Security scan

Gazette photos by CHRIS DORST

West Virginia Adjutant General Allen E. Tackett gets his iris scanned before gaining access to his office suite at the West Virginia National Guard headquarters building in Charleston.

Guard testing biometric ID gear

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The iris-scanning identification technology is produced through the U.S. Department of Defense's Biometrics Fusion Center in Clarksburg.

Biometric identification gear developed in West Virginia is being used at the West Virginia National Guard's headquarters buildings, as well as 10 field locations in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Iris-scanning identification technology produced through the U.S. Department of Defense's Biometrics Fusion Center in Clarksburg is being used to control access to key offices in the Guard's headquarters building.

Across Coonskin Drive, fingerprint-scanning gear is being used to control access to the National Guard's Operations Center.

"We're using their inventions and creations and testing them out," said Army Maj. Gen. Allen E. Tackett, the state's adjutant general, whose office suite access is controlled by an iris-scanning device.

"This allows the [biometrics center] to test the reliability and durability of their equipment, while we get the benefit of faster and more secure access control," said Lt. Col. Jim Hoyer, the West Virginia National Guard's Homeland Security liaison.

While both the iris- and fingerprint-centered biometric devices at the Coonskin Drive headquarters are being used on a trial basis, 10 portable, containerized biometric identification units developed through the BFC and manufactured in Morgantown are being used in the field in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The Biometric Identification System for Access (BISA) modules were reportedly produced in response to the bombing of an American dining hall in Mosul, Iraq, in December 2004.

"BISA was integrated here in West Virginia under an extremely tight time constraint," said David M. Lohman, deputy director of the Biometrics Fusion Center. "Azimuth Corporation of Morgantown produced the first prototype within a month. Within another month, 10 of them were in the field and in use."

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Nine of the 10 BISA units were delivered to the Persian Gulf last August by C-130s from Charleston's 130th Airlift Wing. The biometric units are used primarily to screen foreign personnel seeking to enter or work at American military bases.

"The BISAs have already been successful in interdicting unauthorized personnel" attempting to gain access to the bases, Lohman said.

Other biometric gear developed by the BFC is being used by the North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD), and the Department of Defense's U.S. Northern Command, which provides command and control functions for homeland defense.

The U.S. Air Force is interested in using biometrics to control all access points at one demonstration base, to not only improve security, but to keep tabs on the location of base personnel.

"One of the lessons we learned from the 9/11 attack on the Pentagon was that you don't want to be in the position where you don't really know who's in a building at the time of an attack," said Lohman.

"In the next decade, I think we'll see this kind of equipment at all critical access points on military bases across the nation," Lohman said, after watching Tackett demonstrate the use of the iris scanner at the entrance to his office suite.

Specially trained West Virginia National Guard Civil Support units are among military units tasked with responding to an attack or natural disaster in Washington, D.C. "They will be biometrically scanned so that they will have rapid access to Washington" in such an event, Hoyer said.

Military officials are considering using biometric gear to scan and track evacuees leaving the nation's capital following an emergency and arriving at shelter areas. "We want to make sure no one gets lost, and make sure that everyone is getting the services they need," Hoyer said.

Lohman said biometrics technology is being developed to positively identify people not only by their irises and fingerprints. "People are looking at voice authentication, facial recognition, ears, even a person's gait," he said.

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A biometric finger scanner controls access to the West Virginia National Guard's Operations Center.