

1997 visa fear for passports

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Holders of the British National (Overseas) passport may need visas to visit foreign countries after July 1997, because the Government has not yet obtained China's approval to negotiate a visa-free agreement with any country.

Currently 81 countries allow BN(O) passport holders visa-free entry. Three of them - Poland, South Africa and Thailand - have arranged with the Hong Kong Government that BN(O) passport holders enjoy visa-free treatment.

Ten countries, including Italy, Belgium and Switzerland, allow the same treatment by virtue of formal visa abolition agreements with the United Kingdom. The other 68 countries are not bound by any agreement.

Yesterday, at the Legislative Council's constitutional affairs panel, the Secretary for Constitutional Affairs, Nicholas Ng, said all visa-free arrangements would lapse after July 1997.

"The countries give Hong Kong the [current] treatment because of Hong Kong's status as a British colony," he said. "Re-negotiations will be needed to extend the arrangements. But any bilateral agree-

ment between Hong Kong and a foreign country with effect beyond 1997 must be approved by the Chinese side.

"So far the issue has not been discussed in the Joint Liaison Group [JLG], so we cannot start negotiation."

Ng, giving a report on the progress of the JLG, said the Government had suggested twice to China, in August 1992 and June 1994, making visa-free agreements with foreign countries.

There is a similar problem over the special administrative region passports, he said.

"Because China has not decided on the definition of permanent residency, it is impossible to negotiate with other countries about visa exemption," Ng said.

He also said five countries had entered into extradition treaties with Hong Kong that would be effective beyond 1997, and 12 more were under negotiation.

Presently, 94 countries have extradition arrangements with Hong Kong.

Legislators voiced their fears that Hong Kong might become a haven for foreign criminals after 1997 if the process was not speeded up.

The panel also resolved to express concern over the lack of progress of the JLG.