

COVID-19: The Impact on Visas in the UAE



Following on from the World Health Organisation declaring Covid-19 as a pandemic, the UAE authorities have taken strict measures in order to minimise the spread of the virus and to maintain the health and wellbeing of its citizens and residents. These measures include the temporary suspension of all types of visas, as well as a restriction on UAE residents, barring their return into the UAE.

The DWF Employment team considers the impact of the recently implemented Covid-19 protective measures on visitors, residents and businesses.

New Visas

From Tuesday 17 March 2020, the UAE suspended the issuance of all visas, except for diplomatic passports holders. The suspension applies to tourist, visit, employment and mission visas. However, it should be noted that there has been some confusion as to whether the aforementioned suspension also applies to 'visas on arrival'. Accordingly, the UAE authorities swiftly issued further guidance confirming that these restrictions do in fact apply to visas on arrival.

Renewal of Visas

The visa suspension does not affect holders of valid residence visas who are already in the UAE. Such individuals will still be in a position to renew their UAE residency visas without any problems. Moreover, residents whose residence visa expires from 1 March 2020 onwards will be able to extend their residence visa for a period of 3 months without any additional fees.

Non-residents who have entered the country on a visa on arrival or visit visa can legally renew these types of visas without exiting the UAE. It should be noted however that any such renewal of the visit visa must be effected under the same sponsor.

Individuals with visas that will be expiring and who are unable to renew them will not be subjected to the usual daily fines due to the worldwide restrictions on flights and the closure of airports. However, we do advise those individuals to keep abreast of the latest developments, stay in communication with the authorities and follow updates in the media to avoid any potential violation of the applicable laws.

Change of Status

Under the current exceptional measures, employees already in the UAE will still be able to change jobs and switch from one sponsor to another in accordance with the same rules that applied before the visa suspension came into force.

The Impact of the Visa Suspension on Residents and Companies

Despite UAE residents' ability to renew and change their residence visas, under the current measures, families will not be able to hire domestic helpers, drivers or nannies from abroad. However, UAE residents will still be able to hire individuals who are already in the UAE and apply for the applicable change of status for them. Conversely, individuals willing to sponsor a family member who is currently outside of the UAE will have to wait until the current visa restrictions are lifted by the authorities.

With respect to companies, the current measures will impact the recruitment of individuals from abroad. In this regard, employers' must take into consideration the current circumstances before issuing any offer letters, and are advised to seek legal advice prior to taking any decisions regarding offer letters that have already been issued to prospective employees.

Entry Ban

Starting from Thursday 19 March 2020, the UAE imposed an entry ban that includes holders of valid UAE residence visas. Diplomats, citizens' first-degree relatives and domestic helpers escorting citizens are exempted from this ban.

Holders of residence visas who are unable to return to the UAE are advised to contact the UAE consulates in their respective host countries to facilitate their safe return.

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Contacts



Shiraz Sethi
Regional Managing Partner //
Co-Head of Employment
T +971 4 397 8565
E shiraz.sethi@dwf.law



Thenji Moyo
Director // Co-Head of Employment
T +971 4 397 8565
E thenji.moyo@dwf.law



Ali Al Assaad
Senior Associate // Employment
T +971 4 397 8565
E ali.alassaad@dwf.law