

Hungary relaxes policy on illegal border crossings

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Susan Viets in Budapest

HUNGARIAN government officials announced yesterday that they will be taking a soft line with first time East German border offenders.

While officials at the Ministry of Interior say they do not want Hungary to become a transit route for East European emigres to the West, they have announced a more relaxed policy on the practice of stamping the passports of people trying to cross the border illegally.

Mr Karoly Nagy, head of the ministry's refugee department, said those caught for the first time would now receive a police warning. "Repeated offenders will continue to have their passports stamped," he said.

Hungary is caught in a web of conflicting legislation. Now a signatory of the Geneva Convention which came into effect in June, it is committed to safeguarding human rights.

But in 1969, the Hungarian Government signed an accord

with East Germany, obliging it to pass on information about border offenders. East Germans in Hungary live in fear of the border stamp, which can be entered in their passports by Hungarian border officials.

Although no forcible action is taken by Hungarian authorities, this stamp says East Germans must leave the country within 24 hours and are not allowed to return to Hungary for a year.

Many East Germans now in Budapest believe that if they return home with the stamp in their passports, they will lose their jobs, be unable to complete their studies and, in many cases, end up in jail.

Mr Istvan Csurka, a leader of one of Hungary's larger opposition groups, the Democratic Forum, said: "There is pressure on Hungary from two sides, the GDR and the FRG. We understand that the government faces an extremely difficult situation, but the theoretical stand which we take is that border stamps should be done away with." The government's

decision yesterday was clearly a compromise.

This year the government has already initiated criminal proceedings against 453 East Germans caught trying to cross the Austro-Hungarian border illegally.

Officials at the Ministry of the Interior said an amendment has been proposed for the criminal code which would downgrade an illegal border crossing from a crime to a misdemeanour. If this amendment is ratified by parliament, it will take effect in January 1990.

For now, Hungary has told East Germans they can have one safe shot at crossing the border. Physical obstacles like alarms and fences have been removed along much of the border.

Guards have been instructed only to shoot in self-defence. However, the border, remains heavily guarded.

East Germans are still queuing to take refuge in the West German embassy in Budapest. The West Germans have said the embassy will not be closed.

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