

Hotline for Refugees and Migrants

Languishing in Line

**The Queues at the PIBA Office
in Bnei Brak in Early 2018**

December 2018

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The photos in the report, unless stated otherwise, were taken by Israeli activists and volunteers who accompanied the asylum seekers waiting in line.

About the Hotline for Refugees and Migrants

The Hotline for Refugees and Migrants (HRM) is a nonpartisan nonprofit organization that aims to protect and promote the human rights of refugees and migrants and to prevent human trafficking in Israel through client services, detention monitoring, legal action and public policy initiatives.

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Photo: Oren Ziv, Activestills



1. Introduction

"When I leave the offices of the Immigration Authority with a visa for two whole months, I feel a real relief despite being terribly tired. I try not to think about the visa, but a few days before the date to renew it, I can't stop thinking about it. I start feeling nervous and I have headaches every time the thought about standing in those long lines pops into my head. I thought these were really uncommon feelings, but one of my friends whom I told about this, claimed that he suffers stomach aches every time he has to renew his visa." (An Eritrean asylum seeker in an interview with the HTM, April 24, 2018)

During the first six months of 2018, the sight at the Bnei Brak office Population, Immigration and Borders Authority (henceforth: "Immigration Authority" or "PIBA") was a difficult one. Every night, hundreds and at times thousands of asylum seekers would gather behind the Ayalon Mall. The conditions on the premises were utterly inadequate for prolonged waiting: there were no bathrooms, seating or garbage cans; the area reeked of urine and filth. Before sunrise, those gathered would begin to crowd near the metal barriers leading to the entrance of the gated premises, trying to ensure that they are among the lucky ones who manage to enter the PIBA facility that day. Inside the facility's yard, they had to wait in another queue, go through a security check, receive a number and wait several more hours before meeting a PIBA employee.

Sudanese and Eritrean asylum seekers from all over Israel had to wait entire days outside the facility before they were able to enter. Many could not handle the long journey and its cost and had to stay with relatives in Tel Aviv, or sleep in the streets if they did not know anyone in the area who could host them overnight. Even when they did enter, there was no guarantee that they could renew their visa, and at times asylum seekers had to return more than once until they managed to renew their permit. Many gave up and were left without a valid visa, exposing them to arrest and detention, and depriving them the ability to work or access their bank accounts.

This report describes the long lines and unbearable conditions outside the PIBA office in Bnei Brak in early 2018 and the reasons for their emergence. The report surveys the failings of PIBA, which did not offer appropriate and timely solutions that would have mitigated the suffering of asylum seekers. In the conclusion, we will offer solutions that would prevent the recurrence of similar problems in the future.

2. Background

PIBA Offices

Until December 2013, PIBA, which operates under the Israeli Ministry of Interior, provided visa renewal service for asylum seekers in 24 offices that were also open to the Israeli public.¹ The service was available throughout the regular reception hours. In December 2013, after the 4th Amendment to the Anti-Infiltration Law was enacted, PIBA announced a sharp reduction in the number of offices providing services to the Sudanese and Eritrean asylum seekers and the number of hours in which they would provide these services. Only four offices remained open to these asylum seekers throughout Israel: Tel Aviv, Beer Sheva, Haifa and Petach Tikvah.

Because criticism of the change was fierce, PIBA reopened two more offices to asylum seekers: Eilat and Rishon Lezion. Later, the Nazareth Illit office was also reopened to asylum seekers a few hours each week.

PIBA kept making changes to the locations of offices providing services to asylum seekers, with offices closing and opening from time to time. By November 2014, only three PIBA offices provided services to Sudanese and Eritrean asylum seekers: Bnei Brak, Beer Sheva and Eilat.

In April 2017, PIBA announced that it would no longer receive asylum seekers in its Beer Sheva office starting in June 2017. The Hotline for Refugees and Migrants (HRM) filed a petition against this measure in May 2017.² Before the hearing on the petition, PIBA suddenly added 30 clerks and proved that it is able to issue 1,000 visas per day. In response to the petition, the State committed to receive applicants on all weekdays, eight hours a day, and that the last in line to arrive would receive services after reception hours. The State also committed to staff the office with 30 clerks, to ensure that translators would be available during all hours of operation, to organize the lines through a queue management system, to provide services in a facility with orderly service stations and equipped with a

¹ The offices were in Eilat, Ashdod, Ashkelon, Beer Sheva, Bnei Brak, Herzliya, Hadera, Holon, Haifa, Tiberius, Jerusalem, Kfar Saba, East Jerusalem, Nazareth Illit, Netanya, Acre, Afula, Petach Tikvah, Safed, Rishon Lezion, Rehovot, Ramleh, Ramat Gan and Tel Aviv.

² High Court of Justice (HCJ) case 17/4284 *Hotline for Refugees and Migrants vs. the Minister of Interior*.

waiting area with fans and bathrooms, to create a separate queue for families, and to ensure that the overall process takes no longer than an hour and 15 minutes.³ Given these commitments by the State, the petition was dismissed on September 11, 2017.

Despite these commitments, since June 2017, only two offices of the Ministry of Interior serve 34,000 Eritrean and Sudanese asylum seekers who are required to renew their visas: the office serving asylum seekers in Bnei Brak, operating Sunday through Thursday, from 8am to 4pm, and the office in Eilat, which is open only on Tuesdays and Wednesdays between 4 to 6pm and provides services to asylum seekers who are residents of Eilat only.

Even during these limited hours, the offices were not always operational. The reduction in the number of offices created long lines and additional challenges to those who do not live in the central area but must come there to renew their permits. From June 2017 to May 2018, large numbers of asylum seekers would gather outside the Bnei Brak PIBA office on days of operation. These asylum seekers hoped to manage to renew their visas, without which they cannot be employed.

The Status of Refugees and Asylum Seekers in Israel

Article 1(B) to the Entry to Israel Law stipulates that the residency of a person who is not a citizen or an immigrant under the Law of Return must be regulated with a permit.⁴ Article 13F(D) of the law stipulates that the Minister of Interior is obligated to provide a permit to a person illegally residing in Israel who has been released from detention, which is the legal status of most asylum-seekers in Israel. We will briefly describe the types of visas provided the asylum seekers and recognized refugees in Israel:

A. Refugee status

According to the Refugee Status Determination (RSD) Procedure, those whose asylum cases were examined and were recognized as refugees by the State obtain temporary residency (an A/5 visa). This visa must be renewed annually. Temporary residents receive an Israeli identification card but are ineligible for a passport. They can obtain a laissez passer after filing a reasoned request. To exit and re-enter Israel, temporary residents require an entry visa. Temporary residency provides the right to work, medical care under the National Health

³ Ibid., the State's response from June 15, 2017.

⁴ The Entry to Israel Law, 1952 (Hebrew): <https://bit.ly/2J954hD>.

Law, benefits from National Security and the right to vote in local elections. This status does not provide the right to vote in Knesset elections or be elected to it.

An A/5 visa was given to asylum seekers from Sudan who received this status as part of "humanitarian gestures", to citizens of other countries who are in the process of obtaining citizenship through marriage with Israeli citizens, and in specific humanitarian cases.

This permit needs to be renewed once a year in the PIBA offices open to the general public, in the recipient's area of residence.

B. A work permit

A B/1 visa given to migrant workers who arrive in Israel to work for a limited period. A governmental decision in 2009 granted this visa to a small number of Eritrean asylum seekers. This permit does not provide the recipient with social benefits or rights under the National Health Law. Those who hold the visa enjoy some National Security rights, limited to employees. Holders of B/1 visas can obtain a driver's license in Israel.

This visa is granted for varying periods, ranging from two to six months. Eritrean asylum seekers who hold this visa must renew it at the Bnei Brak PIBA office, while all others who carry this permit should renew it at the PIBA offices open to the general public in their area of residence.

C. A temporary permit given to asylum seekers

Most asylum seekers in Israel receive a "temporary permit." This permit is granted under Article 2A5 of the Entry to Israel law (henceforth, a 2A5 permit), which states that the visa is to be given "until the exit from Israel or removal from it" of the permit holder. Asylum seekers must renew this permit periodically, ranging from every few weeks to every six months. The visa does not grant any social rights or a work permit, but the State committed itself before the Supreme Court not to enforce the prohibition on employing asylum seekers who hold this permit, although the document itself states: "this permit does not constitute a work permit."⁵

This permit is provided for periods ranging from two to six months. In some cases, it is given for shorter periods of a few weeks or even a few days. The visa must be renewed at the Bnei Brak (or Eilat) PIBA office.

⁵ HCJ case 10/6312 *Kav LaOved vs. the Prime Minister*, verdict from January 16, 2011.

3. The Lines at the PIBA Office in Early 2018

Chronology of Predetermined Overload

On January 1, 2018, PIBA issued an announcement to "infiltrators" (the term the State uses to refer to asylum seekers who didn't enter Israel through a border crossing point) to leave Israel within three months.⁶ The same day, the State issued the Regulation on Removal to Third Countries.⁷ The Regulation stated that starting in February 1, 2018, PIBA will begin issuing notices to asylum seekers that they must leave the country within 60 days to an undisclosed third country (in reality, Rwanda and Uganda), and if they fail to do so, they will be detained indefinitely. Following the announcement of the deportation plan, PIBA clerks began issuing visas valid for shorter periods due to the State's intention to issue summonses to a pre-deportation hearings starting in February. The reduction in the duration of the visa considerably increased the workload of the PIBA office in Bnei Brak.

Three petitions were filed against the deportation plan.⁸ An Interim Order issued as part of the proceedings prevented the beginning of the deportations, but the Ministry of Interior continued to issue notices and hold pre-deportation hearings.

In late January 2018, PIBA decided that asylum applications, at the time filed at the offices of the RSD Unit in southern Tel Aviv, would now be filed at the Bnei Brak office due to the overload and long lines outside the Tel Aviv office and the poor conditions of the waiting area outside. As a result, those waiting outside the Bnei Brak office were confused regarding which queue they should wait in: the one to file asylum claims, or the various lines for visa renewal (divided between families and singles according to countries of origin; more on this below).

⁶ Announcement from January 1, 2018, updated on January 2 and available in four languages on PIBA's website: <https://bit.ly/2yTinhE>.

⁷ The regulation was updated on January 2018. Its updated version is available on PIBA's website in Hebrew: <https://bit.ly/2l0iT4l>.

⁸ HCJ case 18/679 *Cook Avivi vs. the Prime Minister*; HCJ case 18/733 *Feldman vs. the State of Israel*; and HCJ case 18/2445 *Hotline for Refugees and Migrants vs. the Prime Minister*.



Outside the Bnei Brak PIBA office, March 21, 2018.

Asylum seekers who received a summons for pre-deportation hearings were given a predetermined day and time and did not need to wait in line. They were supposed to approach the security personnel to allow them to enter, but most were unaware of this and joined the others in the long queues. Those who did not enter the office on time for the hearing were automatically given a deportation order to a third country. To schedule a new time for a hearing, they had to send a detailed written request by fax. If the request was granted, the asylum seeker had to come to the office again.

In early March 2018, rumors spread that asylum seekers who had not renewed their visas, for fear of being sent to the Holot detention center for asylum seekers or because of bureaucratic obstacles,⁹ could now come to the Bnei Brak office and receive a visa. Activists translated the information to Tigrinya and spread it on social media, leading thousands of asylum seekers from all over the country to rush to Bnei Brak and stand in the unbearably long lines, hoping to be able to obtain a visa.¹⁰

⁹ For more information about the Holot detention center, see: HRM, *Immigration Detention in Israel: Yearly Monitoring Report*, 2015 <https://bit.ly/2rFAWmo>.

¹⁰ For more, see: Rozen, Sigal. (2018) *A Criminalizing Visa Regime*. Available at: <https://bit.ly/2y1nhJQ>.

At the same time, following the shutdown of the Holot detention center on March 14, 2018, many of those released received visas for short durations of a week or two, and were also forced to come to the PIBA offices to renew them.

On April 10, 2018, the High Court of Justice (HCJ) ruled that there is no third country to which asylum seekers can be deported and therefore put a halt to the deportation plan; despite this, the State continued with deportation proceedings. Thus, PIBA's Border Control Officers continued to hold pre-deportation hearings and refrained from renewing the visas of those who had received deportation orders. This further contributed to the overload at the Bnei Brak office, forcing many to come to the office several times in an attempt to renew their visa.

Kidane, an asylum seeker from Eritrea, described the situation to the HRM:

"They said on Facebook that we can now get a visa if we did not previously have a visa. My employer did not ask about the visa, but for my travel to Canada, they said that I need a visa, so I left my job in Jerusalem and traveled to Bnei Brak. I was there day after day until night. At the end of March 2018, I was sleeping outside because I did not feel comfortable coming every night to my friends whose home was very small. After a week, I gave up and returned to Jerusalem without a visa. But my employer took someone else to work for him and I no longer had a job. In April I tried again to get a visa, also because it was not so



Asylum seekers sleep outside the PIBA office in Bnei Brak. March 18, 2018.

cold at night outside anymore. I stood in line for two more weeks with many other Eritreans. I do not understand why they tell everyone to come at the same time. It's very hard this way."

Only on May 2, 2018, when he arrived at the PIBA office accompanied by HRM representatives, was Kidane's visa renewed. The HRM heard similar testimonies from asylum seekers from Ashdod, Ashkelon and other places across the country.

Tesfay managed to enter a pre-deportation hearing at the Bnei Brak office on April 17 after many efforts. His hearing took place a week after the HCJ had ruled that there is no third country to which Israel could deport asylum seekers. Like Kidane, Tesfay wasn't granted a visa after the hearing:

"I do not understand how they work there at the Ministry of Interior. I didn't think they were going to deport me to a third country because a friend told me that only those without asylum requests are being deported. I had a [pending] asylum application. When I managed to enter, they told me to go to Rwanda. I told



Photo: Oren Ziv, Activestills

them I have an asylum application. They gave me a letter rejecting my asylum application and an order to leave to Rwanda. The letter was dated April 10, and I was actually there on April 10, but I was unable to enter until now [the 17th], so they couldn't tell me that they've rejected my asylum application."

On the same day, Kibreab also managed to enter the office:

"I've been here a week but only yesterday managed to enter the offices. Before that, there were too many other people. When I entered, they took my visa like always, and I thought that I would get a new visa for a month or two, as usual. The person told me to go to Rwanda. I told him I don't want to go to Rwanda. He told me that there is no visa if I don't want to go to Rwanda."

Tesfay and Kibreab reached out to the HRM to receive assistance because without a valid visa, they could not withdraw funds from their bank accounts.

In April and May 2018, HRM and HIAS-Israel sent a number of appeals to Israeli authorities regarding the overload at the Bnei Brak office, the poor conditions in which asylum seekers wait in lines, and the failure to renew visas of asylum seekers. In their appeals, the organizations warned that the State is failing to adhere to the commitments it made during the proceedings in HCJ case 17/4284. The appeals demanded that the State once again provide services to asylum seekers in all 24 offices that once served them, in accordance with their area of residence, and provide services of the same quality as those provided to citizens and residents. The appeals also demanded that PIBA renew visas for longer durations to avoid forcing asylum seekers to report to its offices again and again. The organizations also argued that the Ministry of Interior must allow asylum seekers to arrive at the office by degrees and renew their visas on the day of arrival; the appeals also called on PIBA to allow outsiders to accompany asylum seekers as they enter the facility's premises.

Replying to these appeals in its June 3, 2018 response, the State committed to changing the reception policy at the facility, prioritizing those who arrived at pre-scheduled times. The State decided that asylum seekers who arrive at times in which they were not summoned would not be allowed to enter the premises, except during predetermined times in the afternoons. On June 4, the new policy was published on PIBA's website in Hebrew.¹¹

¹¹ Reception at the Bnei Brak PIBA Facility, June 4, 2018. Available in Hebrew: <https://bit.ly/2q3b8zt>.

However, the State did not address the poor conditions its deliberate policies created at the facility entrance during the period when the State attempted to carry out the deportation plan. Instead, the State shifted the blame to the asylum seekers, claiming that they do not arrive on the date and hour set for them. For months, asylum seekers received summonses to report to the PIBA office at a predetermined time, but few were able to enter the office at those times. Therefore, they had to arrive early to secure a spot in the line. The attempt to blame the asylum seekers for this is outrageous. Only after repeated appeals by the HRM and HIAS and legal proceedings of the organizations on this matter did the Ministry of Interior increase staffing at the Bnei Brak facility and the wait time in queues were gradually reduced.¹²

Lack of Adequate Infrastructure for the Queues Outside the Office

Before asylum seekers could enter the queue inside the premises of the PIBA office, which is shaded, has seating and the queue is ordered by numbers, they had to spend hours and even days in the long line outside. For many months, there was no seating, bathrooms, water coolers, shade or protection from the rain in the area, and there were no cleaning services. In a complaint filed on March 19, 2018, one of the Israeli volunteers described:

"The conditions in the waiting area outside the facility (outside of the fence) are atrocious. This is an open courtyard that apparently served as a parking area in the past. There is no seating, no shade or any cover from the sun or rain, there are no bathrooms or running water. To enter the facility, people wait there for many hours in unbearable conditions."

During the height of winter, asylum seekers had to stand in line under the rain without any shelter. Those who left the queue in search of shelter lost their place in the line.

"The endless wait in line entailed difficulties that are hard to fully put into words: being forced to inhale the stench of urine for hours because those waiting in line refused to step aside before urinating, fearing they would lose their spot in the line; being forced to listen to the shouting of the security guards at the entrance to the facility or the managers of lines and those waiting who often quarreled

¹² Ziv, Oren, *A Relief for Asylum Seekers: The End of the Monster Lines at the Immigration Authority?*, Local Call, June 7, 2018. Available in Hebrew: <https://bit.ly/2M5yNtc>.

over their place in line; being forced at times to crowd together in such close proximity as to cause physical pain, with masses of people who had not had the opportunity to shower or change clothes for many days; being forced to stand under the glaring sun or in the rain; standing in enormous puddles; standing for hours without being able to rest one's legs by sitting." (A HRM representative, March 23, 2018)



On several instances in early 2018, Israeli volunteers joined activists from the refugee communities to clean the waiting area, after appealing to the Bnei Brak Sanitation Department and failing to receive a response. Volunteers also cleaned racist graffiti that was sprayed on the walls of the parking lot where the asylum seekers waited outside the facility's premises.

A group of ultra-orthodox volunteers named "Fearful [Haredim] of the Deportation" assisted in cleaning the facility, erected a temporary shade canopy to protect those waiting in line from the sun,¹³ and later gathered donations to establish a

¹³ The shade canopy was partially dismantled by Bnei Brak Municipality employees, arguing that it was built without a permit; PIBA employees managed to prevent the destruction of parts of the canopy that did not pose a risk to those waiting in line.

permanent pavilion and benches.¹⁴ Another volunteer donated port-a-potties for those waiting outside the facility.

Disorder and Tensions in Queues

No one in an official capacity regulated the lines outside the facility and the presence of so many people led to tensions among the asylum seekers and the facility's security personnel.

On many occasions, PIBA officials and the security guards at the entrance arbitrarily decided to close the office, claiming that too many people had arrived or that people are not standing in orderly queues. In response, independent representatives of the refugee community began organizing the line: one representative in charge of the queue of Eritrean asylum seekers, and another representative in charge of the queue of Sudanese asylum seekers. In exchange for NIS 10 (\$2.7), the self-appointed ushers distributed notes with queue numbers and made sure that no one cut in line. This created several queues for renewing visas outside of the facility: a queue for those with families, a queue for singles from Sudan and a queue for singles from Eritrea.

Those waiting in line did not always accept the authority of the self-appointed ushers. In those instances, the disorder in the line grew worse.

PIBA employees and the security guards were aware of the activities of the ushers. The conduct of the PIBA employees toward the ushers changed at times, apparently arbitrarily. Thus, activists assisting the asylum seekers reported that PIBA representatives and the security guards at times forced the ushers to leave, while on other occasions, relied on the ushers and even conditioned entry of asylum seekers to the PIBA facility on the cooperation with the ushers.

¹⁴ More on the activism of the "Fearful/Haredim of the Deportation", see: Prof. Ruhama Weiss, *Ultra-Orthodox against the Deportation of Refugees: The Torah Loves Them Too*, Ynet, April 13, 2018. Available in Hebrew: <https://bit.ly/2PamWyl>; Allison Kaplan Sommer, *Remember You Were Strangers: Ultra-Orthodox Jews Step in to Help Asylum Seekers in Israel*, Haaretz, April 16, 2018: <https://bit.ly/2Am2fqU>; Nofar Moshe, *A group of Haredim joined the struggle of the 'infiltrators' who face deportation*, Kan, March 28, 2018, Available in Hebrew: <https://bit.ly/2R4teN3>.

4. Failings of the Immigration Authority

Arbitrariness as a Policy

The permits of asylum seekers are provided for varying durations, in accordance with the discretion of the PIBA employees and with the ever-changing policies of the Authority. At times the permits are valid for a month, sometimes for two or three. In a handful of cases, the permits are given for longer durations. Thus, for example, asylum seekers from Darfur and women receive permits for six months, but their partners, in cases where they are not married or do not have mutual children, receive permits for shorter periods. In most other cases, permits are given for shorter periods, for example, when an asylum seeker was summoned to a hearing before being sent to the Holot detention center. The same pattern emerged in 2018 when the government attempted to deport asylum seekers to third countries. The decrease in the term of validity of permits contributed to the overload at the PIBA office, as it forced asylum seekers to renew their visas more frequently.

Some groups were arbitrarily given access or moved to the front of the line without any prior notice. Thus, on certain days, clerks allowed asylum seekers whose visas were expired for a long time to enter and renew their visas, while on other days, their entry was denied without any justification.

This chaotic conduct is unacceptable. It unnecessarily makes the lives of asylum seekers harder, leaving them in a constant state of insecurity as regards their future. It forces them to lose many work days due to the need to renew their permits. And, in the period that is the focus of this report, it also forced them to wait day and night in harsh conditions, sometimes for several days in a row.

Manpower Shortage

As mentioned above, in May 2017, the HRM filed an appeal to the HCJ against PIBA's plan to stop servicing asylum seekers in its Beer Sheva office. This petition was dismissed because the State committed to staff the Bnei Brak office with 30 clerks and keep the office open for five days a week, from 8am to 4pm. However, the clerks' stations often remained unmanned.

On January 3, 2018, the government decided to allocate to PIBA new personnel openings, including "60 personnel openings for increasing enforcement and removing infiltrators to a third country, for a period of 24 months, starting in April 1, 2018," as well as "30 personnel openings for supporting and organizing the voluntary departure of infiltrators to a third country, for a period of 24 months starting from the day the decision comes into force."¹⁵

However, in January 2018, PIBA inspectors announced that they had entered a labor dispute due to deterioration in their conditions of employment, the work overload and the refusal of the State to negotiate with its employees.¹⁶

Lack of Information in Languages Spoken by the Asylum Seekers

Although the hours of operation of the Bnei Brak office appear on PIBA's website, on some days, particularly at times of overload, the office opens later than the times listed online or shuts down early without prior notice. PIBA does not publish information online regarding times when the office is closed (for example, on holidays, during strikes, etc.), and the information is not available in languages spoken by the asylum seekers.

The Ministry of Interior's guidelines and regulations concerning asylum seekers, which went through multiple changes during the attempt to implement the deportation plan, are not accessible in the languages spoken by the asylum seekers. One result has been that asylum seekers often miss their hearings. As mentioned, a person who arrived for a hearing should not wait in line, but because the information was not made available to the asylum seekers, those summoned waited in line along with those wishing to renew their visa, and thus were unable to enter at the time allotted to them. This situation, which could have been avoided, also increases the number of people standing in line.

During the period discussed in this report, the Legal Clinic at the Ramat Gan College, in collaboration with refugee rights NGOs, created informational leaflets in the languages spoken by asylum seekers. Volunteers of the HRM, HIAS,

¹⁵ Government of Israel meeting, January 3, 2018. Available in Hebrew: <https://bit.ly/2q648BY>.

¹⁶ *Against the Backdrop of the Asylum Seeker Turmoil: Labor Dispute at the Population and Immigration Authority*, Channel 10, January 29, 2018. Available in Hebrew: <https://www.10.tv/news/154193>; See also protocol no. 324 from the Knesset Committee on State Control, May 9, 2018. Available in Hebrew: <https://bit.ly/2ySsp2s>.

independent volunteers from the refugee communities, students of the Ramat Gan Legal Clinic, and members of youth movements came to the facility to assist the asylum seekers waiting in line; they translated explanations and directions in their languages, and updated the communities about changes in the policies and hours of operation of the facility. However, the constant changes in policy made it difficult to provide reliable and up-to-date information to those waiting in queues.

Difficulties and Bureaucratic Hurdles

"Although I have a wife and a child in Israel and although I am from Darfur, they want me to renew my visa every two months and not six. Every month, I have to show them my apartment lease agreement and my last pay slip. On April 25, I came with the lease agreement and the pay slip, and the Immigration clerk suddenly told me that 'the lease agreement is no good.' He told me to bring a different agreement, a better one. I asked what is wrong with the lease agreement. I told him that it's the same one I brought two months ago, when my visa was renewed, but the clerk insisted that the lease agreement was no good. Finally, the clerk gave me a visa for month, and told me to come back in a month with a new lease agreement. How will I do a new lease agreement if I don't know what went wrong with the old one?" (Anwar Suleiman Arbab, April 25, 2018).

As part of the general pattern of abusive policies toward asylum seekers, PIBA makes it difficult for them to renew their permits by requiring certain documents that asylum seekers, at times, simply cannot obtain, such as pay slips, apartment lease agreements, documents proving they have a family in Israel, proof of settled medical debts, and notarized translations in Hebrew of documents originally in Arabic or English (recognized languages in Israel). These asylum seekers are forced to return several times to the PIBA office to present the missing documents or plead with them to renew their visa despite being unable to produce these documents. This pattern has also contributed to the overload at the PIBA office.

In addition, during this period, PIBA clerks altered the identification number of the permits of many asylum seekers, without indicating the prior number on the permit. As a result, asylum seekers were deprived of access to their bank accounts. Asylum seekers whose identification numbers were changed had to return to the PIBA office to try to reverse the number change or obtain a letter attesting that the two numbers belong to the same person in PIBA's computer system. This also created unnecessary work and contributed to the overload at the Bnei Brak office.



Activists clean up racist graffiti outside the PIBA office in Bnei Brak, May 16, 2018.

Aggressiveness of Guards at the Entrance

Another phenomenon often observed during that period was aggressive behavior by some of the security personnel guarding the masses of people waiting in long lines for hours at the Bnei Brak PIBA office. Activists accompanying asylum seekers reported that the guards shouted at asylum seekers, threatened them and at times abused their power by removing asylum seekers from the line or preventing their entry to the office, all without the authority to do so.

Activists and Volunteers Filling the Role of the State

Because the State of Israel and PIBA failed to organize the queues at the entrance to the Bnei Brak office, failed to provide the basic necessities of those waiting in line (such as shade, seating, water coolers, bathrooms, cleaning services, etc.), and failed to provide information in languages spoken by asylum seekers, independent activists and NGO volunteers stepped in to fill those roles.

The presence of Israelis at the PIBA office was often required to monitor the conduct of security guards and PIBA clerks to ensure proper and respectful treatment of

the asylum seekers. In addition, activists accompanied asylum seekers who had been prevented from entering when they tried doing so on their own and assisted them in overcoming bureaucratic hurdles.

NGOs also created informational leaflets distributed by volunteers, though this is the responsibility of PIBA, as is providing adequate conditions for those waiting in line, also done by volunteers who shaded the waiting area, erected benches, provided port-a-potties and cleaned the waiting area, as described above.

Infringement on the Rights of Asylum Seekers

The reduction in the number of offices providing services to asylum seekers created a significant overload and gravely injured the rights of asylum seekers. Due to the long lines at the Bnei Brak office, many asylum seekers could not renew their visa on time, were exposed to detention, and could not work and provide for themselves and their families. Not having a valid permit also denied asylum seekers access to their bank accounts.

"Fearful [Haredim] of the Deportation" set up a shade canopy outside the PIBA office.



5. Summary and Recommendations

This report surveys the inhumane conditions in which asylum seekers had to wait outside the PIBA facility in Bnei Brak in the first half of 2018. However, spikes in overload at the PIBA offices are a recurring problem due to the State's deliberate changes in policy toward asylum seekers. The overload at the PIBA offices is avoidable, and when it decides to tackle the matter, it is solved quickly and easily. This time, PIBA finally implemented changes that led to a reduction in the work load, but only after multiple appeals and court cases by the HRM and HIAS. The policy of intentionally making the renewal of visas more challenging is part of a myriad of measures and laws implemented against asylum seekers, such as the Anti-Infiltration Law, which allows for the detention of asylum seekers without trial, and the Deposit Law, which robs asylum seekers of 20% of their salaries. The overload and poor conditions at the Bnei Brak office are part of this deliberate policy, whose goal is to make the lives of asylum seekers in Israel difficult, thus pressuring them to "voluntarily" depart the country.

We call on the Israeli government to alter its policies toward asylum seekers living in our midst, examine the asylum claims they have filed (some of them many years ago), and grant refugee status or complementary protection to those deserving of these statuses. Until the State reaches a decision regarding their asylum claims, it should grant them B/1 visas for long periods. This status would provide them with the ability to renew their permits in PIBA offices in their area of residence, which are open to the general public.

Until the State overhauls its policies toward asylum seekers, it must at least guarantee humane and dignified conditions for those reaching PIBA's doors as they try to fulfill their legal obligation to renew their permits. We call on the State to adopt the following recommendations:

- Allow asylum seekers to once again receive services, in accordance with their place of residence, in all 24 PIBA offices during all hours of reception.
- Ensure that 30 border control officers staff the reception desks in the Bnei Brak facility, that translators are available during all hours of operation, and that the

overall process takes no longer than an hour and 15 minutes, in accordance with the State's commitment in HCJ case 17/4284.

- Provide asylum seekers with a permit valid for at least six months.
- Manage the queues outside the premises of the Bnei Brak facility, so that those waiting receive a number in line before entering the facility; translators should also be made available in this waiting area.
- Adapt the waiting area outside the facility to be able to hold the large numbers of people present there by establishing a shaded waiting area with cover from the rain, with seating, sanitary facilities and running water.
- Ensure the cleanliness of the waiting area.
- Provide all instructions to asylum seekers in languages they speak on PIBA's website, as well as inside and outside the Bnei Brak office.
- Conduct training for the security personnel on working with vulnerable populations and update them about changes in PIBA regulations.
- Avoid altering the identifying numbers of asylum seekers, and alternately, mention both numbers clearly in their permit.
- Avoid conditioning the renewal of permits on provision of documents that asylum seekers cannot produce.
- Avoid conditioning the renewal of visas on provision of translation to documents in Arabic and English, which are recognized languages by the State of Israel.
- Avoid enforcing any punitive measures such as detention or fines against asylum seekers who are found working without valid visas due to PIBA's failings mentioned above, or against employers of such asylum seekers.

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