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ORIGINAL - ENGLISH

MEETING OF EXPERTS ON PASSPORTS AND FRONTIER FORMALITIES

EIGHTH PLENARY MEETING

Held at the Palais des Nations, Geneva, on Friday, 18 April
1947 at 10.00 a.m.

MINUTES

Chairman: Mr. CAREW ROBINSON (United Kingdom)

1. Expression of sympathy with the Government of the United States of America in connection with the disaster in Texas City.

The CHAIRMAN, in declaring the meeting open said that the members of the Meeting had noted with profound regret the terrible disaster which had befallen Texas City and wished to express their deepest sympathy with the Government of the United States of America.

Mr. TAIT (United States of America) thanked the members of the Meeting, on behalf of his Government, for their expression of sympathy.

2. Item I.B. 2(b) of the Agenda - Cost of Visas.

The CHAIRMAN said that the meeting had disposed in principle of the question of the extent of validity of visas and the number of journeys which could be made during the period of validity. Three proposals had been submitted regarding the cost of visas. In Document E/Conf/Pass/PC/4 it was suggested that there should be no discrimination with respect to fees for visas on the basis of nationality or itinerary, except

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that the fees might be lowered or raised on the basis of reciprocity. A similar proposal had been made by the representative of the United States of America. The United Kingdom delegation had proposed that there should be a moderate standard fee of say 10 shillings, each country retaining the right to charge on a higher scale where higher scales were charged by another Government, or to reduce or abolish fees by mutual agreement.

Mr. WILKINSON (United States of America) pointed out that the proposal of the United States delegation suggested that there should be no discrimination in visa fees on the basis of nationality, itinerary, purpose of visit, or means of transportation. United States law provided for a fixed fee for visas and a reduction or elimination of such fees by the conclusion of reciprocal visa fee waiver agreements with other countries. The United States Government had already made such agreements with several countries, and hoped that that process would be followed to an even greater extent.

Mr. BAUDOY (France) said that there was a difference between the question of visa fees and passport fees. Some countries regarded visa fees as a source of revenue. France had acted in accordance with the decisions of the 1926 Conference and now charged 400 French francs, or 16 shillings, for an ordinary visa, and 50 French francs, or about 2 shillings, for a transit visa. His Government had had to take retaliatory measures against certain countries which were now applying higher fees than those recommended by the 1926 Conference. Out of the thirty-two countries represented at the Meeting, ten charged much higher visa fees than those

recommended at the 1920 and 1926 Conferences. Mr. Baudoy considered that there should be a minimum tariff for transit visas and a maximum tariff for an entrance visa to cover a certain number of journeys. He suggested that the maximum fee should be £1.

Mr. PRZEWANSKI (Poland) seconded the proposal made by the United States representative.

Mr. VILLA MICHEL (Mexico) said his delegation agreed with the principle of non-discrimination. His Government observed the principle of reciprocity where visa fees were concerned. He considered that the exception in the case of reciprocity should be stated more clearly.

Mr. CONTEMPRE (Belgium) approved the United States' proposal and said that the Belgian visa tariff had been uniform since 1933.

Mr. PETERS (Australia) asked whether the vote to be taken would include the provision in paragraph (b) (1) on page 4 of document E/Conf/Pass/PC/4 - "except that the fees might be lower or higher on the basis of reciprocity."

The CHAIRMAN said he proposed to put the recommendation to the vote that there should be no discrimination for visa fees on the basis of nationality, itinerary, purpose of visit, or means of transportation, except that a visa fee might be fixed higher or lower on the basis of reciprocity.

Mr. BOER (Netherlands) pointed out that certain countries had higher visa fees than others and, as a consequence, the

countries with the lower visa fee raised their fees when granting a visa to a national of the country which charged a higher fee. That was a retaliatory measure, and he wished to know whether it would be mentioned in the text which the Chairman suggested.

The CHAIRMAN said he hoped that the Meeting would be able to recommend a standard fee which would render any such retaliatory measures unnecessary. The text of the recommendation would mention that countries were free to take retaliatory measures if they so wished, but Governments might agree between themselves either to the abolition of a fee altogether or to some lower fee on the basis of reciprocity.

Mr. MIKACUI (Lebanon) supported the Chairman's proposal. Lebanon applied a uniform fee of ten Lebanese pounds for an entry visa and five pounds for a transit visa, and would be willing to conclude agreements to lower those fees.

Replying to Mr. PERIER (France), the CHAIRMAN said that the proposed text on which the Meeting would be called to vote could be found in paragraph 8, page 46, of document E/Conf/Pass/PC/2.

Mr. WILKINSON (United States of America), speaking on a point of order, said that the United States proposal was worded slightly differently from the paragraph mentioned by the Chairman.

The CHAIRMAN asked whether the United States proposal differed in principle from paragraph 8 on page 46 of document E/Conf/Pass/PC/2, apart from the addition of the words "purpose of visit".

Mr. WILKINSON (United States of America) said that the United States proposal differed only on the point quoted by the Chairman, but that point was a very important one in the development of trade and employment throughout the world. There had been cases of discrimination where purpose of visit was concerned. The suggestion made by the United States delegation was broader than that contained in paragraph 8, page 46, of document E/Conf/Pass/PC/2.

The CHAIRMAN pointed out that document E/Conf/Pass/PC/2 contained the additional reservation regarding the right to charge higher fees or to allow lower fees, and therefore was broader in that respect than the United States proposal.

Mr. PETERS (Australia) asked whether the United States proposal of non-discrimination for purposes of visit would exclude the lowering of fees for students or deserving cases.

Mr. WILKINSON (United States of America) replying to Mr. Peters, said that his question was answered by the proposal of the United States regarding the next item on the Agenda, which was that the objective should be the universal abolition of visa fees.

Mr. PERIER (France) suggested that the Meeting should vote on both suggestions simultaneously.

Mr. WILKINSON (United States of America) replying to the CHAIRMAN, said that he accepted the suggestion made by the representative of France.

The CHAIRMAN put to the vote the proposal that there should not be discrimination on the basis of nationality,

itinerary, purpose of visit, means of transportation, or flag of ship, with the reservation that for special reasons there might be mutually adopted lower fees or, in respect of a particular country, there might be a retaliatory higher fee.

Decision: The proposal was adopted.

3. Standardization of Visa Fee.

The CHAIRMAN said that the representative of France considered that the fee proposed in the United Kingdom resolution of 10 shillings was on the low side and had suggested that a fee of £1 should be charged.

Mr. JEFFES (United Kingdom) said that ever since the 1926 Conference his Government had adhered to the decision arrived at at that Conference in regard to the cost of visas and had charged 15 shillings, which was more or less equal to the original ten gold francs recommended by the Conference. The United Kingdom delegation had suggested the sum of 10 shillings in a spirit of moderation to show that the United Kingdom Government were prepared to bring down the charge for visas.

Mr. Jeffes agreed with the representative of France that a visa valid for several journeys during one year should be charged at the full rate, and that a transit visa should be charged for at the rate of one-tenth of the full fee.

Mr. PRZEWANSKI (Poland) suggested that the question of visa fees should be settled in the same way as the fees for passports had been settled, and that the wording of paragraph 4 on page 44 of document E/Conf/Pass/PC/2 should be used for the Meeting's recommendation. His Government would not be able to adopt a fixed fee as the value of the Polish zloty had not yet been stabilized.

Mr. WILKINSON (United States of America) said there was a proposal from the United States delegation before the Meeting that there should be a general declaration that the objective should be the universal abolition of visa fees. The visa fee was a definite deterrent to travel, particularly tourist travel, and visitors crossing a number of countries found the cost of journeys unnecessarily burdensome. It was in the interests of most countries to have exchange developed through tourist traffic, and the revenue coming in from visa fees in comparison with the exchange developed through tourist travel was unimportant. The United States delegation wished to put before the Meeting the general question of stating that the objective should be the universal abolition of non-immigrant visa fees.

Mr. PERIER (France), referring to the remarks of the representative of Poland regarding the difference between passport fees and visa fees, said he agreed that no common measure could be applied to both fees. He understood that the aim of the Meeting was to recommend the abolition of visa fees, and pointed out once more that certain countries were still applying very high visa fees.

Mr. STOPPANI (ICC) said that the International Chamber of Commerce was in favour of the United States proposal. It not only wished to see the abolition of visa fees, but also the total abolition of visas.

The CHAIRMAN put to the vote the proposition that the ultimate objective should be the total abolition of visa fees.

Decision: The proposal was adopted.

The CHAIRMAN, replying to Mr. PRZEWANSKI (Poland), who wished to reserve the decision of his Government, pointed out that nothing said or recommended in the Meeting in any way committed the Governments concerned.

Referring to the proposal by the representative of France that a fee of 20 shillings should be charged for a visa and the United Kingdom proposal that there should be a fee of 10 shillings, the Chairman said that those proposals indicated a desire to moderate fees. The representative of Poland had proposed that the fee for a visa should be fixed on a non-fiscal basis because of the difficulty of agreeing to a fixed sum while the exchange rate of the zloty remained unstable.

Mr. STOPPANI (International Chamber of Commerce) said that it was important that the fee should not be so excessive as to constitute a burden for people who had to travel extensively on business. He quite understood the difficulty in fixing a specified amount. There was in his view no relation between the fee charged for the passport and that charged for the visa; these were two different things. There was however sometimes a good deal of difference in the cost of the visa in the country itself and the cost when it was obtained abroad and had to be paid for at the official rate of exchange. For this reason, the proposition which approached the nearest to that of the International Chamber of Commerce was that of the French delegation, except that his organisation would like to see the sum slightly reduced.

The CHAIRMAN considered that the proposal made by the representative of Poland that the fee should be fixed in such a manner as to cover only the expenditure incurred, was the widest, and should therefore be put to the meeting first.

Mr. PRZEWANSKI (Poland) regretted that his proposal seemed to have been misunderstood. It related only to the form of the resolution and not to the substance. He had not mentioned any particular sum, and only wished the principle to be established that the fee for a visa should be the same as that for a passport. As no one had supported his proposal, he would like to withdraw it.

The CHAIRMAN said that as the Polish delegate had withdrawn his proposition, there were two specific propositions before the meeting. The French proposal that the sum should be twenty shillings, being the wider, the vote would be taken on that proposal first.

Mr. BAUDOY (France) explained that the sum of twenty shillings which had been proposed by the French delegation was a maximum, for a visa valid for one year and an unlimited number of journeys; the fee should be lower for a visa valid for a shorter period and a limited number of journeys. The cost of a transit visa should not exceed two shillings. The Conference of 1926 had fixed a maximum fee which had not been observed. His Government wished to be sure that the fee agreed upon would be observed. If it were they would be able to drop the principle of reciprocity for which they were obliged to press in present circumstances.

The CHAIRMAN replied that the meeting was dealing only with recommendations. There was no guarantee of the universal adoption of its recommendations.

Mr. BOER (Netherlands) supported very strongly what had been said by the representative of France, it being understood of course that the decisions of the meeting were not binding decisions, but only recommendations.

In reply to a question by the POLISH representative, Mr. JEFFES (United Kingdom) said that the sum of one pound sterling which had been mentioned was in paper money and not in gold.

Mr. PRZEWANSKI (Poland) went on to say that the 1926 Recommendation fixed the price of the visa in gold. He thought this a better principle, owing to the fluctuations in international exchanges.

The CHAIRMAN declared that he himself did not understand problems of international exchange. He asked if it would not be possible to adopt an international standard which would have stability and could be interpreted in the currency of the various countries.

Mr. THORLEY (United Kingdom) stated that in 1926 it had still been hoped that gold would return to its previous position as an international medium of exchange. This it had not done. No international transactions were now based on gold. He asked whether the Polish Government conducted any of its business in gold. The United Kingdom delegation would find it difficult to accede to any proposal that was based on gold, on the ground that it would be a complete fiction; the time was past when gold could be used.

In suggesting sterling, it was natural that the United Kingdom delegation should use its own currency, which was an international currency recognised by the International Monetary Fund. The fees in question would be payable according to the place where the visa was issued. Sterling was an international yardstick which could reasonably be applied.

In reply to another question by the POLISH representative, the speaker went on to say that the range of variation was governed by the agreement of the International Monetary Fund, which had set, in so far as international agreement could be arrived at, certain limits to the possible fluctuation of currencies.

The CHAIRMAN asked whether the limits so fixed were such that it would be reasonable for the meeting to suggest a sum approximating to a particular figure expressed in sterling, with the expectation that that would have a reasonably stable existence and would indicate specifically what the meeting had in mind.

Mr. THORLEY (United Kingdom) said that it was the expectation of his Government that sterling would remain stable. It was of course not possible to give any guarantee on this point, but the intention of his Government was to maintain the currency. Variations were only possible in consultation between his Government and the Monetary Fund. He considered that sterling was a suitable medium (and certainly preferable to the pre-war medium of gold) to use for the recommendations of the meeting, which, after all, were not binding.

Mr. PETERS (Australia) thought it desirable to bring the discussion to a head. His Government could speak

with a clear conscience, because the charge made in Australia was eight shillings. He suggested that a vote be taken on proposal to the effect that the minimum fee should be approximately ten shillings, and the maximum should not exceed twenty shillings.

The CHAIRMAN recalled that the delegate of France had said that a minimum of ten shillings was too low. Would he be able to support the Australian proposal?

Mr. BAUDOY (France) saw some danger in the proposal, because there was a good deal of difference between ten and twenty shillings, which left room for a return to the system of reciprocity which his Government were anxious to abandon. He thought it would be better to adopt a fixed tariff at a reasonable figure. It was always open to countries to charge less. He proposed the adoption of a sliding scale for visas according to duration, ranging from a minimum of two shillings for a transit visa to twenty shillings for the maximum duration.

The CHAIRMAN replied that the meeting was discussing a standard fee for a standard visa for an unlimited number of journeys within the period of its validity. The question of the fee for the transit visa would come up later, and it could be regulated in relation to the fee decided upon for the ordinary visa.

Mr. WILKINSON (United States of America) indicated that the policy of his Government was for the universal abolition of visa fees by means of reciprocal agreements. This had been achieved in the case of 37 countries. The Conferences of 1920 and 1926 had recommended a maximum of ten gold francs. Recommendations for specific amounts had been made during the discussion, but his Government considered them

inconsistent with the ultimate objective, and thus could not support them.

The CHAIRMAN said that the meeting was already agreed on the total abolition of visa fees, but until the World Conference met and its recommendations were ratified, an interim solution had to be found. He proposed the insertion of the word "approximately" in order to meet the difficulties which had been raised with regard to the precise significance in other currencies of the sum in question.

In reply to a question by the POLISH representative, the CHAIRMAN went on to say that the sum of twenty shillings was a maximum.

Mr. WILKINSON (United States of America) explained the position of his Government on the question, which was that when a fee was established, it tended to be maintained. That was one of the reasons for which the United States reserved its position on this matter.

The CHAIRMAN asked the Conference to express an opinion on the proposition that for ordinary visas the fee should be fixed at a sum not exceeding approximately twenty shillings.

Mr. SODERBLOM (Sweden) said he would abstain from voting on this proposal for the same reasons as those indicated by the United States.

The CHAIRMAN put the proposition to the vote. There were four votes in favour and four against.

Decision: This proposition was not carried.

The CHAIRMAN said that he was somewhat at a loss to know what was the view of the meeting.

He would put to the meeting the proposition of the United Kingdom delegation that the standard fee should be approximately ten shillings.

Mr. PRZEWANSKI (Poland) thought that the two proposals that were submitted were in conflict. One was to abolish the fee for the visa, the other was to fix the amount of a fee to be charged.

The CHAIRMAN replied that the proposition which had been adopted was that the objective was the universal abolition of fees; but the feeling of the meeting had been that that objective was not yet in sight, and that it was therefore desirable to arrive at some recommendation as an interim arrangement.

Mr. PRZEWANSKI (Poland) asked for an explanation with regard to the end that the meeting had in view. Was it to submit to the World Conference propositions which were contradictory or propositions on which the Conference could pronounce?

The CHAIRMAN asked whether it was the suggestion of the Polish delegate that as the recommendations of the meeting could not take effect until after the World Conference, it was useless to suggest any alternative for the interim period?

Mr. PRZEWANSKI (Poland) replied that that was what he had suggested.

The CHAIRMAN asked the meeting whether it was the general feeling that it would be unwise to attempt to fix any particular fee lest it should seem to be suggesting the future standardisation and retention of this fee?

Mr. WILKINSON (United States of America) replied that the Chairman had very accurately stated the view of the United States delegation.

Mr. PERIER (France) asked whether it would not clarify the situation and permit a majority to be reached if a sentence were added to the proposition as follows: "However, until this fee is abolished, it is desirable that the members of the United Nations reduce the fee to the lowest possible figure, say twenty shillings".

Mr. JEFFES (United Kingdom) thought that this question could be satisfactorily solved provided it were made clear that there were two stages. The ultimate recommendation was the complete abolition of visa fees, but in the meantime a maximum fee should be fixed for the present period.

Mr. WILKINSON (United States of America) disagreed with the United Kingdom proposal for the reasons previously stated. His Government wished to associate itself with the proposal made by the representative of France for the addition of an explanatory phrase.

Mr. CONTEMPRE (Belgium) thought that the explanation of the hesitation of most of the representatives to arrive at agreement with regard to the fee was that they felt that it might cause repercussions on the finances of their countries. He proposed the following formula: "Where fees are maintained, the maximum fee should be fixed by the World Conference."

The CHAIRMAN asked whether the meeting would agree to add to the United States proposal with regard to the total abolition of visa fees (E/CONF/PASS/PC/7 Item B.2.(b)2) "Failing total abolition it is recommended that the fee be

fixed as low as possible." The Drafting Committee might be able to agree on a formula in this sense when it met.

Mr. WILKINSON (United States of America) supported the Chairman's proposal, which was put to the vote and carried.

Decision: That the Drafting Committee be entrusted with the task of finding a formula in the sense of the Chairman's proposal.

4. Posting of Visa Fees. (E/CONF/PASS/PC/7 Item B.2.(b)1)

Mr. WILKINSON (United States of America) drew the Chairman's attention to the fact that there were two parts to the item with regard to non-discrimination. The second part, relating to the posting of visa fees, had not been discussed.

In reply to a question from the CHAIRMAN as to whether he saw no inconsistency between this sentence and the proposition which had just been carried, the speaker said that that proposition provided that fees would be charged for a time, and that where such fees still existed, it was in the interests of the travelling public that their amount should be published and conspicuously posted at the places where the visas were issued.

Mr. PRZEWANSKI (Poland) asked, on a point of order, which amendment was the farthest removed from the original proposition for the abolition of visa fees, the British proposal of twenty shillings, or the French proposal of fifteen shillings.

The CHAIRMAN replied that the proposal that the fee should be twenty shillings was farthest removed, but that proposal had been abandoned in favour of one that, pending abolition, the fee should be fixed as low as possible.

Mr. JEFFES (United Kingdom) said that the suggestion by the representative of the United States that the cost of visa fees be published and posted met with the entire support of the United Kingdom delegation. It was the practice of his Government to post a full table of consular and visa fees in every waiting room in offices where visas were applied for.

Mr. BAUDOY (France) asked the United States representative whether he meant that the normal tariff should be posted. In France, where reciprocity agreements existed, the document setting forth the details of these agreements ran into four typewritten pages. He regretted to have to state that the United States was one of the countries with which France had an agreement of this kind, because the fee charged by that Government was higher than the fee agreed upon in 1926. Would it meet the case if the main tariff were posted, but where reciprocity agreements existed they would have to be the object of special enquiry on the part of the applicant?

Mr. BOER (Netherlands) put a question to the representative of the United States as to whether, when he used the term visa, he included immigration visas. He understood that the United States immigration visa was not properly speaking a visa, but was a special document. Did he include this document in his suggestion?

Mr. WILKINSON (United States of America), in reply to the question put by the representative of the Netherlands, said that he was speaking of the regular visa for non-immigrant visitors. In reply to the question

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raised by the representative of France, as to what fees were to be posted, the reference was to the general tariff rather than to all of the complex charges worked out on a reciprocity basis.

The CHAIRMAN felt that he should add to what the United States representative had said that the question of immigrant travel was specifically outside the terms of reference of the meeting. He was not clear whether the proposal was that the fees which were to be posted were those which would be adopted in the future by the World Conference, or those that were on a reciprocal basis.

Mr. WILLINSON (United States of America) explained that the fees to be published were those usually posted by consular offices as to the general fees charged for the various services performed by such offices.

The CHAIRMAN said that it was proposed that the information which the applicant needed when he came to apply for a visa should be posted. This proposal was put to the vote and carried.

Decision: That visa fees should be published and conspicuously posted at places of issue.

The meeting rose at 12.30 p.m.