

« Palestinians hit out as Israel tightens visa controls »

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Palestinian businessmen who returned from exile over the last decade to help build the economy in the occupied territories have launched a campaign against a change in Israeli immigration policy that they say is forcing them out.

The policy is also affecting academics and other professionals with foreign passports, the vanguard of a future state, who have been either denied entry to the territories or granted only short-term visas when returning from trips abroad.

The problem became acute after Hamas took over the Palestinian government at the end of March, followed by an international aid boycott of the militant Islamist group.

Palestinians say Israel's policies are harming those very moderates who hope to create an alternative to violence and religious fundamentalism.

« If Israel wants to end up with Somalia next door, it's going the right way about it, » says Zahi Khoury, a US citizen and chairman of the National Beverage Company, which holds the franchise for Coca-Cola in the territories.

Mr Khoury, who was born in Jaffa, now Israel, in 1938, was recently given only a one-week visa instead of the usual three months. He wrote to Condoleezza Rice , US secretary of state, who he says was shocked by the situation. He hopes to raise the issue in a meeting soon with Ehud Olmert, Israeli prime minister.

Many Palestinians such as Mr Khoury moved to the territories in the wave of hope that followed the Oslo accords of the early 1990s. But Israel retained control over immigration. Access to the West Bank is only possible through Israeli-controlled territory.

Israel tightened restrictions following the outbreak of the intifada in 2000. Many foreign passport holders have lived and worked in the territories for years on three-month tourist visas issued by Israel, forcing them to travel in and out at regular intervals to renew their permits. In recent months, however, US and European Union consulates in Jerusalem have monitored numerous cases of individuals being either denied entry or given short-term visas.

An Israeli spokesman said Israel was working on the situation, with the military authorities that run civil affairs in the territories issuing more work permits. But Palestinians say the bureaucratic procedures are cumbersome, with many refused permits and recourse denied to those affected.

In a recent series of articles on the new measures, the Israeli daily newspaper Ha'aretz called them a « silent expulsion ».

Sam Bahour, a US citizen and businessman, has started the Campaign for the Right of Entry/Re-entry to the Occupied Palestinian Territory to try to protect foreign passport holders. Foreign diplomats who attended a meeting organised by the group this week in Jerusalem said they were seeking clarification from Israel.

Mr Bahour helped to found Paltel, the Palestinian telecommunications company, and now owns a technology consulting firm, Applied Information Management.

Last week he was given a one-month visa after having lived in the West Bank on three-month visas for 13 years. An Israeli official wrote « last permit » in his passport in Arabic, Hebrew and English.

« The occupying state of Israel has decided that I have been living with my family and two daughters long enough, » he says, calling Israel's policy an « off-the-radar way of silently transferring Palestinians out of Palestine ».

In the meantime, uncertainty and worry are affecting thousands, such as Joyce Ajlouny, director of the Friends' School in Ramallah, owned by US Quakers. Six of the school's teachers are US citizens and the school has delayed hiring any more foreign passport holders.

« Coming here to teach is becoming very problematic because of the threat to entry, » says Ms Ajlouny, herself a US citizen.

« In the last year, some of our staff only got two-week visas, forcing them to leave early, which is disrupting and distressing to the staff and pupils. »

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