

After US tests, India to get first e-passport in June

India's first e-passport, which will make travel easy, is expected to be issued next month.

It will be issued to diplomats and officials first. Others may have to wait for about 10 months -- or even more.

If all goes well, the first e-passport will be issued around June 15 to President Pratibha Patil or Prime Minister Manmohan Singh -- or both.

The e-passport project is on a roll. A recent test conducted in a US government laboratory was so impressive that American officials remarked that they would need to study the Indian technology.

An eight-member official Indian delegation this month visited Washington carrying 25 test e-passports made in India.

The e-passport will have thicker front and back covers. The rear cover will have a small silicon chip, smaller than a postage stamp, as well as an embedded rectangular antenna.

The eight officials, drawn from the ministry of external affairs, the National Informatics Centre, the Indian Security Press (Nasik) and the Indian Institute of Technology-Kanpur, had an appointment to keep at the inter-operability test centre in the US Department of Homeland Security.

All the e-passports were scanned at multiple 'readers' to check if they could be read smoothly. Of the five companies involved in the project, the passports of two could not be read - the rest passed with flying colours.

'We found that while the American e-passport took a minimum of 10 seconds to be read, our passports took just four seconds,' said a beaming Indian official, speaking on the condition of anonymity.

According to a member of the team, the reason for the quicker response of the chip in Indian passports was the software developed by IIT-Kanpur and NIC.

'Unlike the US software which is proprietary and developed by vendors, ours is entirely made in-house. So there is no commercial aspect to it,' Rajat Moona, professor of computer science at IIT-Kanpur, told IANS.

And those extra seconds will make valuable difference when the immigration deals with long queues.

'The Americans were highly impressed. If it is two and a half times faster, it means the crowd can be cleared that much quicker,' the official said.

The International Civil Aviation Organisation has set down norms how e-passports may be 'read', but it does not prescribe how the information in the chip is to be 'written' or how its security features should be.

These guidelines were decided by a technical committee headed by the NIC director general and were made part of the tender notice.

The 'inter-operability' test is the critical technical evaluation for the bids. It was also the first time the e-passports were tested in a foreign country.

'We hope to issue the first e-passport around June 15, to the president or the prime minister,' the official said.

There are certain advanced security features incorporated in the Indian design.

For example, to prevent anybody from reading the passport from afar, other countries prescribe that the document should be carried in a metal jacket.

But the Indian e-passport cannot be read unless it comes into contact with the 'reading' machine.

'The Indian passport will have to be first skimmed so that a code is generated. That code then unlocks the chip for the information to be read on the chip,' said the official.

The memory space of the chip is 64 kilobytes, which will, in the first phase, only store the photograph of the holder. Eventually, when everyone gets the passport, it will include fingerprints too.

'It would be able to store records of the last 20-30 visits and movements through international borders,' said IIT's Moona.

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