

18 August 2004

September, October Bring Changes in U.S. Border Procedures Homeland Security, State Department brief on new requirements

U.S. government officials reached out to the international traveling public August 17, issuing an advisory about forthcoming changes in U.S. border procedures.

Briefing reporters at Washington's Foreign Press Center, Undersecretary of Homeland Security Asa Hutchinson said visitors from 27 countries who are allowed to enter the United States without first obtaining a visa will be required to enroll in the US-VISIT program when entering the country from September 30. That means they will be digitally photographed and their index fingers will be scanned upon entry to the United States.

US-VISIT was implemented in early 2004. Visitors from other nations were the first enrollees and Hutchinson said the program has been working well. US-VISIT procedures add about 15 seconds to the entry process.

"Now we've had over seven months of experience with that system and there's an understanding in the international community that it is convenient, it adds to security, and it does not delay the international traveler to the United States," Hutchinson said.

Another upcoming change in procedure comes on October 26, 2004, when visitors from the visa waiver countries will need to present a machine-readable passport to enter the country without a visa. This change also requires children to carry an individual passport, rather than being included on a parent's passport, as some countries currently allow.

Explaining these changes, the State Department's Deputy Assistant Secretary for Consular Affairs Janice Jacobs said officials are working to ensure that these steps do not interrupt travel for legitimate visitors to the United States.

"We've also engaged, I think, in a fairly robust public outreach program in all of the countries involved to try to get the word out on what the different requirements are," Jacobs said.

One further change in border procedures comes in October 2005 when visa waiver nations must issue travelers passports with biometric identifiers if they are to enter the United States without a visa.

Jacobs said the United States recognizes the great technological and logistical challenges this requirement entails. "We do know that some countries are not going to be able to meet that deadline and we are going to continue our discussions with them and offer whatever assistance we can provide to make sure that countries work as hard as they can to meet the new deadline."

The State Department has discussions under way with various countries, Jacobs said, responding to concerns about the recent changes in U.S. visa procedures. "We're happy to engage in those discussions with anyone who approaches us to explain all of the changes that have taken place in visa processing after 9/11 and to discuss any other concerns that you might have."

Further information about documentation requirements for travel to the United States is available at http://travel.state.gov/visa/tempvisitors_novisa_waiver.html

Following is the transcript of the briefing:

(begin transcript)

U.S. Biometric Requirements and Other Issues Affecting Visitors from Visa Waiver Countries

Asa Hutchinson, Under Secretary of Homeland Security for Border and Transportation Security;
Janice Jacobs, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Consular Affairs

Foreign Press Center Briefing

Washington, DC

August 17, 2004

MR. DENIG: Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. Welcome to the Washington Foreign Press Center. Welcome, also, to journalists assembled in our New York Foreign Press Center.

This afternoon, we're having another one in our series of briefings on visa and visitor issues. Today's topic is "U.S. Biometric Requirements and Other Issues Affecting Visitors from Visa Waiver Countries." And here to brief us are two experts: first, Under Secretary of Homeland Security for Border and Transportation Security, Asa Hutchinson; and secondly, we have Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Consular Affairs for Visa Services, Janice Jacobs.

Each one of our briefers will have an opening statement to make, and after that, will be very happy to take your questions. Secretary Hutchinson.

UNDER SECRETARY HUTCHINSON: Thank you. And it is good to be back at the Foreign Press Center. I think I was here last December, and it's good to come back and give an additional report.

I'm pleased to be joined this afternoon by Janice Jacobs, Deputy Assistant Secretary at the Department of State. They've been a great partner with the Department of Homeland Security and our issues relating to security and foreign travel to the United States.

The first five months of this year, the visa applications increased 12 percent, compared to the previous five months of last year, and visa issuance has increased 16 percent. This is good news, in my judgment, for the United States and our international visitors. I think we also have reflected an increase in student visas. We've had an increase in international tourism to the United States, [it] has been up somewhat, and we are very grateful for that.

I believe that there are three factors that contribute to this increase. First of all, the continued message that we've tried to deliver, that America continues to be a welcoming nation. We welcome our international visitors, whether they be students, whether they be business travelers or tourists.

Secondly, we have worked very hard to improve our visa issuance program, and that is in cooperation with the Department of State. After 9/11, of course, we enhanced security, and our systems and our processes are catching up so that we can also facilitate for travel. There is more work to be done, but I think that has contributed to the increase.

Thirdly, there's a greater awareness and understanding in the international community of the U.S.-VISIT system that was implemented last January, a system that, as you all recall, last December, when we met here, people were concerned about. It was new, it was unknown. We tried to explain it, tried to give assurance on it, and the only thing that really gives great assurance and confidence is the experience with that system. Now we've had over seven months of experience with that system and there's an understanding in the international community that it is

convenient, it adds to security, and it does not delay the international traveler to the United States.

Since January 5, we have processed over six million international visitors with the biometric check, the enrollment in U.S.-VISIT, and six million travelers have experienced the convenience of the U.S.-VISIT system, the added security of it. And during that time, while we have welcomed the overwhelming majority of those travelers, we have detected over 600 individuals that were coming in unlawfully to the United States that we detected through that biometric check.

And then I want to move to a point of emphasis to our international visitors under U.S.-VISIT. On September 30 of this year, which is a deadline that is fast approaching, the Visa Waiver countries will be enrolled and subject to enrollment in the U.S.-VISIT system. That will make it a comprehensive system. When we first implemented this on January 5, it was for visaed travelers and many questions were asked about "why are you exempting others, it's not a complete system, it has security gaps in it." And at that time, we indicated that it is a phased-in program, visa travelers first, and then we move to the Visa Waiver travelers.

We're fulfilling that objective, really, sooner than expected by the approaching September 30 deadline, and on that date we'll add Visa Waiver travelers from the 27 countries that are part of the Visa Waiver Program in the United States to U.S.-VISIT. This will mean that there will be 13.5 million visitors that will be added to the program; 13.5 million visitors each year travel as Visa Waiver country travelers and they will be added to the program, and the Visa Waiver traveler enrollments will account for 46 percent of all arrivals to the United States through our Ports of Entry.

And so it is a significant change. We wanted to remind the Visa Waiver countries of the fact of this enrollment on September 30, and we believe, again, that we will be prepared to meet that challenge where it will facilitate travel and build a foundation for our international guests as they come to the United States in a secure fashion.

With that, I'll be happy to turn this over to Janice.

MS. JACOBS: Thank you, Asa, and good afternoon to everybody. It's also a pleasure for me to be here this afternoon to be able to talk to you about some of the different requirements for Visa Waiver travelers, some of the deadlines that have been set by law that are coming up this year and then next year.

But let me first say that our overarching goal is to have a secure, predictable and prompt border security process. This is what we work towards every single day when we are processing visas, visas overseas, or when inspectors are admitting people into the U.S. at our Ports of Entry, and it's something that we work very, very closely with every day with the Department of Homeland Security. We've established a very strong partnership and I think that the system that we have set up after September 11th, 2001, is working very well.

What we're trying to do is to take steps to make sure that travel to the U.S. by legitimate travelers is not interrupted and to include Visa Waiver travelers. And so we have been talking to the various governments. We've had our embassies overseas very actively reaching out to foreign ministries to discuss these requirements and these deadlines.

We've also engaged, I think, in a fairly robust public outreach program, in all of the countries involved, to try to get the word out on what the different requirements are. And I'd like to talk about two of those requirements, two of the deadlines that are coming up, one fairly quickly, and the other now in about a year from now.

The first is by October 26th, 2004, this year, Visa Waiver travelers coming into the United States must enter on a machine-readable passport. You may know that the law that set this deadline

originally had October 1st of 2003 as the deadline. The Secretary of State extended that deadline last year for another year, to occur on October 26th of this year.

And so, as of that date, every visa-less traveler coming in from a Visa Waiver country should plan on entering the United States with a machine-readable passport, and that includes children. I know that some of the governments still issue family passports where children are included with one or both of the parents, and it's very important for me to remind you today that everyone -- including children -- must have their own passport to come in on a machine-readable passport.

Now, when I say machine-readable passport, how many of you know what that is, what that means? I have a sample here that I can show you. It's right up here. And, basically, what we're talking about, these lines of code that you see -- this is an American passport that I'm using as an example, and you'll see at the bottom -- you may not be able to see it real well from the back -- but there are lines down at the bottom that have the name, date of birth and other data about the traveler. This is what is actually swiped through a machine at the Port of Entry and read by the inspector and this is what we're talking about when we say machine-readable passport.

In our discussions with the various Visa Waiver countries, we have heard that most of the countries have, in fact, produced machine-readable passports and given these to the traveling public. I think that some countries may still have a little bit of work to do, but I think, in general, this is not going to be a problem. But it is very important for you to realize that that will be in effect on October 26th of this year.

The other deadline I want to talk to you about a little bit is the deadline for Visa Waiver countries to begin producing biometrically enhanced passports. The original deadline for this was set for October 26th of this year and I'm happy to say that the President signed a law this month that extends that deadline for a year, until October 26th of 2005.

And so, what does that mean? That means that passports issued on or after October 26th, 2005, must be biometrically enhanced in order for the traveler to be able to enter under the Visa Waiver Program. In other words, people traveling with passports that have been issued after that date, October 26th, 2005, must enter on a biometrically enhanced passport or they will have to get a visa from the closest U.S. embassy.

And so we have heard again from many of the governments that they have plans in place to begin producing these passports. We are going to be working very, very closely with all of the Visa Waiver governments and countries in trying to meet this new deadline.

There have been a number of technological issues. It is the International Civil Aviation Organization, ICAO, that actually has set the standard that is going to be used in these biometric passports. The standard they're going to use is facial recognition. But because the standard was fairly late in being set, many of the countries have had to do a lot of catch-up in order to actually get their programs in place.

There have been some other sort of technological issues that countries have had to deal with, but I think most of those issues now have been decided in the various ICAO working groups. And so, most countries now are going to be able to move ahead with their plans.

We do know that some countries are not going to be able to meet that deadline and we are going to continue our discussions with them and offer whatever assistance we can provide to make sure that countries work as hard as they can to meet the new deadline.

So those, basically, I think, are the two major changes, in addition to enrolling the Visa Waiver nationals in U.S.-VISIT, which Under Secretary Hutchinson just described to you, and that will begin on September 30th.

So I think we will stop there and open it up for questions.

MR. DENIG: Let me remind you to please use the microphone, introduce yourself and your news organization.

Okay. Let's go to the gentleman in the middle here with the blue shirt.

QUESTION: Daniel Jahn, AFP, French News Agency.

When will the United States start to turn out biometric passports? And what kind of biometric characteristics are going to be in the passport?

MS. JACOBS: Well, we actually don't have a legal requirement to produce the biometric passports. However, we are going to do that and we expect to be in full production by the end of 2005. We are going to be using the same standard that was set by the ICAO, facial recognition.

MR. DENIG: Next question. Yes, we'll go to the lady up front here, please.

QUESTION: Suzanne Gamboa, with AP World Services. Do you know which countries will not be able to meet the deadlines that you discussed? And I know that the Administration had asked for, actually, two years to extend the deadline. Can we -- can all of these countries realistically make this one-year deadline?

UNDER SECRETARY HUTCHINSON: Let me take on the deadline part and I'll ask Janice to comment on where the other countries stand in this. She probably has more information.

But in regard to the two-year request that the President submitted to Congress, Congress looked at that and believed that one year was sufficient and they considered that a hard deadline that was being given.

I think one thing did happen in the interim, and that was that we expected a little bit longer before the international standards for biometrics would be clarified, which was a necessity for the countries to move toward production of the biometrically enhanced passports. ICAO and the international standard was set and sufficiently defined and so that did allow us to have that decision point and move forward more quickly. And so we believe that deadline that Congress gave is something that we need to work toward accomplishing.

Janice.

MS. JACOBS: Many of the countries, a few months ago when we canvassed the different governments, gave us their schedules for producing these new types of passports. We're going to have to go back to them now, I think, and look at the new deadline, look at where they are, so that we have a better idea about how many will or will not be able to meet the new deadline.

MR. DENIG: All right, let's go to the gentleman in the middle, please.

QUESTION: Norbert Rief from the Austrian newspaper Die Presse. You said that, starting with October 2004, children need a passport. It is a specific age, older than two years, or is it no matter what age, every kids needs a passport?

MS. JACOBS: Yeah, no matter what age, every person entering under the VWP will need a machine-readable passport.

MR. DENIG: Okay. Let's go to the gentleman in the green shirt.

QUESTION: Yes, Tim Harper from the Toronto Star.

Under U.S.-VISIT, you've gone from visa countries to Visa Waiver countries. Is it perhaps inevitable that the next step is that Canadian visitors would be covered by U.S.-VISIT?

UNDER SECRETARY HUTCHINSON: I don't know that anything is inevitable when it comes to public policy and politics, but certainly we've had a unique relationship with Canada, our border arrangements, the fact that it was such an open border; 9/11 did change a number of those requirements, not the friendliness or the level of cooperation, but the fact that we do have to add security to the requirements for our border relationships.

In reference to U.S.-VISIT, Canadian citizens are exempt from U.S.-VISIT under U.S. law and policy. As to whether that is ultimately changed down the road, I think, remains to be seen. Clearly, there is a security gap with the comprehensiveness of U.S.-VISIT, not just in that regard, but also U.S. citizens that travel in the western hemisphere, with driver's license or proof of U.S. citizenship.

So the 9/11 Commission has, you know, actually caused us to focus on those type of travel documents. And so I think that, both from a comprehensive standpoint of U.S.-VISIT, as well as the recommendations of the U.S.-VISIT, that, you know, over the long term, all of those travel documents will have to be looked at. But Canadian citizens are exempt from it. That is the current status. There is not any intention to change that at the current time.

MR. DENIG: All right. Let's take the lady in white here, please.

QUESTION: Charlene Porter with the Washington File. When the extension was being considered on the Hill during those hearings, when both of your agencies were all making the case that biometrics need to be delayed, one was hearing a certain degree of grumbling from members of Congress about the wisdom of the Visa Waiver Program overall, beyond just what was on the table with this extension. What do you think that may portend? Do you see that there is any kind of swell on the Hill to review the entire program? Can you comment on that?

UNDER SECRETARY HUTCHINSON: Congress is very clear on the necessity of appropriate security measures in the Visa Waiver Program. This Administration is as well, and we are charged with the responsibility of conducting the review of the Visa Waiver countries. Statutorily, there are various requirements to participate in that program.

Looking at the integrity of the travel documents, the visa denial rate, and those factors have to be evaluated. We, in conjunction with the other departments, including the State Department, are going through the review of the Visa Waiver countries and their continued participation in that program and measuring how they stack up against those statutory requirements. We view that review very seriously from a security standpoint, and that's the process that we will go through.

And with that, though, I think, certainly, the relationship of the Visa Waiver countries has been very important in the travel, but with the enrollment in U.S.-VISIT we do add to that security capability and I think that gives us more confidence in the security of those travelers.

Janice, I didn't mean to cut you off.

MR. DENIG: Okay, let's go to the gentleman in the way back in the white shirt.

QUESTION: Miroslav Konvalina, Czech Radio. Beginning of the summer, there was the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic speaking about visa and there was understood that there would be inter-governmental commission looking for the process to ease the process to find the ways how to issue visa for Czechs easily in Prague. And so is this commission already working and what are the results?

MS. JACOBS: We've been approached, actually, by a number of governments over the past few months, especially new EU members and others interested both in how visas are processed within the country and then also about participation in the Visa Waiver Program.

We have a number of bilateral discussions with different countries on visa issues and I know that we have been talking to the Czechs, we've been talking to other countries as well, about concerns that people have about visa processing. And we're happy to engage in those discussions with anyone who approaches us, you know, to explain all of the changes that have taken place in visa processing after 9/11 and to discuss any other concerns that you might have.

And so, yes, I think those talks have taken place. I think they're ongoing, just as they are with a number of countries. As I mentioned, we have been asked by several other countries about membership in the Visa Waiver Program, and, as Under Secretary Hutchinson just pointed out, the program itself is under a lot of scrutiny after 9/11; there's no question about that. And, certainly, I think we want to get through the reviews of the countries that are currently in the program and maybe look at the overall program before any decisions are made about adding new countries.

MR. DENIG: Okay, let's go to the gentleman in the blue coat.

QUESTION: Just a question. Matt McClure from Canadian Television. I just want to -- I'm a little bit -- pardon me if these questions seem ignorant, but I just want to clarify something.

With respect to Canadian citizens who currently can travel to the U.S. with a birth certificate alone, nothing changes with these deadlines this fall? And second of all, I just want to clarify that, with respect to Canadian residents, landed immigrants in Canada, nothing changes with these deadlines this fall; is that correct?

And the second question, perhaps for Ms. Jacobs, is when did the U.S. begin issuing machine-readable passports for all of its passports?

UNDER SECRETARY HUTCHINSON: In reference to the first part of your question, there are not any deadlines that would be applicable to the Canadian citizens that travel to the United States. They don't travel with passports so the machine-readable or biometric passports would not apply, those apply to the Visa Waiver travelers, so those deadlines do not apply to Canadian citizens.

The second part of your question is the landed immigrants [third-country citizens who have legal residence in Canada]. It's my understanding that they are not exempt from U.S.-VISIT and would be required to be enrolled. If that's not correct, we'll get back with you immediately, but that's my understanding.

MS. JACOBS: I think because the landed immigrants now have to get visas that they are subject to U.S.-VISIT.

QUESTION: Machine-readable --

MS. JACOBS: Machine-readable passports, we began issuing in 1981.

MR. DENIG: Yes, the gentleman behind him.

QUESTION: Hi, my name is Sawai from Kyodo News, Japanese News Agency.

I have also question for clarification. I think you said that all the Visa Waiver countries passport issued on or after October 26th, year 2005, must be biometric. So I'm wondering how are you going to treat the, you know, still valid passports issued before this date? All of those passports must be renewed also, or can we continue to use them?

MS. JACOBS: You will be able to continue using any passports issued before October 26th, 2005, as long as they're machine-readable.

MR. DENIG: Yes, sir, the gentleman back there.

QUESTION: My name is Kashiya, Japanese newspaper, Sankei.

I'm afraid, some countries do not comply new biometric passport system, even after that October 26, 2005. For example, Japanese Government said probably they could comply the new passport in March 2006. So what is going to happen? Do you extend another year, or it depends on your original idea, or any other idea?

UNDER SECRETARY HUTCHINSON: There are three options. One, our friends overseas, Japan, in this case, accelerates their timetable. The second option would be that Congress could consider an extension. They are certainly clear in their hesitancy to do that. The third option would be that the travelers would simply get a visa to come to the United States. So it doesn't shut off travel, it just simply says, "If you do not have the machine-readable, biometric enhanced passport, you would have to get a visa."

MS. JACOBS: I think it's very important to see what progress is going to be made by the different countries over the next few months, and again, we will be working very closely through our embassies overseas to try to keep track of where countries are. And we hope that people will be able to accelerate the deadlines, if at all possible. If not, we'll just have to see where we are in a few months' time.

MR. DENIG: Okay. Any other questions? No? Okay.

UNDER SECRETARY HUTCHINSON: Thank you very much.

MR. DENIG: Thank you very much, Secretaries. We appreciate it. Thank you, ladies and gentlemen.

(end transcript)