

# Applications to live in Canada plunge by 50pc

By JACQUELINE LEE

APPLICATIONS for immigration to Canada filed in Hongkong dropped by 50 per cent last year, but improved local processing of visa requests will see more people able to immigrate this year.

A record 26,647 Hongkong residents left for Canada in 1991 and the figure this year is expected to be 17 per cent higher.

But while the Canadian Commission received 18,672 visa applications in 1990, it only handled 9,428 last year.

The higher number of people leaving this year is a result of the Commission being able to halve processing time for applications, so now it will take less than two years after submission of visa requests before people are able head for their new homes.

Immigration experts said yesterday that the apparently contradictory figures

stemmed from more and more Hongkong people filing visa applications through overseas consulates to avoid the long queues the territory had suffered in the past. In fact, they said, the number of people leaving could be even higher.

The number of local people leaving for Canada last year was 18 per cent up on figures for 1990, but extra resources at the commission should see this increase further this year.

The consulate will have six new immigration officers from Ottawa and its premises will be expanded.

A spokesman for the commission, Mr Colin Robertson, said: "Our immigration target has been raised by 17 per cent and our production of visas for Hongkong immigrants could rise by as much as 17 per cent assuming a similar mix of applications processed as in 1991 and the six new staff arrive on time."

But Mr Robertson said there were a number of reasons which had led to a dramatic drop in the number of applications.

Mr Robertson, said: "It reflects a number of factors such as the buoyancy of the economy in Hongkong and the perception of the Canadian economy being in recession."

Despite the slump in applications, Mr Robertson expected growth in the number of visas issued this year.

"Don't be distracted by the figure of a 50 per cent drop because the pre-application questionnaires have gone up. There is still a healthy interest in Canada although there is now more confidence in Hongkong."

He admitted that some applicants, put off by the wait in Hongkong, had taken their applications overseas, probably accounting for 2,000 to 3,000 visas that would normally have been processed in the territory.

Applications from business immigrants and skilled workers for Canada — the most popular destination for Hongkong emigrants — dropped by two-thirds, while the assisted-relatives class shrank by a third.

However, the consulate received 17,937 pre-application questionnaires — designed to cut down on frivolous visa requests — which was 16 per cent more than last year.

Hongkong Institute of Personnel Management spokesman, Mr Patrick Maule, believed the British nationality scheme, which granted passports to 50,000 households without residency requirements, was holding up fresh applications to Canada.

"People thinking or planning to emigrate to Canada may wait to see the results of the nationality scheme first," Mr Maule said.

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