BALI PROCESS AD HOC GROUP

WORKSHOP ON VISA INTEGRITY FOR FOREIGN MISSION STAFF
BANGKOK, THAILAND, 23-26 JULY 2012

CO-CHAIRS' STATEMENT

1. The Workshop on Visa Integrity for Foreign Mission Staff of the Bali Process on People Smuggling, Trafficking in Persons and Related Transnational Crime (Bali Process) Ad Hoc Group (AHG) was held in Bangkok, Thailand from 23-26 July 2012. The meeting was co-chaired by Thailand and Australia. The meeting was attended by representatives of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, Australia, People's Republic of Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Maldives, Republic of the Union of Myanmar, Islamic Republic of Pakistan, Republic of the Philippines, Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka, Kingdom of Thailand, United States of America, and Socialist Republic of Vietnam as well as representatives from the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC). Representatives from Canada and the United Kingdom also attended the meeting.

2. The Workshop explored risk characteristics of visa applicants and promoted the importance of conducting integrity checks, strengthening border security through improved decision-making practices at foreign missions.

Proceedings

3. The meeting was opened by Mr. Niyom Watthammawut, Deputy Director-General of the Department of Consular Affairs, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Thailand, and Ms. Sarah Storey, Acting Deputy Head of Mission of the Australian Embassy in Bangkok. The meeting was co-chaired by Mr. Bill Pettitt, Principal Intelligence Advisor, Department of Immigration and Citizenship, Australia, and Mr. Nadhavathna Krishnamra, Director of Social Affairs Division, Department of International Organizations, together with Mr. Pratak Sikkhamonton, Director of Visa and Travel Documents Division, Department of Consular Affairs, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Thailand.

4. Mr. Watthammawut warmly welcomed members to Thailand and referred to the trend of increased irregular movement in the region, which has evolved into a more complex pattern of activities linked to various forms of transnational organised crime by the use of fraudulent documents. Problems need to be resolved through the enhancement of regional cooperation,

strengthening of visa regimes, and the sharing of information and thus training for foreign mission staff is a key contributing factor to successful border control. In this regard, technical training, closer coordination, harmonised information sharing will provide more effective responses to transnational criminal activities in the region.

5. Ms. Storey underlined that the Bali Process has taken an increasingly sophisticated approach to visa integrity issues and has developed practical measures to address the challenges of smuggling of migrants, trafficking in persons and measures to share the burdens which are unequally imposed across the region.

6. Presentations by Thailand and Australia highlighted the need for all officers, including foreign affairs, immigration and officers from other agencies who may be involved in visa processes, to understand and apply consistent and robust visa integrity processes. Such processes would assist in identifying threats and underlying risks to visa regimes by persons seeking to move irregularly across borders. The briefings also provided an overview of what is meant by visa integrity and an outline of possible visa integrity principles which could be applied by member states to mitigate these threats and risks. The Australian presentation touched upon a suggested range of skills training to enhance capabilities of all officers involved in assessing visas.

Country Presentations

7. Each participating country presented an overview of their respective visa integrity processes, current challenges, possible mitigation strategies, and applicable training provided to foreign mission staff.

8. The presentations emphasised that visa integrity processes were essential to ensure the security of national borders and that robust visa integrity processes do not impede the facilitation of genuine travelers.

9. A range of key issues and best practice principles were identified, including:

    -   Identification of high and low risk in visa caseloads to inform appropriate allocation of limited resources to assist member states to manage the increasing number of movements throughout the Bali Process region;
    -   Determining risk characteristics and the intention of travellers to inform and improve the knowledge of foreign mission staff when processing visa applications;
    -   The advantages of addressing immigration problems offshore, but also recognised the need to also improve processing in the visa on arrival and visa free streams at borders;
    -   The benefit of embracing mechanisms such as centralized processing for high risk caseloads, E-visa opportunities and increased security offered by machine readable passport and visa labels;

- Increased cooperation with airlines to further facilitate genuine travellers and minimise the potential of high risk movements through encouraging enhanced passengers screening by airlines, including the rigorous application of existing infringement regimes;
- The importance of implementing strong management practices and audit procedures within visa issuing offices at overseas missions to ensure the integrity of the visa processes. This included the control and management of visa labels, appropriate recruitment processes, and the training and oversight of local staff;
- The need to reinforce timely sharing of information and intelligence, both internally and externally with all stakeholders, including other agencies and regional partners; and
- The value of utilising all sources of information, including open source (internet, media, local political events) for visa application verification checks.

10. The briefings also identified a number of challenges to enhancing visa integrity practices, including:
    - Lack of understanding of the impact of poor visa integrity processes on border security;
    - Limited awareness of visa integrity principles by foreign mission staff;
    - Low level of training in technical skills to identify counterfeit or altered documents provided to foreign mission staff;
    - Generally inadequate level of resources to efficiently address increasing numbers of visa applications and travel, particularly during peak periods and for special events;
    - Minimal pre-screening of visa free or visa on arrival travellers pose particular challenges for immigration and other agencies at entry ports; and
    - Balancing humanitarian and refugee protection considerations against the desire to ensure appropriate border management.

11. Technical presentations were provided by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) on the Migrant Smuggling Crime Challenge in the Bali Process Region, and the International Organization for Migration (IOM) on new technologies and project developments that may support visa integrity processes, including the Bali Process secure web portal, and the Document Examination Support Center (DESC).

Break-out group discussions

12. The workshop was divided into two break-out groups to discuss the following:
    - Group 1: What should form part of a standardised training package for foreign mission staff and could training modules be shared on a regional basis?
    - Group 2: What are appropriate responses to the detection of visa fraud by foreign mission staff and how is this information disseminated?

13. **Group 1** suggested that any visa integrity training programme for foreign mission staff should include an initial module on the legal and policy framework under which such staff would operate. This should include subjects as their legislative authority, roles and responsibilities, applicable Standard Operating Procedures, and training on ethical and professional standards. The group noted that it is also important that foreign mission staff should also receive awareness training on people smuggling and human trafficking principles, and applicable international legal frameworks.

14. In addition, foreign mission staff should also receive appropriate technical skills training on subjects such as document examination, impostor detection, databases, interview and liaison skills, stakeholder awareness, visa integrity processes, threat and risk analysis, and language training if appropriate. The technical training should be a combination of theory and practical activities, including guest speakers and subject matter experts.

15. Officers should also receive appropriate country specific briefings covering cultural awareness, risk and psychological profiling, socio-economic and political environment of the host country.

16. Training of officers at foreign missions should continue after arrival at post through ongoing mentoring, on-the-job training, and with regular refresher training.

17. Group 1 also recommended exploring the potential for sharing good practice and training modules via the secure Bali Process secure web portal, including the possibility of sourcing a course outline that could be adapted by member states to their specific country needs.

18. **Group 2** noted that officers at foreign missions should use all information and technical systems available to them to support fraud detection in the visa issuing processes.

19. The Group strongly supported the principle of sharing information and intelligence on any fraud detected with internal and external stakeholders. In addition to sharing this information and intelligence through domestic channels, it could also be shared mutilaterally via Regional Immigration Liaison Officers Network (RILON) meetings, the Bali Process secure web portal, and the Document Examination Support Center in Thailand.

20. The Group recognised that challenges for effective information sharing are identifying appropriate recipients and ensuring there is an approved process to exchange information. This challenge is further complicated by changes in government policies and procedures.

21. Participants recognised that the timely sharing of appropriate information and intelligence on visa fraud informs the development of effective mitigation strategies to combat threats and reduce risks in our visa regimes.

Recommendations

22. Participants agreed that all officers involved in visa issuing processes should receive appropriate training in visa integrity principles, including necessary technical skills, to assist them in their duties.

23. In addition to enhanced visa integrity processes at foreign missions, the use of public awareness campaigns can be an effective mitigation strategy. This will include the rights of travelers and consequences of seeking to move irregularly across international borders.

24. Participants also agreed to continue to encourage sharing of best practices and training packages, as appropriate. New developments in technology, as well as visa integrity processes adopted by member states could also be usefully shared.

25. The workshop agreed that further work needs to be done in relation to the development of appropriate training packages on visa integrity issues for foreign mission staff. The workshop noted that opportunities existed to further develop training modules through other regional training proposals, including those under consideration by the Bali Process Ad Hoc Group Technical Experts Working Group on Irregular Movements, the e-learning tools being developed for the Bali Process Secure website, and sourcing modules from existing training packages of partner countries and international organisations including IOM, UNHCR and UNODC.

26. Participants also agreed that awareness is enhanced by information sharing using RILON, other existing mechanisms, and improvements in IT systems to improve information availibility to visa processing officers.

27. Participants agreed that efforts be made to explore opportunities for capacity building including training which may soon be available through the Regional Support Office (RSO).

Special presentation by the Royal Thai Navy

28. A Special presentation was given by the Royal Thai Navy on the Thai Maritime Enforcement Coordinating Centre (Thai – MECC) about the strengthening of inter-agency cooperation in safety, security and prosperity at sea. This was followed by a visit to the Royal Thai Navy Headquarters and Royal Barges Museum.

Next Meeting

29. Participants recognised the value of the Visa Integrity Workshop for Foreign Mission Staff and agreed that visa integrity merited continuing attention by the Bali Process through further workshops on this issue.

Conclusions

30. The Co-chairs expressed appreciation to the IOM, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Thailand and the Australian Embassy in Bangkok for their assistance in the logistical and secretariat arrangements.

31. The Co-chairs and members expressed its appreciation to the Government of Thailand for its generosity and hospitality in hosting the Visa Integrity Workshop for Foreign Mission Staff.

Australia and Thailand (Co-chairs)
Bali Process Ad Hoc Group
Visa Integrity Workshop for Foreign Mission Staff
Bangkok, 26 July 2012