



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Statement of Chairman Bennie G. Thompson

Visa Security and Passenger Pre-Screening Efforts in the Wake of Flight 253

March 11, 2010 (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 *Visa Security and Passenger Pre-Screening Efforts in the Wake of Flight 253*:

“In January, the Committee on Homeland Security held a hearing to examine the circumstances surrounding the attempted bombing of Northwest Flight 253 on Christmas Day.

From our examination of the chain of events leading up to the incident, it is clear there were several failures that allowed the alleged perpetrator to board the U.S.-bound flight.

I am pleased that today’s hearing will build on what we have learned by focusing on what we are doing, both now and over the long term, to eliminate the security gaps revealed by Flight 253.

As I stated earlier this year, we will not eradicate all terrorist threats overnight nor with a single technology.

Instead, we must develop a layered security approach that pushes borders out and begins far in advance of a passenger boarding a U.S.-bound flight.

With respect to the Department of Homeland Security, that will require a number of initiatives, including enhancing ICE’s Visa Security Program (VSP) and strengthening CBP’s passenger pre-screening activities.

In the aftermath of the September 11 attacks, Congress recognized the importance of securing the visa process and required it to be used as a counterterrorism tool.

Mandating the Visa Security Program was one of these efforts.

By deploying experienced ICE agents at overseas posts, the program attempts to identify potential threats before they reach our borders. Despite the legislative mandate to deploy Visa Security Units to high-risk posts, VSP expansion has been slow.

The current process can be cumbersome, and there appears to be some resistance to expanding the program.

I was troubled by the State Department’s denial last month of ICE’s application for a new VSP unit at a very strategic post – even in the wake of Flight 253.

At the same time, it is DHS’ responsibility to ensure that applications are submitted in a timely way and that it makes the most of the positions granted. In short, improved

coordination and cooperation between DHS and the State Department are essential to the success of the program.

With respect to passenger pre-screening efforts, CBP has recently strengthened some of their processes to ensure greater scrutiny of certain passengers prior to departure, rather than waiting until they arrive at U.S. Airports.

I want to hear more about those enhancements and what else we can do without unduly delaying legitimate travelers.

Those who would do us harm do not stick to the status quo, and we cannot either.”

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