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NIGERIA: PREVALENCE OF FRAUDULENT DOCUMENTS, INCLUDING WHETHER GENUINE DOCUMENTS CAN BE OBTAINED USING FALSE INFORMATION; INSTANCES OF VISA APPLICATION FRAUD; DOCUMENT VERIFICATION PRACTICES AT THE CANADIAN VISA OFFICE IN LAGOS (2016-AUGUST 2018)

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1. Prevalence of Fraudulent Identity Documents

According to sources, corruption is a serious issue in Nigeria (Canada 14 Feb. 2018a; Quartz Africa 21 Aug. 2017) and is "prevalent across most government agencies and departments" (Quartz Africa 21 Aug. 2017). According to Transparency International, Nigeria is ranked 148 out of 180 countries on the Corruption Perceptions Index 2017, with 180 having the highest level of corruption (Transparency International n.d.).

In correspondence with the Research Directorate, an associate fellow in the Africa Programme at Chatham House [1] whose research focuses on Nigeria and on corruption, among other topics, speaking on his own behalf, stated that

Nigeria is a highly bureaucratic society where citizens are required to obtain and routinely produce a variety of official documents. These are often in the form of paper originals that are signed/stamped by local government and other officials. Because these documents typically lack basic security features (e.g. watermarking), they are easily forged. Because of the high prevalence of official corruption, however, it is also possible to fraudulently obtain genuine documents in exchange for a bribe. This makes it difficult to determine the authenticity of a specific document. (Associate Fellow 20 Aug. 2018)

According to sources, documentation fraud is highly prevalent in Nigeria (Researcher 17 Aug. 2018; Canada 14 Feb. 2018a; *Vanguard* 19 Nov. 2017). In correspondence with the Research Directorate, a visiting lecturer and academic researcher at the Green Economics Institute in the UK, who has written and published on corruption in Nigeria, stated that document fraud can occur through the falsification of an entire document; the partial falsification of a document; the use of false information to obtain genuine documents; impersonation, where one person assumes the identity of another (deceased or alive; with or without the person's consent); and renting out documents to someone else (Researcher 17 Aug. 2018).

In an interview with the Research Directorate, a Lagos-based representative of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) at the High Commission of Canada to Nigeria stated that, in Nigeria, there is "an absence of [document] verification options" (Canada 14 Feb. 2018a). In the same interview with the Research Directorate, a Lagos-based Migration Program Manager of IRCC indicated that High Commission staff in Nigeria are "not able to physically travel to a registry office to verify a document" (Canada 14 Feb. 2018b). The same source stated that, when assessing Canadian Temporary Resident Visas (TRVs), their office conducts interviews and does not generally "look at documents" (Canada 14 Feb. 2018b).

According to the Reciprocity Schedule published by the US Department of State for Nigeria, "fraudulent documents can be easily obtained in Nigeria" (US n.d). The researcher stated that the following documents are subject to "high incidences of fraud": driver's licences, passports, secondary school certificates, birth certificates and marriage certificates (Researcher 17 Aug. 2018). According to the IRCC representative, there are "fraudulent letters of acceptance in education and fraudulent bank documents" (Canada 14 Feb. 2018a). According to the Associate Fellow,

in Nigeria, all forms of genuine documents can be obtained using false information. However, the cost (in bribes) of obtaining some documents (e.g. a Permanent Voter Card or a passport) would be significant, whereas the cost of obtaining an educational certificate or driver's license would be much less so. (Associate Fellow 20 Aug. 2018)

In an article in the Lagos-based daily newspaper *PM News* that describes the use of fake documents to obtain Italian visas, the spokesperson of the Lagos-based Police Special Fraud Unit (PSFU) states that, on a monthly basis, his unit receives about 50 passports from the Italian embassy related to "complaints of forged documents" (*PM News* 19 June 2017). According to the same source, "'[d]ocuments the applicants always forged include bank statements, health insurance certificates, invitation letters from Italy, letters of introduction and letter[s] of employment from multinational companies'" (*PM News* 19 June 2017).

According to the researcher,

fewer incidences of document fraud are found with [regard to] tertiary education qualifications and National Youth Service Certificates (a requirement for tertiary educated graduates to work in the civil service) … because they have been historically easy to detect and have led to convictions. No one goes to jail for falsifying birth certificates, driver's licences, marriage certificates, passports or voter cards. (Researcher 17 Aug. 2018)

Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

2. Banking Documents

According to sources, banking documents can be "verifiable and reliable" in order to establish identity (Researcher 17 Aug. 2018; Associate Fellow 20 Aug. 2018), "[d]epending on the degree of cooperation … from the financial institution in Nigeria" (Associate Fellow 20 Aug. 2018). The Associate Fellow explained that "[f]ollowing the introduction of the Bank Verification Number (BVN) scheme [2], banking information is tied to an individual's identity using biometric information" (Associate Fellow 20 Aug. 2018). According to the IRCC representative, the IRCC is able to verify banking documents, "because banking documents require biometrics in order to establish an account," giving them "confidence in terms of locking in the person's identity" (Canada 14 Feb. 2018a). The researcher explained that, to the best of his knowledge,

the only time bank documents are falsified with the help of bank staff to make them [verifiable] is when [the documents] are used for advance fee fraud purposes or obtaining a visa for a foreign country by "inflating" the accounts balances falsely. Such bank staff and their crimes are easy to detect. Therefore, the incidence of it is very low. (Researcher 17 Aug. 2018)

According to the IRCC representative,

because of the emphasis we place on banking documents and the poverty of many applicants, fraudulent bank statements with increased balances are common. All the migration officers have been trained [regarding] the detection points in the various bank statements that allow officers to verify genuineness very easily in most cases. We also have contacts with[in] the audit section of each major bank in Nigeria and we refer any statements that we are unsure of to them for verification. This normally only takes 1-2 days. (Canada 14 Feb. 2018a)

The IRCC Migration Program Manager indicated that Nigerians can request banking documents at their branch (Canada 14 Feb. 2018b). The same source explained that "normally" the bank stamps and signs every page of bank statements (Canada 14 Feb. 2018b). The same source further explained that it is also possible to print online statements and get them stamped by the bank (Canada 14 Feb. 2018b).

3. Police Certificates

Sources indicate that police documents, including police certificates, are not verifiable or reliable to establish identity (Researcher 17 Aug. 2018; Canada 14 Feb. 2018a). According to the Associate Fellow, "[t]he reliability and verifiability of [police] documents is unclear, as we know little about how well-maintained and accurate Nigeria's police records management system is" (Associate Fellow 20 Aug. 2018). According to the IRCC representative, there is no "centralized police database" in Nigeria and there is "no such thing as a national computer database for criminal charges or police activity" (Canada 14 Feb. 2018a).

Sources indicate that a high degree of corruption is prevalent within the Nigerian police (Associate Fellow 20 Aug. 2018; UN July 2017, 7). The IRCC representative explained that "[i]t is relatively easy for anyone to obtain a clean police certificate given the state of record-keeping and corruption in [West Africa]" (Canada 14 Feb. 2018a). The same source further explained that given that a "police certificate is easily purchased," these are of little value (Canada 14 Feb. 2018a).

Similarly, the researcher stated that "[a]ll police documents are readily available for sale[,] but vary [significantly] in price," and that the issuance of a clean police clearance record to a "convicted violent criminal," for example, "could cost US$2,000" (Researcher 17 Aug. 2018). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

4. Identity Documents

According to the US Reciprocity Schedule for Nigeria,

[t]he rules and regulations regarding the maintenance of public records and the issuance of certificates in the 36 states of Nigeria are similar; however, those rules and regulations are often ignored. Except for a few federal [g]overnment [a]gencies, no local or federal government body currently has a central database with digitized records. Most records are stored on paper, filed by dat[e], location, and, in regards to divorce cases, presiding court. (US n.d.)

According to the IRCC representative, "[w]hen it comes to identity and supporting documents, civil documents, primary documents or secondary documents, … they are impossible to verify with any confidence" (Canada 14 Feb. 2018a). The same source added that "most" identity and civil documents are "unverifiable" and that "[a]s a whole, there is little weight placed on official documents from West Africa. It is relatively easy for anyone to obtain an official document given the state of record-keeping and level of corruption in the region [of West Africa]" (Canada 14 Feb. 2018a). The same source indicated that, regarding fraudulent stamps for legal documents, these are "easily found and purchased" (Canada 14 Feb. 2018a).

According to the IRCC representative,

[o]f particular interest is Benin City in Edo State which is notorious for internet-fraud scams, fraudulently issued civil documents, criminality, robberies, and kidnappings; all these things are very common. For example, if a birth certificate was registered extremely late and it was issued in Benin City, we would not put much weight on the document. (Canada 14 Feb. 2018a)

The IRCC Migration Program Manager added that "[a]ny document that comes out of Benin City" is discounted and that such documents are unverifiable (Canada 14 Feb. 2018b).

According to the researcher, "[t]he most notorious and frequent form of documentation fraud is found with birth certificates" (Researcher 17 Aug. 2018). The IRCC representative indicated that

[m]any civil documents, such as birth certificates, can be issued on the strength of a statutory declaration. Even if verified as being legitimately issued by the proper issuing authority, the value placed on the document is minimal. (Canada 14 Feb. 2018a)

According to the same source, "[t]he greater the length of time between [the] date of issuance of a birth certificate and the date of birth, the more susp[icious] we are of the genuineness of the birth certificate" (Canada 14 Feb. 2018a). The Migration Program Manager added that "the closer a birth certificate is registered to the date of birth, … the more likely it is to be genuine" (Canada 14 Feb. 2018b). According to the Associate Fellow, "[t]he National Identity Card is … a more reliable form of identification, whereas birth certificates (especially those issued decades ago) are much less so" (Associate Fellow 20 Aug. 2018).

4.1 National Electronic Identity Card

The IRCC Migration Program Manager explained that, when an individual applies for a National Electronic Identity Card, "self-reporting" is involved and whatever the applicant says is recorded (Canada 14 Feb. 2018b). The same source explained that, while the National Electronic Identity Card has a biometric component, IRCC cannot verify the information provided by the applicant during the application for the card (Canada 14 Feb. 2018b).

5. Travel Documents

According to the Associate Fellow, travel documents, including passports, are

a more reliable form of ID as [they are] issued based on biometric data capture and other identity data (e.g. physical residential address and state/local government of origin). Such documents are difficult and costly to forge or manipulate, [compared] to other forms of identification. (Associate Fellow 20 Aug. 2018)

According to the researcher, "[p]assport office touts can process passports very quickly for a fee and often falsify required documents on [behalf] of clients applying for passports" (Researcher 17 Aug. 2018). According to the IRCC representative, in Nigeria, "[i]t is easy to reproduce entry and exit stamps to show previous travel when [applying] for a visa" (Canada 14 Feb. 2018a). Media sources report instances of individuals applying for visas at foreign embassies in Nigeria using fake visas and stamps in 2017 (*The Nation* 16 June 2017) and in 2018 (*Daily Post* 17 Feb. 2018). The government-owned News Agency of Nigeria (NAN) reports that, in January 2018 in Lagos, the PSFU arrested individuals who were suspected of counterfeiting entry visas and forging "visa processing documents such as passports, bank statements, company letterheads and immigration stamps of several overseas countries" (NAN 20 Jan. 2018). According to sources reporting on statements by a PSFU public relations officer, between January and March 2018, the PSFU arrested 400 visa applicants with fake documents at the British High Commission and the US, Italian and French embassies in Nigeria (NAN 23 May 2018; Nigeria News 23 May 2018).

6. Voter Cards

According to sources, "permanent voter cards" contain biometric data, including fingerprints and a photograph (VOA 25 Mar. 2015; *The Washington Post* 10 Mar. 2015). The IRCC representative indicated that, in terms of document verification, little weight is placed on voter cards (Canada 14 Feb. 2018a).

Notes

[1] Chatham House is an independent policy institute based in London, UK (Chatham House n.d.). Its research focuses on the analysis of "critical global, regional and country-specific challenges and opportunities" (Chatham House n.d.).

[2] The Bank Verification Number (BVN) is a "unique identity [number] across the banking [i]ndustry to each customer of Nigerian banks" (Central Bank of Nigeria 18 Oct. 2017, 3). The BVN was launched in February 2014 by the Central Bank of Nigeria, in collaboration with the Bankers Committee (Central Bank of Nigeria 18 Oct. 2017, 3).