

11843/95

LIMITE

ASIM 320

NOTE

from: Belgian delegation

to: ~~False Documents Working Party~~

Subject: General acceptance within the European Union of the principles underlying the need for
~~quantitative limitation, uniformity and centralized manufacture of travel, identity and residence~~
documents

Delegations will find attached a note from the Belgian delegation concerning quantitative limitation, uniformity and centralized manufacture of travel, identity and residence documents.

At its meeting on 27 September 1993 the False Documents Working Party considered it very important that, within a reasonable period, each Member State should limit the number of documents for frontier-crossing purposes to an absolute minimum at national level, and move towards harmonization as to their characteristics (see WGI 1636). The basic assumption at the time was that the official responsible for the initial check need have no more than a clearly defined limited knowledge and be able to apply a few simple techniques in order to make a quick and accurate assessment of a document submitted to him. A good practical visual knowledge of the official's own national identity documents and those of the other Member States is of great importance here (see 10470/93 ASIM 25 and 10992/93 ASIM 30). It has since also been realized that centralized manufacture and individualization of such documents is becoming a matter of absolute priority in view of, inter alia, the widespread misuse of blank documents stolen from local authorities. To date, the issue has only been the subject of internal exchanges of views within the Working Party, and declarations of intent have still not been made at the appropriate EU levels. At its meeting on 5 October 1995 the Working Party agreed to the Belgian delegation submitting a document on the matter (see 10604/95 ASIM 279).

I. Limitation of the number of frontier-crossing documents

Frontier officials responsible for checks and police officers in the field frequently find it particularly difficult to carry out their identification and authentication duties because they are expected to have a sound knowledge of frontier-crossing documents. This involves having adequate knowledge of size, colour, safety features, manner of completion and issuing procedures. Besides national travel passports and identity cards, a great variety of frontier-crossing documents exists (e.g. residence permits for European Union nationals and for aliens who are nationals of a non-EU country). Moreover, a given type of document does not always retain the same characteristics or standard of quality throughout its life (e.g. where several series are printed). A further difficulty stems from the fact that local authorities responsible for issuing identity documents do not always complete them in a uniform and correct manner; in the past this has on a number of

occasions resulted in serious consequences for the bearer who was acting in good faith and was unaware that anything was amiss. After all, there are some 250 countries throughout the world, each of which has its different types of travel, identity and residence documents, printed in several series.

The above clearly demonstrates that it has become extremely difficult to check the documents concerned within the statutory time limits. Apart from introducing the principle of uniformity (see below), the only possible solution is to limit the number of recognized identity documents.

II. Uniformity

Uniformity should be sought as regards not only the documents themselves (e.g. formats and security features), but also the method of completing them. Here, the appropriate solution is to issue travel, identity and residence documents centrally.

In Belgium, where local authorities have insisted on retaining their autonomy as regards the issuing of identity cards, a sound compromise arrangement has been devised for the centralized approach. A person needing an identity card must apply to the municipal authorities of his place of residence. After the prospective bearer has provided a passport photograph and made a final check of a master card containing his personal data, signature and photograph, a uniform identity card is issued within a few days by a central department set up for that purpose. The system has already been operational for 10 years without running into any special problems.

III. A specific case: Belgium's solutions for the *limitation* and *uniformity* requirements

Belgium is considering the creation of a Central Documents Unit. That Unit's brief would involve issuing binding recommendations regarding the design, security, features, manufacture, safekeeping, issue and extension or replacement of documents with probative force.

Setting up such a new unit would have the following advantages:

- (1) fewer, better protected identity documents would circulate;
- (2) document checkers would require shorter training courses and less documentation;
- (3) documents would become easier to check and the success rate of checks would increase;
- (4) the scope for abuse would be reduced.

In order to counter the growing abuse of foreign driving licences, the Belgian Ministry of Communications has made a proposal to the Belgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. When concluding bilateral agreements with countries requesting an exchange procedure with Belgium, guarantees would be built in to ensure that driving licences could be exchanged solely on the basis of those formats for which a specimen was provided at the time of signing by both parties. A new format would be unacceptable unless the relevant specimen were supplied. As a direct effect of that restrictive measure, some countries (e.g. India) with an unmanageable diversity of driving-licence formats are being obliged either to provide specimens of all those formats or to reduce the number thereof.

IV. Conclusions

As stated above, *limitation* and *uniformity* are the only measures which may eventually put a stop to the proliferation of identity documents and the ensuing unmanageable nature of the overall situation regarding identity checks.

Since, within the Schengen area, controls at internal frontiers have been abolished and the number of frontier posts has dropped considerably as a result, while more random checks are being carried out within the respective territories, a much greater number of officials with different backgrounds are being confronted with the phenomenon of identity documents. In future, therefore, there will be an ever greater demand for further information on those documents. Moreover, that need will also arise in areas other than police matters (e.g. official bodies, financial institutions, etc.).

Accordingly, Steering Group I (Asylum/Immigration) should be urged to undertake the necessary steps to press the Council of Ministers for some form of declaration of intent on limiting the number of identity documents and seeking their harmonization. The quality of the work being done by frontier officials can clearly only benefit from this.

For the sake of completeness it should also be noted that the above principles were also discussed with the utmost interest at the third Interpol meeting on false documents in Lyon on 5 and 6 September 1995 and the twelfth International Fraud Conference (IFC) at Fribourg from 18 to 22 September 1995, and that initiatives were formulated to enshrine these topics in international resolutions.