Passports

Congolese media report that regular passports, service passports and diplomatic passports were expected to be available (Le Potentiel 13 Nov. 2016; Top Congo FM 10 Nov. 2015). According to the radio station Top Congo FM, [translation] "like the previous passports, the colours of the future passport will be blue for regular, red for diplomatic, and green for service passports" (ibid.).

Sources indicate that the Minister of Foreign Affairs explained during the launch of the new passport that the electronic chip stores [translation] "all the information about the person who holds the passport," including the date of birth, and "can be read electronically" (Le Potentiel 13 Nov. 2015; Radio Okapi 10 Nov. 2015). According to the Congolese news Internet site Congo virtuel, the electronic chip in the passport makes it possible to verify its authenticity using the place of issue and issuance (Congo virtuel 10 Nov. 2015).

Sources add that the passport contains the holder's fingerprints (Le Potentiel 13 Nov. 2016; Radio Okapi 10 Nov. 2015; Top Congo FM 10 Nov. 2015). According to Semlex, the fingerprints are stored in the electronic chip (Semlex Jan. 2016).

Sources state that the new passport is consistent with International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) standards (Le Potentiel 13 Nov. 2016; Télé50 with the ACP 11 Nov. 2015; Congo virtuel 10 Nov. 2015). According to Semlex, [Semlex English version] "to [further] reinforce its security benefits, the passport will feature the latest printing techniques" (Semlex Jan. 2016). The fingerprints on the passport are described as [translation] "tamper-proof" (Le Potentiel 13 Nov. 2016; Télé50 with the ACP 11 Nov. 2015). Congo virtuel states that the technical components of the passport [translation] "are verified with laser beams and ultra-violet light" (10 Nov. 2015).

3. Issuing Authority

An information document posted on the Internet site of the Embassy of the DRC in Ottawa states that the passports are printed at [translation] "headquarters" in Kinshasa (DRC n.d.). The passport application form that accompanies the information document is provided by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (ibid.).

4. Validity Period

The press release from Semlex states that the new passport is valid for five years (Semlex Jan. 2016). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

Sources add that the old passport models will be valid until their expiry dates (Congo virtuel 10 Nov. 2015; Le Potentiel 13 Nov. 2015; Radio Okapi 10 Nov. 2015). The article from Top Congo FM explains that, in the past, when new passport models were introduced the old models became invalid (Top Congo FM 10 Nov. 2015). An article from Groupe l'Avenir, a group of private media companies that specialize in disseminating news in the DRC (Groupe l'Avenir n.d.), explains that the passports still in circulation [translation] "will be replaced by chip passports as those passport holders apply for them," but it adds that the validity of the passport will depend on "the ICAO's opinion," since that organization "continually reviews its requirements" (ibid. 11 Nov. 2015).

5. Application Procedure and Requirements

5.1 Within the Country

The Congo virtuel portal provides the following information about the passport application procedure:

Fees are paid at the counter, where a receipt is given to the applicant;

Identification form is completed;

Photograph is taken and fingerprints of all ten fingers are captured electronically;

Applicant's personal information is stored in the database;

Validity of the personal information is verified;

Passport is printed and issued to the applicant (10 Nov. 2015).

Information on the documents to be provided with a passport application in the DRC was scarce among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response. However, the Congolese news Internet site KongoTimes! indicates that [translation] "those who do not have an elector's card are forced to obtain a certificate of Congolese nationality before obtaining a criminal record excerpt to prove that they are not wanted by the law" (KongoTimes! 26 Jan. 2016).

Sources report that it is possible to produce a passport within 15 minutes after the applicant's personal information is collected (Groupe l'Avenir 11 Nov. 2015; Congo virtuel 10 Nov. 2015). According to sources, Semlex is able to produce 1,000 passports per day (Groupe l'Avenir 11 Nov. 2015; Télé50 with the ACP 11 Nov. 2015).

However, media articles published in 2016 report that the process of obtaining a passport is hindered by delays and difficulties (Waza 24 Mar. 2016; KongoTimes! 26 Jan. 2016). According to KongoTimes!, [translation] "you need to show up early in the morning to get a good spot [in] line to be among the first to fill out the forms and have a photo [taken]" (ibid.). In an article describing his efforts to obtain a new passport in Butembo, in the province of North Kivu, an independent journalist who published his article on Waza [1] states that it is more difficult to obtain a passport in the province; the journalist explains that, since there is no data collection centre in Butembo, the authorities sent a temporary mobile collection centre that stayed there for only one week (Waza 24 Mar. 2016). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

5.2 Outside the Country

The Internet site of the Embassy of the DRC in Ottawa provides information on the procedure for Congolese nationals who wish to apply for a passport at the embassy and the documents that must be provided (DRC n.d.). That information is attached to this Response.

6. Issuance Fee

Sources report that the official passport issuance fee is US\$185 (Waza 24 Mar. 2016; Radio Okapi 8 Jan. 2016). According to a press release posted on the site of the Embassy of the DRC in Ottawa, the issuance fee for a biometric passport for Congolese citizens residing in Canada is C\$400 (DRC 7 Mar. 2016).

Some sources report that when the related fees that have to be paid as part of the passport acquisition process are considered, the total cost could be as high as around US\$300. (Waza 24 Mar. 2016; KongoTimes! 26 Jan. 2016). According to the article from KongoTimes!, [translation] "at each step of the process, the applicant is required to pay more than the official rate" (ibid.). According to an independent journalist, the spokesperson for the mayor of Butembo stated that the passport issuance fees in that region were set [translation] "by consensus between the local team and the officials from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs" (Waza 24 Mar. 2016). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

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 sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

Note

[1] Waza is a platform that publishes [Waza English version] "independent journalistic content from a network of correspondents across Africa and an editorial team headquartered in the Netherlands" that focuses in particular on issues related to freedom of expression, governance and human rights in sub-Saharan Africa (Waza n.d.).

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Additional Sources Consulted

Oral sources: Embassy of the Democratic Republic of the Congo in Ottawa; Embassy of the Democratic Republic of the Congo in Paris; Embassy of the Democratic Republic of the Congo in Washington.

Internet sites, including: Agence d'information d'Afrique centrale; AllAfrica; Canada - Global Affairs Canada, Immigration and Citizenship Canada; Council of the European Union - Public Register of Authentic Identity and Travel Documents Online (PRADO); Democratic Republic of the Congo - Embassy of the DRC in Paris, Embassy of the DRC in Benelux and the European Union, Consulate in Anvers, La Primature; ecoi.net; EdisonTD; Factiva; JournaldeKin.com; Keesing's Documentchecker; Le Millénaire; Radio France internationale; Top Africa Magazine; United Nations - Refworld; United States - Department of State; Virunga Mountains Observer; Voice of Congo.

Attachment

Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). N.d. Embassy of the Democratic Republic of the Congo in Ottawa. Informations importantes concernant la demande d'un nouveau passeport congolais. [Accessed 19 May 2016]

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