

Pupils bribed over travel documents – claim



UNFAIRPORT: Controversial requirements for documentation for children travelling with their parents are the backdrop for an official's suspension for allegedly soliciting bribes. Picture: SUNDAY TIMES

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CAPE TOWN — The Department of Home Affairs and a travel agents' association are wrangling over a claim that an immigration official has been suspended for soliciting bribes from a group of minors, in an apparent bid to cash in on the desperate need for extra documentation.

The Association of Southern African Travel Agents (Asata) reported yesterday that an alleged fraud, who tried to solicit fines from minors at OR Tambo International Airport claiming they had the wrong documents to travel in terms of the new Immigration Act, had been suspended following a rapid response by Asata.

The airport official was said to have approached a group of schoolgirls travelling on a student exchange after they had successfully checked in and presented all documentation to check-in staff.

But a spokesman for home affairs said last night it could find no trace of the incident and believed it was part of attempts to discredit the new visa regulations.

Tens of thousands of children had been processed though OR Tambo without any problem, he said.

In terms of the new regulations, travelling minors need an unabridged birth certificate to either enter or leave the country.

The regulations have been under fire for harming the tourism sector and for damaging the country's investment climate. Some commentators have claimed there have been significant reductions in the number of foreign visitors, particularly from China.

So serious have the complaints been that President Jacob Zuma has established a special inter-ministerial committee, led by Deputy President Cyril Ramaphosa, to deal with the "unintended consequences" of the regulations.

The girls were "allegedly forced to accompany the official to an 'interview' room and were denied access to a female official, leaving them traumatised and distressed", Asata said. "According to the victims, the official claimed they did not have the correct paperwork to travel and demanded a R500 'fine' be paid before being allowed to depart SA. This is despite their

documents having been vetted previously by their travel agent and accepted by the airline staff upon check-in as valid."

The association said the agent acting for the girls, upon hearing of the incident, escalated the matter to Asata "which in turn ensured it was dealt with speedily through the correct channels".

Asata CEO Otto de Vries said: "It is so important that travellers fully understand what their rights are and that this kind of behaviour from an official is unacceptable.

"We would urge members of the public to inform themselves about the full requirements of the immigration legislation, consult with their Asata travel agent to ensure they comply, and refer any similar incidents to the association so that these may be dealt with swiftly and effectively.

"We simply cannot have situations where the officials in whom we place our trust undermine the process and cause our travellers undue distress," Mr de Vries said. "The incident seemed to be the first of its kind and there was no indication it had happened before.

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