

Visa staff pressured in appeals decisions

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By Kerry-Anne Walsh, Political Correspondent
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A former member of the body responsible for reassessing rejected refugee applications has claimed he and colleagues were politically pressured over their decisions.

Bruce Haigh, a Refugee Review Tribunal member for five years from 1995 and a former diplomat, said there was no directive issued to members of the statutorily independent board, but members would be told if "the [Immigration] minister [Philip Ruddock] wasn't happy" about certain decisions.

Pressure was exerted through informal "chats" and meetings with the tribunal's senior member after meetings with Mr Ruddock, he said

"It is supposed to be an independent tribunal, but it is not," Mr Haigh said.

"People are appointed to the tribunal on \$90,000 plus cars and other perks, and if they want to have their term renewed, they end up agreeing with certain directions and influences."

He said that although he had no evidence of "palm-greasing" in return for visas, refugee places had become so tight that the system was open to corruption.

Mr Ruddock's use of his ministerial discretion to intervene in cases had become more powerful over the years, Mr Haigh said.

"What we saw was real and sustained pressure from the department and the minister; for instance, when we were looking at East Timorese refugees.

"There has been corruption in the department forever."

Both the Government and Opposition have been muddled in the past two weeks with claims and counterclaims about cash payments from international businessmen for visas and political purposes.

The Australian Federal Police is investigating an alleged \$220,000 payment by fugitive Filipino businessman Dante Tan to Karim Kistrwani, a prominent Sydney businessman and close friend of Mr Ruddock.

Opposition immigration spokeswoman Julia Gillard claimed the large payment was made to Mr Kistrwani to lobby Mr Ruddock to look favourably on Tan's immigration application.

Tan, wanted in the Philippines for corporate fraud, was granted Australian citizenship last year by Mr Ruddock within weeks of making a \$10,000 personal donation to the minister's election campaign fund.

Mr Kistrwani has vehemently denied receiving money from Tan.

Figures show Mr Ruddock has used his powers of intervention 1751 times since becoming Immigration Minister in 1996 - an average of 250 times a year, as much as three to one times more than his three predecessors.

Mr Ruddock could not be contacted for comment.