Reducing immigration processing cost and time

Foreigners who hold Permanent Resident status can register for the ability to use the self-service immigration kiosks ('e'gates) when entering or exiting the Kingdom. The process involves recording of the user's biometric data to be associated with his or her foreign passport and appropriate Thai identification data.

Although a useful feature in theory, the actual process of registration remain difficult. Registration can only be done via immigration officials at Suvarnabhumi Airport and possibly at other airports (not even the immigration office at Chaeng Wattana can do this) and it can only be done when actually travelling in or out of the country, either before passing through immigration on the way in, or after passing through immigration on the way out. This fact is not mentioned beforehand when requesting information about the process - I learned it only after making a special trip to Suvarnabhumi one morning with the specific intention of registering for the service. I had prepared the form in advance, and although an Immigration officer came to the desk at the front of the "passengers only" zone, he was unable either to process my application or to escort me into the office which is beyond the airport's public area. Although it may possibly be a technical requirement to record the biometric data at a terminal which is physically connected to the system (hence the need to perform the function at Suvarnabhumi), that would not preclude such a terminal being set up in a publicly accessible area, i.e. somewhere on the "inbound" side of the airport's facilities.

Furthermore, the process of registration requires waiting for the correct Immigration officer who is able to handle the task. There may be an unpredictably long wait for that person – and most people typically do not arrive at the airport with an extra hour (or more) to wait at Immigration for a specific officer to be available. I have tried twice now when actually travelling and still not achieved the right timing. If the registration is attempted when returning to Thailand, especially after a long flight, a traveller does not want to then spend an indeterminate amount of time sitting at the airport waiting for the necessary officer before passing through the Immigration counter (while one's luggage spins around outside on the carousel, perhaps to be thrown into uncollected baggage, or worse, taken home by someone else).

Lastly, even if one is able to register, there looms the larger question of whether using the self-service immigration kiosks might create an entirely new set of problems arising from the lack of physical endorsements in the passport and resident immigration book. I can easily imagine that when renewing a work permit, for example, the Employment Department at the Ministry of Labour would not be able to access electronically stored Immigration data. Although it should not be necessary, of course, is there a simple process if one uses the kiosks, for later obtaining official, printed documentation (i.e. a record of one's electronic entry and exit history, re-entry permit usage, etc.) to prove to other government agencies that one is in the country legally?

It would seem that with the objective of reducing cost and time (and thus also reducing delays to other passengers) this process should be made as simple as possible and, in addition to Thai citizens, made available to all foreigners who have valid residency, or work permit, or other longer term visa status where details are already captured in the immigration system.

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