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Syrian Asylum Seeker Waiting in Moscow Airport Fined

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A Syrian mother of four who has been staying in Sheremetyevo Airport's transit zone along with her family while they sought political asylum in Russia has been fined 5,000 rubles ($77) for crossing into the country illegally, the Kommersant newspaper reported Friday.

Gulistan Shaho Issa, her partner and children arrived at the airport on Sep. 10 on a flight from Iraq, and approached customs officials requesting asylum. According to Kommersant, their passports aroused the suspicion of immigration officers, and were later declared by unidentified experts to be counterfeit — an allegation confirmed by the Syrian Embassy.

A spokeswoman for the Russian Foreign Ministry, Maria Zakharova, was quoted as saying that the sentence was not politically motivated.

The Khimki city court in the Moscow region dismissed on Thursday a request by Shaho Issa's lawyer Roza Magomedova that her client be freed from criminal responsibility. The prosecution initially demanded a fine of 30,000 rubles ($460), which was reduced "due to

mitigating circumstances" — the lack of previous convictions and the fact that the defendant was accompanied by four underage children.

The head of the Civic Assistance Committee, a Russian NGO offering legal, medical and social assistance for refugees and their families, said the ruling contravened the 1951 United Nations Refugee Convention, the key legal document in defining who should be granted refugee status.

Svetlana Gannushkina said that the document prohibited states from charging refugees arriving on their territory directly from areas where their life or freedom was in danger with illegal entry or illegal stay, Kommersant wrote.

“The judge did not have the professional courage to acquit [the defendant],” she was reported as saying. “By imposing a fine, they are effectively saying 'I'm sorry, but there's nothing else I can do.'”

According to Federal Migration Service statistics, none of the 174 Syrian citizens who have sought refugee status in Russia since June 30, 2015 have seen their requests granted, Kommersant reported. A further 514 were reported to have applied for temporary asylum; of those, 333 were successful, the paper said.

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