

54,000 beat passport deadline

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Tens of thousands of people flooded Immigration Department offices yesterday ahead of the midnight deadline to apply for British naturalisation.

A total of 54,178 applications were processed - 12,000 above the number for the whole of last year - during the final-day surge.

Housewife Yau Sui-chun, 61, was the last to register.

She squeezed into Immigration Tower on the dot of midnight, but Cheung Sing, 40, was not so lucky - officers closed the gate in his face.

Ms Yau said: "I have a lack of confidence in the future [Special Administrative Region] passport, so that's why my family was so keen for me to come today."

Director of Immigration Laurence Leung Ming-yin declared the operation a success.

He said: "We've received approximately 200,000 applications this month, it seems very satisfactory."

"Only a few were unfortunately not entertained because they were late."

"The law says we cannot accept applications after midnight."

"The next step is to interview every applicant. We have to deal with it in six months."

Some 14,000 rushed to Immigration Tower in the last three hours before the deadline.

The queue to become British Dependent Territories Citizens (BDTCs) snaked round Convention Plaza to Wan Chai Sports Ground, which was opened on Saturday to accommodate the crowds.

But the line moved at a brisk pace throughout the day. Applicants in the morning said they sped through in

three minutes. Those who arrived in the early evening waited 25 minutes to go through.

At peak periods yesterday officers were processing more than 3,000 forms an hour. A total of 130,134 applications have been received in the past week.

The BDTC expires on June 30, 1997, but holders can apply for a British National (Overseas) (BNO) passport, which is valid for 10 years and gives visa-free access to about 80 countries.

Only Britain and Singapore have agreed to give visa free access to the SAR pass-

ports, which will be issued after the handover.

But Preparatory Committee member Rita Fan Hsu Lai-tai denied the queues were a vote of no confidence in the SAR passport.

"It is just natural for people to apply for a passport that enables them to travel more easily, but this doesn't mean Hong Kong people have no confidence in the future SAR passport," she said.

But trainee manager John Leung, 24, said he joined the queue because of fears about the future.

"I'm getting one because the PRC [People's Republic

of China] Government is frightening. They want to abolish the Bill of Rights and they've kicked out [Preparatory Committee member] Frederick Fung - the only democrat.

"I also work in shipping so if I have a BNO I can go abroad much more freely. I won't have to apply for a visa for individual countries."

Import-exporter Mahesh Melwani, 24, was applying for naturalisation to ensure his future in Hong Kong. China has said it will not give SAR passports to non-ethnic Chinese.

Mr Melwani said: "We

want to stay in Hong Kong. It will also be good for business.

"The fact it means visa-free travel is a plus point."

On Saturday, there were ugly scenes when four men came to blows in a row over queue jumping.

But police said yesterday went smoothly, with no violence.

Last night, immigration spokesman Alvin Tam Ho-man said the processing time for BDTC passports was about half a year, after which people could apply for the BNO passport.

SOUTH CHINA MORNING POST
1 APR 1996