

Refugees can now own bank accounts

Refugees and asylum permit holders in South Africa will from now on be able apply for bank accounts in the country, the Home Affairs Department announced on Thursday, 11 November 2010.



Until now, refugees could not own bank accounts in South Africa under regulations of the Financial Intelligence Centre (FICA). Financial services regulations require that any applicants seeking to open bank accounts produce the green bar-coded Identity Document and proof of residence.

Murray Michel, director of FICA, said the message will be communicated to all the banks from next week before the affected foreign nationals could start applying for accounts.

Under the agreement with FICA, Home Affairs will provide banks with the ability to verify the authenticity of permits issued in terms of the Refugee Act. Information would be verified within two days.

Millions want to open accounts

Millions of asylum seekers and refugees - about three million believed to be from Zimbabwe alone - are said to be living in South Africa. Banks had been inundated with requests from asylum permit holders to open accounts.

Authorities on Thursday said the decision was in line with international practice to help create a climate in which refugees and asylum permit holders can live their lives normally and with dignity, while engaging in the economy.

"It is our conviction that the agreement will give expression to government's commitment to care for all within its borders while strengthening the department's commitment to honour its international obligations in terms of support to refugees," said Home Affairs director general Mkuseli Apleni.

Thousands apply to stay

He said the agreement would continue until there was an amendment to the relevant legislation.

Meanwhile, the department said it had received more than 60 000 applications from Zimbabweans wanting to regularize their stay in the country.

This comes after Cabinet decided to end a special dispensation for that country's illegal immigrants living in South Africa. About 18 000 applications had been approved, while 1560 were granted amnesty following their return of fraudulent documents and permits.

Government has set itself a deadline of 31 December 2010 to document all illegal Zimbabweans in the country. The move will be extended to all other foreign nationals in the country.

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