

PM refused to sign MoU on illegal Indians as UK didn't ease visas

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London: Prime Minister Narendra Modi refused to sign a memorandum of understanding (MoU) with Britain agreeing to facilitate the return of thousands of illegal Indian immigrants because the UK is not offering Indians easier access to its visas, it has been revealed.

Sources at the Indian high commission in London

told TOI that the bilateral agreement on the return of illegal Indians, which junior home minister Kiren Rijiju had pencilled in January, was not signed in April when

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Modi visited London because India "did not see any progress on the British side of the agreement".

The deal was meant to ha-

ve been the centrepiece bilateral agreement signed during Modi's visit. British Prime Minister Theresa May had told Modi in India in November 2017 that "the UK would consider further improvements to its visa offer if, at the same time, we can step up the speed and volume of returns of Indians with no right to remain in the UK".

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'Visas will be bargaining chip for post-Brexit FTA'

On Wednesday a home office spokesperson said, "The MoU initiated by minister of immigration Caroline Nokes and Indian minister of state for home affairs Kiren Rijju on 11 January... paves the way for a quicker and more efficient process for documenting and returning Indian nationals who are in the UK illegally."

A senior Indian high commission official told TOI: "When May went to India she said progress on returns would help progress on UK visas for Indians, but we are not seeing that. We are seeing the denial of spousal visas and cancelling visas on small pretexts and a hostile environment. We need to see some easing of migration, especially of short-term visas such as for

Indians students and those coming to work for companies."

"We want a better visa system. If they are offering it to the Chinese, why not to Indians?" he said, referring to the two-year multiple-entry visit visa which Britain offers Chinese nationals. Access to visas is expected to be a key bargaining chip when the UK negotiates a free trade agreement with India after Brexit.

Another reason for not signing the pact was that the timelines in the MoU were not realistic for getting confirmation of people's identities, the official said. The proposed timelines were that the Indian authorities would have 70 days to verify a suspected illegal Indian in the UK without ID and 15 days to confirm the identity of someone with ID.