

Secretary of Homeland Security Tom Ridge at Dulles International Airport

Release Date: 09/03/03 00:00:00

For Immediate Release
Office of the Press Secretary
September 3, 2003

COMMISSIONER BONNER: Good morning. I think it's still morning. I'm delighted to be here at Dulles International Airport today with Secretary of Homeland Security Tom Ridge, and with the Under Secretary for Border and Transportation Security, Asa Hutchinson.

Mr. Secretary, I think what you've seen already today, I think you can see that we've come a long way in the last six months at Customs and Border Protection since it's been up and running, and as part of the Department of Homeland Security. It's one uniform. It's one team, and it's one fight.

I want to thank Secretary Ridge for his leadership and vision because it's been his leadership since the Department of Homeland Security was created that there is one agency of our government responsible for protecting and securing our nation's borders and ports of entry.

Mr. Secretary, as you know, before March 1 of this year, before the Department of Homeland Security was created, there were actually inspectors from three different agencies, three different departments of government, and now we have Customs and Border Protection, one agency for the borders of the United States and for our ports of entry under the Department of Homeland Security.

And Secretary Ridge, I must say to you, he knew that we could be more effective and we could do a better job of preventing terrorists and terrorist weapons from entering this country if we unified our border agencies into one. And I can tell you, and I think everybody else can tell you, that he was right. We are more effective, and we are doing a better job at protecting our country and making America safer.

So it's with great pleasure, Mr. Secretary, that I can tell you that the goal that you set of creating one face at the border, is becoming a reality. And it's becoming a reality very fast. And it's my great honor, first of all, to serve under Secretary Tom Ridge, and it's my special privilege to introduce to you the Secretary of Homeland Security, the Honorable Tom Ridge.

SECRETARY RIDGE: Thanks. Thank you very much. Thanks, all.

(Applause.)

Well, first of all, Commissioner Bonner, let me thank you and our colleague in public service, Asa Hutchinson, for arranging the visit and for leaning forward aggressively to help us create one face at the border.

There are many experiences that I think we can all call upon in our professional lives as members of this Department or perhaps just as citizens traveling, when we often wondered, as we traveled around the world and then back into the country, why the United States was represented by different people in different uniforms when we came back home.

And certainly it was that notion that we could train more people to do more things that would give us the flexibility and the agility so that at the border there would be a single face, a single uniform, a single government that would create not only efficiencies, but frankly free up some resources and give us a better opportunity and a stronger opportunity to identify terrorists, which is our primary responsibility, but also go after other individuals whose presence in our country was basically unwanted, undesired.

So at the outset, let me thank Jay Ahern as well, the Assistant Commissioner of the Bureau of Customs and Border Protection. Jay has spent a lifetime of service in Customs. He's here, and he's done a phenomenal job managing the field operation and working with Rob Bonner to get this thing ramped up. We already have it operational at six major hubs around the country, and we're going to accelerate the pace. And thank you, Jay, for your extraordinary leadership.

Mike Perron, our Port Director here, has been here for quite some time. We appreciate the good work you've done. As you know, back on March 1st when we still had the legacy Customs and legacy INS and legacy Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service, at that time, the decision was made by Secretary Hutchinson and Rob Bonner and myself that instead of having these men and women report up three separate chains of command, that we would consolidate the command structure so they would report into a port director.

That was the first step in creating a single face at the border, and we appreciate the good work you've done with Jay in order to accomplish that task.

Ed Bolton, thank you for escorting us, and thank you for your great work. Retired Navy – been with the Department of Homeland Security. Because I'm proud of your legacy, I'm going to tell them you've been with us since '87, even though the Department has only been operational since May.

And Tillie Kukulka, fabulous lady. Been with the Department since '76, am I right? And it's just great to be able to report to the American public in hopefully a comforting way that we have some very, very talented people, not only at this airport but airports around the country and throughout the Department of Homeland Security, who have been with us for a long time and who appreciate the opportunity to enhance the skills that they have so they can do their job better.

And their primary mission clearly is to protect this country from terrorist and terrorist weapons, but they also know they inherited other responsibilities, and as we continue to train and cross-train them, they'll just get better at doing their job. And I appreciate the openness and willingness of the workforce to take on those challenges.

I thank again the Commissioner for his very kind and very generous introduction, and remind everyone that I had a chance to take a first-hand look at the one face at the border. It's one of the many ways the Department of Homeland Security continues to reorganize to better mobilize. To make sure that all available resources that the President and Congress has given to us are used to provide the highest level of protection for our citizens. That's the reasoning behind our decision to unify the border inspection process, not just at airports, but at seaports and at land crossings.

I mentioned the experience at an international terminal, but if you had occasion to cross the border with Canada and Mexico, you would find that while in some areas they were cross-trained and did each other's and worked with each other, on other occasions, somebody would be there in one uniform to inspect the person. Another individual would be there in another uniform to inspect the back seat or the contents of the trunk. And if there were plant or food involved, there would be a third person to examine those contents.

So, again, unifying the face at all our borders is one of the highest priorities of this new department. And we're now taking the best inspection resources available to us. That's talent that we inherited, and additional training, and unifying all of that into one customs and border protection officer, an officer cross-trained to address three highly important inspection needs.

Traditionally the border inspection process required travelers entering the country to visit three separate inspection stations: Customs, INS, and USDA. The disadvantage with this system was that at each stage in the process, the inspector was trained for only one specific area. Basically, the other two areas, the other two concerns, were somebody else's responsibility. Now the inspector understands that all those concerns are his and her responsibility to address.

We believe one of the advantages is that it will accelerate border processing for legitimate travelers and better focus resources on travelers who require more inspection attention. Again, at the heart of the process of primary and secondary inspection is the information we gather from the National Targeting Center of Customs and Border Patrol and other agencies, so that these men and women equipped with that information can do a better job of identifying those who would do us harm.

And again, now that we've got people in the process of being cross-trained, frankly, we will just have more people empowered and be in a position to do that job either in the primary or a secondary area.

And since we know that al Qaida is interested in entering our ports, this officer, these officers, now trained in all three areas of inspection and armed with the best intelligence we have, improves our ability to spot and to stop terrorists quickly. It improves our flexibility. If we are to secure our nation successfully, we must be as adroit and as flexible as the enemy.

And so gone are three separate faces of government at the border, and many of the inefficiencies that occurred under the old system. Now it's one face, one uniform, one government. A single officer trained for primary inspection as well as how to determine who needs to go through the secondary inspection process.

We've already recruited our first group of Customs and Border Protection officers who will be trained in this new process throughout this fall. It is a very rigorous, three-month period of training in order to get the skill sets and the background to accomplish the mission. For the Department, this is another significant step toward our efforts to retool where it makes sense, and to create efficiencies and unity around a single mission.

So, again, I want to thank the Under Secretary for Border and Transportation Security, Asa Hutchinson, for his work, and in support of the good work that Rob Bonner has done, and all the very talented and highly motivated employees, the men and women of the Department of Homeland Security, who continue to do a great job.

And I said early on, we've all -- everybody on our team agrees. We start with the talent, and the highly motivated and committed group of men and women that we inherited in this agency, and our job is to better equip them and train them and exercise them to take advantage of that talent and motivation. And Secretary Hutchinson and Commissioner Bonner have really done an extraordinary job in promoting this initiative and then accelerating its implementation across the country.

So I thank them both. And they would be happy to respond to any questions you might have.

(Laughter.)

SECRETARY RIDGE: That's probably not going to work.

QUESTION: How long is it going to take to cross-train all of the legacy INS and former Customs agents and APHS too, to do each other's jobs?

SECRETARY RIDGE: Well, it's a great question. I'm going to defer to Commissioner Bonner. But first of all, we are moving prospectively. Every new entering class will be cross-trained. We have done some of that cross-training for legacy INS and Customs folks, and that's also a part of our plan. But I'll ask Commissioner Bonner to respond specifically to your question. All right.

COMMISSIONER BONNER: I think it's important to know that we've already begun the cross-training of the various inspectional workforce. We've begun the cross-training for unified primary inspection. We've begun the cross-training for consolidated anti-terrorism secondary or enforcement group, and we're moving forward as quickly as possible.

As the Secretary said, the new inspectors that will be coming on board will be Customs and Border Protection, CBP officers. And so all the new people that will be graduating through the Federal Law Enforcement Training Center in Glenco will be fully multi-functional, cross-trained officers that are coming onto duty.

The overall, though, I mean to do all of the cross-training -- and it is a very significant undertaking. I mean, this will take place over certainly a year or perhaps even more before we have fully cross-trained all of the 18,000 inspectional officers that were formerly U.S. Customs inspectors or Immigration inspectors or Agriculture inspectors.

Yes?

QUESTION: Of that training, you referred to it as cross-training. But how much of that is actually new? Or is any of that new techniques, new things that have kind of come in post-9/11?

COMMISSIONER BONNER: Well, first of all, part of it is new, because the priority mission of Customs and Border Protection is part of the Department of Homeland Security is homeland security, and that means our mission is preventing terrorists terrorist weapons from entering our country. That's the priority mission.

And so, yeah, there's a lot of cross-training that's going on right now for all of the inspectional workforce for that priority homeland security mission. So that is new, and that's new for the training that we're rolling out.

A lot of it, though, is learning the traditional inspectional missions of the former Agriculture, former Immigration, former Customs, and making sure that there is as full as cross-pollination as possible so that every CBP inspector, every frontline inspector, all 18,000 of them at all of our ports, 300-plus ports of entries around the

country, are fully conversant and fully capable of doing both the primary, and frankly, most of the secondary inspectional functions for all of these inspection missions.

SECRETARY RIDGE: If I might add, I mean, again, I think you apply that notion to what Under Secretary Hutchinson has done working with Mike Garcia at the Bureau of Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

Yesterday we announced that we were going to bring the Federal air marshals from the TSA into the enforcement side, into vice. And the long-term goal, as Commissioner Bonner very appropriately pointed out, we're not going to get this done in a week or a month. I may take a year or two to cross-train.

But again, we have very able men and women who are trained to help us deal with aviation security. We also have men and women in the department who had been previously trained to that end but also have other skill sets. But in order to improve the career path for our Federal air marshals, but also to give us a surge capability if we needed even more air marshals, we blend the two, cross-train them.

So whether it's Customs and Border Patrol, either here or the vice agents, in time, most of these men and women will be trained to performed different kinds of tasks, and depending on the information or intelligence we have, if there is a need to deploy quickly to respond to a threat, more people, we'll be in a position to do that.

So again, it's a mindset that as we take a look at our responsibility to protecting America, we start with talented and motivated people who want to be better equipped to do their job and are willing to take on additional skills in case there is a need to deploy them to help to protect their country, their community and their families. And they've been very receptive to it, which America must be and I'm sure is grateful. We'll just be a stronger country because of it.

Yes?

QUESTION: Secretary Ridge, I have been transferred to Freeport, Bahamas as the assistant border director. What is your vision of the role of the overseas offices in the Bureau of Customs and Border Protection?

SECRETARY RIDGE: The role of the overseas office? Well, you should know that Under Secretary Hutchinson and I, working with Commissioner Bonner, but also with other units within the Department of Homeland Security, will be looking to use those offices to coordinate our international reach as we try to push our perimeters out around the world.

We all agree that whether it's America's land border or sea border or airport border, that should be the last line of defense, not the first line of defense. So ultimately, the mission that Secretary Hutchinson has undertaken as he's reorganizing border and transportation security and then integrating it with other units within our agency, is to make sure that we coordinate where appropriate the activity of our different units.

Because at the end of the day, we believe that the freedom-loving people around the world, an economy that's interdependent, that it is in everybody's best interest, not just in America, that the skies are free of terrorists and the commercial aviation are safe, that port security and commercial shipping is safe, because in an interdependent world, the economic consequences are shared beyond any single nation.

And the pain of death of citizens, as with the attack on September 11th, 3,000 people lost their lives from 80 countries, terrorism confronts not just America, but the entire world. And one of the primary missions will be not only to coordinate our activity, but work with those countries to see that we have safer skies and seas.

Yes?

QUESTION: A slightly different topic. It's a week before the second anniversary of September 11th. Are you receiving intelligence now that you have any reason to increase the terror alert or have a heightened level of even yellow, where we are now, looking ahead before the anniversary?

SECRETARY RIDGE: As you know, we review threat information on a daily basis. And in fact, the agencies involved in that process actually meet by videoconference twice a day. So there is a daily threat assessment that accompanies all of our work.

And as of today, based on the assessment, there is no intention, based on what we know today, we're not going to raise the threat level.

And I also use this as an opportunity really to tell the American public and to remind everyone, that since the Department was created on March 1st, with the creation of that infrastructure and the information analysis and infrastructure protection unit, from time to time, we get information from the intelligence community that we share with state and locals, that we share with the private sector.

From time to time, you get that information, too, and you write about it and report it. From time to time, we send that information out there just so they need to know it and we want their knowledge base to be as deep as ours. And from time to them, when we send out the advisory, we not only give them an alert, but recommend certain things they do to enhance security.

So that is a new element, and that is a new dynamic as the federal government works with the governors and the mayors in the private sector to add additional levels of protection.

Having said that, we have on a day-to-day basis we review it, and as of today, it stays at Condition Yellow, which is an elevated level of risk. Let's make no mistake about it. When we say that there's an elevated level of risk, we're saying that there is a -- that we ought to be wary, we ought to be vigilant, and we're still at war, even though -- I mean, we hope we don't have to raise it necessarily to orange to remind people we're still at war.

Yellow is an elevated level of risk. We're still receiving intelligence that we're the number one target, and we need to understand that.

All right?

SPEAKER: Thank you.

SECRETARY RIDGE: Okay. Thanks very much.

This page was last modified on 09/03/03 00:00:00