

Case of business visa renewal

I am a foreigner who considers Thailand to be my home. My work involves bringing foreign investment to Thailand and trade with Thailand. I have been ordinarily resident in Thailand for more than eight years, and I am a shareholder in a local business, which I helped found some years ago.

For my Non Resident Business Visa renewal over the last eight years, my accountant (who is Thai) has been responsible for collecting all of the relevant documentation and helping me apply for my renewals.

This year followed the same process, except that I started the process one month earlier than my expiry date (which is the earliest allowed), as I would be travelling for most of the time up until the expiry date. My accountant prepared all of the documentation he understood was required, including taking photographs of myself and my staff at my office (which seems to get more and more burdensome and requires more and more photographs every year), and arranged for me to meet him at the Chaeng Wattana Bureau of Immigration office, to show myself to the immigration officials responsible for processing my documentation.

I arrived at 7.45am on the appointed day. We were fourth in the queue. However, on speaking to the immigration official, who had dealt with my visa process previously, my accountant was told that they required a police clearance document which I would need to get that from the nearest police station. This additional information had not only never been asked of me previously (even for the initial application), but had not been advised as a requirement for this particular renewal. When my accountant asked the reason for it, he was told it had been 'decided from above'.

My accountant said he felt he should follow up with the request, and on calling to the police station nearest to Chaeng Wattana, he was told that it would take a month to process this document, or it could be done 'Express' in three days, for an additional fee.

I thus had to go to the police station, with my accountant, pay 3000THB (the 'Express fee'), for which I received no receipt. There is no record of such a fee required for anything and it is not clear where the fee would be accounted for.

I have already noted that the earliest time advised for renewal is one month before expiry. Clearly adding a process which would ordinarily take a month, would mean that finalizing renewal prior to the deadline would not be possible. I have to be out of Thailand on business for the next three

weeks, so I will have to take additional time off from work in the middle of the project, to try and complete my visa application once again, on its final date, which I had planned to avoid.

It is also curious that when my accountant requested the list of countries whose citizens require a police clearance, he was told that it was confidential, and could not be shared. He was told this by both the immigration official, and the policeman whom we dealt with.

It seems odd to me that neither the Immigration office nor the police station is able to identify which countries the police report requirement applies to. It was not clear whether Immigration officials are aware of the Express fee option.

While I do understand that a visa renewal requires certainty about the bona fides of the application, continual changes to the rules and requirements make doing business difficult. It is not possible to prepare for requirements which are not advised up front. In the past, in more than one instance, I have incurred costs and spent time dealing with requirements which should be known and standardized. I have had to cancel or shift work around to the detriment of my clients. It also appears that different immigration officials have different rules and requirements, which makes things even more complicated and unpredictable.

Many people value working in Thailand and respect local laws. However many of those same people also comment on the high level of processing needed to do standard tasks, the inconsistency of application of rules. Thailand should be a good place to 'do business'. Unfortunately these experiences suggest the opposite.

Done February 2018