

Tajikistan citizens claim that an additional fee is charged for a passport replacement, but law enforcement officials deny this. Officials admit that the deadlines for the government decree implementation have to be extended.

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“I did not intend to replace my passport, since I had one SIM card registered on my name, and even if it would be deactivated, it is not a big deal”, said Kimmat Bilolova, 69, resident of Khatlon region.



*The queue for obtaining passports in Tajikistan. Photo: Akhbor.com*

However, one of her relatives told that if she did not replace her passport, she would not be able to receive a pension and money transfers from the bank.

“I had to visit the passport office to change my passport; if what a relative said was true, I will not receive a pension”, said Kimmat Bilolova in CABAR.asia interview.

Currently in Tajikistan, thousands of people just like Bilolova, line up outside the passport offices anticipating their turn to replace passports.

Ismail Zarifi, 64, resident of Panjakent, Sughd region, claims that due to the illness he still has not replaced his passport issued in 2009 and is not willing to change it. The expiry date of his passport issued in 2009 is indicated as unlimited.



*Ismail Zarifi. Photo: Facebook*

He added that after the expiration of the deadlines set by the government's decree, he will let the SIM card to be deactivated. However, SIM cards deactivation will not benefit anyone, especially the government.

Ismail Zarifi claims that no matter how difficult the life would be without a mobile phone, he is ready to endure.

In compliance with the Decree of the Government of the Republic of Tajikistan of April 30, 2016 "On the Procedure and Requirements of Connection to Networks of Electric Communication and Rendering Services, Related", persons who previously registered SIM cards on the passports of the 1996 type must re-register their SIM cards to internal passport of 2014 type by August 15 of this year.

This decree was adopted after the publication in August 2018 of the authorities' decision to set new prices for SIM cards in the amount of 250 somoni (about \$25). The decision was to enter into force in September 2018, but according to the President's direction, was postponed until January 2019.

Now, citizens of the country complain not only about the necessity to replace passports and re-register SIM cards, but also about difficulties in receiving pensions and money transfers through banks.

The Head of the Passport Registration Department, Colonel Hussein Khalilzoda, said in CABAR.asia interview that there were reports of refusals to issue pensions and money transfers to the holders of the passports of 1996 type, and added that an official investigation was carried out on these complaints.

He noted that such facts were reported in one of the districts of Sughd region. During a working trip to the Sughd region, he, together with the First Deputy Minister of the Interior, met with the management of the Agency of Social Insurance and Pension Under the Government, SSB Amonatbonk, as well as representatives of several banks to discuss these problems.

At the meeting, it was noted that no changes were made to the legislation and government decrees regarding this issue, and the mentioned government agencies had no right to undertake these actions.

“That is, both pensioners and other citizens are free to carry out banking operations and receive a pension with the passports of the 1996 type. The government’s decision extends only to the process of replacing mobile SIM cards”, Khalilzoda said.



*Hussein Khalilzoda. Photo: vkd.tj*

### **Migrant: “SIM Card Deactivation Will Be a Big Problem for Me”**

Tajik migrant Jonibek Rahmonov said that he used one SIM card for years and even brought it with him to Russia. He uses it every time he comes to Tajikistan to contact his friends and relatives.

He is concerned that there is no opportunity to replace a passport in Russia. He has no opportunity to come to Tajikistan either: his monthly salary is only enough to support a family back in his homeland.

“When I will arrive in Tajikistan in the winter, my SIM card will already be blocked. This will create big problems for me”, Rahmonov says.

Just like Jonibek, many other migrants daily keep track of the situation with their SIM cards through social networks. They do not want their SIM cards to be blocked, because they use them to contact their families and relatives.

Mobile companies’ representatives answering the question about extending the SIM cards re-registration deadline, say that authorized bodies should make this decision.

Kholiknazar Jumaev, the Head of the press center of the “Babylon-T” mobile company, said: “We must follow the instructions of the Communication Service and act in accordance with

the laws of the country”.

According to him, the decision of the Service states that after August 15, the provision of communication services to customers who have not registered their SIM cards to the passports of the 2014 type will be suspended. Perhaps, the deadlines for replacing passports will be extended for citizens, Jumaev added.

### Authorized Officials: Passports Replacement Period May Be Extended



Internal passport of the Republic of Tajikistan (2014 type). Photo: faraj.tj

Colonel Hussein Khalilzoda, the Head of the Passport Registration Department of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, said that many migrants, Tajik citizens, are outside the country and will not be able to change their passports during a period of time set by the authorities.

A working group from the Ministry of Internal Affairs sent a proposal to the President's Office to extend the deadline for passports replacement, which is currently being studied.

Nurullo Mahmadullozoda, Deputy Minister of Labor, Migration and Employment of the Republic of Tajikistan, said that, indeed, migrants are not able to return within the deadlines to replace their passports and re-register SIM cards.

In this regard, he expressed the hope that the authorized bodies and the government will take into account the migrants' problems and extend the period for replacing passports and registering SIM cards.

This issue has been raised more than once during press conferences held by the Communications Service of Tajikistan. Although the Deputy Head of the Communications Service, Ilhom Atoev, did not give a clear answer to the journalists' questions, he said that, with a high probability, he would ask the government to extend the deadline for registering SIM cards.

### **Expert: This Decree Violates the Rights of Migrants**

Experts insist that the authorities, while making such decisions, should have taken into account the problems of people abroad who do not want to lose their phone numbers. This can be considered as a type of violation of the civil rights of labor migrants.



*Shokirjon Hakimov. Photo from Facebook profile*

Shokirjon Khakimov, a Tajik lawyer, claims that this decree not only undermines the rights and freedoms of labor migrants, but also their social and economic guarantees.

In his opinion, it is important that in the further development of this issue, authorized persons and initiators make decisions in such a way that there are no restrictions.

On the contrary, it is necessary to resolve the problem so that nothing interrupts the communication between migrants, their relatives and citizens in general, Khakimov said.

### **Citizens Complain About Additional Payments**

Odina Davlatov, a young Tajik, recently faced many problems during his passport replacement in the passport office of the Panj district. To replace his passport, Davlatov gathered all the necessary documents; to obtain a reference from the village council he had to pay a land tax and a water fee.

“At the branch of the SSB Amonatbank I paid 97 somoni (about \$10) for replacing my passport and 7 somoni for fingerprinting, a total of 104 somoni. I went to the authorities, and having received the documents I gathered, they demanded 10 somoni (about \$1). Then I went into the department Head’s office and handed over all the documents. Before leaving, I was shown a document and asked for 60 somoni (about \$6). I asked: “What is this for?” I was told that this amount is for the services of issuing a passport. I paid the required amount and did not continue the argument, because there were a lot of people in line”, said Davlatov.



Odina Davlatov. Photo: CABAR.asia

The Head of the Passport Registration Department of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Republic of Tajikistan, Colonel Hussein Khalilzoda, in CABAR.asia interview said that, except the state duty for the passports replacement and fines for the untimely replacement, the departments of the passport and registration service of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Republic of Tajikistan should not demand any other payments.

According to him, in case of similar incidents, citizens can call the hotline of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, which is available in all branches of the Passport Registration Service.

Khalilzoda said that the Ministry of Internal Affairs did not receive complaints about extorting additional money for services. According to him, recently a meeting was held between the Minister of Internal Affairs of the country and all the Heads of the Passport Registration Departments, who discussed the inadmissibility of corruption acts and emphasized that employees should be courteous to visitors.

Authorities say that the purpose of passports replacement is to ensure security, including preventing excessive use of the phones, and to quickly obtain accurate information about SIM card’s owner.

The Communication Service stated that the decree was “aimed at preventing the crimes, threats of terrorism and extremism arising from mobile phones. For this, it is necessary to have the fingerprints of each subscriber”.

The lawyer Shokirjon Khakimov expressed concern that “under the pretext of combating

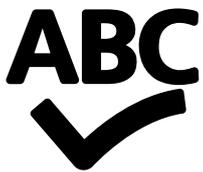
extremism and terrorism, the authorized state bodies pursue other goals and interests”.

According to him, in particular, the purpose of these actions is not only to attract citizens’ funds to the country’s budget, but also to satisfy the personal interests of officials at various levels, who use this opportunity to bribe the population.

“As practice shows, in addition to the state fees, the country’s passport departments force citizens to pay additional amounts without supporting acts. However, despite complaints and objections, authorized law enforcement bodies or deputies do not carry out their supervisory activities, and argue that in fact there are no problems or misunderstandings on this issue”, Khakimov said.

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