

the Bulletin

THE NEWSWEEKLY OF THE CAPITAL OF EUROPE / AUGUST 16, 1996 / 85 BF

WHAT'S ON
YOUR PULL-OUT
ENTERTAINMENT
GUIDE

Fake passports for sale

FALSE

1. Naam - Nom
Mena - Surnama
Mena

2. Voornamen - Prénoms
Vanname - Given names

3. Nationaliteit - Nationalité
Stamps per citizenship - Nationality
Belg

4. Geslacht - Sexe
Geschlecht - Sex
Masculin

5. Geboortedatum - Date de naissance
Geburtsdatum - Date of birth
17 JAN. 1995

6. Geboorteland - Lieu de naissance
Geboortestreek - Place of birth
Lakore (PAK)

7. Dagen van afloop - Date de délivrance
Aanvaltdatum - Date of issue
16 JAN.

8. Geldig tot - Date d'expiration
Geldig bij - Date of expiry

9. Instansie - Auteurs
Beleids - Authority

Mondtkeuring van de kantoor - Signature de l'office
Onderschrift des Funktionärs - Initials of signatory



Dépot Bruxelles X

Hopping mad: a beer at bedtime
Hopping off: a look at Limburg

Hundreds of illegal immigrants are using stolen Belgian passports to enter Britain and other countries. Once there, they use their new-found identity to become citizens.

A joint investigation by The Bulletin and British newspaper *News of the World* has discovered that immigrants, particularly from Asia, are paying up to £3,500 (around 160,000 BF) for a "package deal" which enables them to enter Britain as Belgian tourists, often travelling to Waterloo Station aboard the Eurostar train. The gang behind the racket appears to specialize in breaking into the offices of Belgian communes to steal official stamps and passports.

The scam came to light when a reporter from the Sunday newspaper contacted a retired British Rail worker, Abdul Wasim, 59, known in the trade as Mr Fixit. The reporter posed as a potential customer wanting to bring a relative to Britain illegally. "Belgian passports are easy to get hold of," bragged Wasim. "The crazy Belgians haven't computerized passports. They are still hand-written and easy to manipulate. I have brought a hundred and forty-eight people from Belgium into Britain."

Wasim boasted that no matter where he was in Europe, he could bring anybody to Britain within 10 days of being asked. "We even throw in a rail ticket so our clients can arrive in style," he said.

Wasim's assistant Benny, from west London, continued: "We have contacts in the Belgian communes who get blank passports. They fill them in and get them stamped." He claimed he had brought at least 200 people into Britain illegally.

Wasim took the reporter to his home to show him proof. He proudly presented one of the "genuine" Belgian passports awaiting delivery. The recipient, he said, would be a young Bangladeshi man, living illegally in



Identity Crisis

Seventy thousand passports, driving licences and residence permits have been stolen from communal offices in the last six years. Thieves are taking advantage of the antiquated methods used to fill in passport details by doctoring documents and selling them, creating a race of black-market Belgians. Having first supplied her information to the police, who are using it to track down the culprits, Heide Newson breaks the story in this country

ILLUSTRATIONS BY
THIBAUT FICHET

Germany. "Trust me," he said, "making him a Belgian is child's play."

Once someone from outside the EU has acquired a Belgian passport, it is easy to obtain British nationality. "If a person has lived in Britain for five years and has not been absent for more than two hundred and seventy days within a five-year period and not more than ninety days in the last year, they can apply for British citizenship," says Michelle Roelly, deputy British Consul in Brussels. Non-Europeans come under a different, stricter ruling.

While the crooks revel in the ease with which they can obtain and alter Belgian passports, the news came as a shock to the Belgian Foreign Office. "How can this happen?" asked spokesman André Querton when I put the issue to him.

As proof, I showed him a photocopy of the passport of Mosin Khan who, with his wife Gitu, was tracked down by the *News of the World* reporter to the British town of Slough. As "Belgians" – with passports and driving licences to prove it – they, like other European citizens, are entitled to housing and income support and social security benefits. Yet the Khans, originally from Pakistan, allegedly paid the passport gang £6,000 (around 275,000 BF) to acquire their new identity.

"This can't have been stolen from the Foreign Office," Querton insisted. "It's impossible to break in." The Foreign Office is responsible for printing passports. "We negotiate the price and check the quality," he explained. "We receive up to 447,000 passports annually. They are all numbered and registered with us and locked in the basement, where they are as safe as in Fort Knox.

"We have daily demands to supply passports not only to the communes in Brussels, Flanders and Wallonia, but also to embassies, consulates and other missions world-wide. We deliver passports or ID cards to a thousand places throughout the world on demand." There are daily checks to make sure that the documents have safely arrived at their destinations.

"Of course, it is much easier to steal documents in the offices of the communes. Passports have disappeared from

there," Querton admitted. "But we are told at once if that happens. We inform Interpol and our embassies abroad immediately." He had heard rumours about organized gangs specializing in stealing Belgian passports.

"We have noticed a steep rise in passport robberies in local government offices ever since October 1, 1991, when the law was changed to allow Belgians to visit the US without a visa."

In addition to his name, place and date of birth (Lahore, Pakistan: September 1, 1954) Khan's passport bore the stamp of a Brussels commune, which cannot be named for legal reasons. It was dated January 17, 1995. I faxed a copy to the passport office of the commune in question. When I followed the fax with a phone call, the official was incredulous.

"We issued only one passport on that day. It has a different serial number and does not correspond to the name on the fax," she said. "There is no doubt that the recipient was a genuine Belgian citizen." She conferred with a colleague in the driving licence department, who checked his records: no driving licence had been issued in the name of Mosin Khan on January 17, 1995,

"All ministries and communes are concerned and on the alert," says the head of the Police Support Service. "We must tighten our security measures, introduce computerized passports or centralize the system"

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or on any other day. "We have nothing to do with this obvious fraud," he stated.

Meanwhile, the Foreign Ministry had contacted the General Police Support Service, which specializes in tackling document theft. The office of head of department Daniel Merlo is on the third floor of a building in Brussels' Rue Royale mainly occupied by the Interior Ministry. "I want to know how much information you have collected," said Merlo, pulling out a file on the latest thefts. I told him that Mosin Khan and others had obtained a false Belgian identity and are living comfortably in Britain and that, as I spoke, Abdul "Mr Fixit" Wasim was in the process of negotiating prices to take more clients on stolen passports from Belgium into Britain.

"Mr Khan's passport looks real," Merlo said, "but the stamp is false." Checking a long list of missing passports, he revealed that it was one of 179 stolen from a Flemish commune. "These thefts are happening all the time," he added.

More than 70,000 identity documents – passports, driving licences and residence permits – have disappeared



from communes since 1990. Only last month, 87 vanished from a small commune in Flanders. "All ministries and communes are concerned and on the alert," Merlo assured me. "We have to tighten our security measures, introduce computerized passports or centralize the system as they have done in Germany."

I asked him if he thought Belgian officials were selling passports "over the counter", as the British press has alleged. "The thieves don't need to buy them," he said. "It's much easier just to steal them."

If not directly involved in selling, had communal officials been involved in fraud, as alleged by Benny, Wasim's assistant in London? "I only remember one case, five years ago," says Merlo. "It was in a Brussels commune. One of the officials was discovered to be dealing in documents. He was sacked. Whether he was sent to prison, I don't know. The trouble is, we do not take offences like manipulating passports or documents seriously enough. That has to change."

As for security in the communes, Merlo thought the regulations were good – but whether they were always observed was another matter. Dealing in Belgian passports, he admitted, had become big business.

I asked Merlo how the Foreign Office and General Police Support Service would use the information I had given them. "We will contact Interpol. But we have to be very discreet. We are dealing with an international gang. We are not interested in arresting only the buyers. Our ambition is to catch the brains behind the racket. But that will be very difficult. So far we have not been lucky." □

** Some of the names in this article have been changed.*