



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Statement of Chairman Bennie G. Thompson

“Implementing the 9/11 Act Mandates for Enhancing the Visa Waiver Program”

July 16, 2008 (Washington) – Today, Committee on Homeland Security Chairman Bennie G. Thompson (D-MS) delivered the following prepared remarks for the Border, Maritime, and Global Counterterrorism Subcommittee hearing entitled “Implementing the 9/11 Act Mandates for Enhancing the Visa Waiver Program”:

“In just a few short weeks, we will mark the one-year anniversary of the Implementing Recommendations of the 9/11 Commission Act.

As a principal author of the Act, I am pleased to participate in this hearing today, examining a critical part of the law aimed at strengthening the Visa Waiver Program.

Few doubt the significance of the Visa Waiver Program to our country.

Roughly 15 million travelers a year visit the U.S. through the VWP, contributing millions of dollars to our economy.

But as so-called shoe bomber Richard Reid and a handful of other Visa Waiver Program participants have shown us, the program’s security vulnerabilities can and will be exploited.

In the 9/11 Act, we required the Department to modernize the Visa Waiver Program by addressing today’s terrorist threats with 21st century tools.

One of these new tools is an electronic system for travel authorization (ESTA) that would require DHS to vet travelers’ information against our watch lists, before they board the plane.

This pre-screening system will be a dramatic improvement over the status quo.

While I have questions about the details of ESTA implementation, I am encouraged by DHS’s apparent commitment to completing this new system.

The other main security enhancement required under the Act is not so new: deployment of a biometric exit system at airports that can confirm the departure of foreign nationals.

Congress has been asking for an entry and exit control system like US-VISIT for over ten years, and it is past time DHS delivered.

Unfortunately, the Department’s recent proposed rule for the US-VISIT air exit system would shift an inherent federal screening function to the private sector.

Under the proposal, air carriers would be required to collect, store, and transmit fingerprints from departing foreign nationals, while safeguarding travelers’ privacy.

Furthermore, the carriers would have to pay for the creation and maintenance of the system.

Immigration enforcement and border security have always been federal responsibilities. So, I am puzzled about why the Department has decided not to rely on its own expertise to carry out these vital homeland security missions.

As you prepare the final rule, I encourage the Department to give serious consideration to the comments that Chairwoman Sanchez and I submitted.

In our comments, we put forth a DHS-driven, biometric collection alternative that could be seamlessly integrated into the passenger travel process.

Our proposal would also help alleviate a number of passenger privacy concerns.

Vital to our proposal – and any successful solution – is a partnership between the government and the travel industry.

From what I have learned, however, there has been a serious breakdown in communication between DHS and the airlines and airports.

This is unacceptable.

DHS must engage stakeholders, and all parties must work to restore a partnership, in the interest of America's security.

The 9/11 Commission made clear that “completing a biometrics-based entry-exit system is an essential investment in our national security.”

A year from now, when we mark the second anniversary of the 9/11 Act, I expect to be here talking about the successful implementation of ESTA and US-VISIT, and a more secure Visa Waiver Program.

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