# DHS Launches US-VISIT Program Nationwide to Enhance Security, Facilitate Travel

Release Date: 01/05/04 00:00:00

For Immediate Release
Office of the Press Secretary
January 5, 2004

Contact: Kimberly Weissman
202-927-8727
Bill Strassberger
202-282-8010

WASHINGTON, DC, JANUARY 5, 2004 - The U.S. Department of Homeland Security today launched US-VISIT, a new program to enhance the nation's security while facilitating legitimate travel and trade through our borders. New entry procedures took effect today for most foreign visitors with non-immigrant visas at 115 airports and cruise ship terminals at 14 seaports.  The system utilizes biometrics, which are physical characteristics unique to each individual, to verify identity. Biometric technologies are the basis of an extensive array of highly secure identification and personal verification solutions.

"Today marks the beginning of a new chapter in our government's commitment to securing our nation while upholding America's ideals about freedom of travel and the spirit of welcoming foreigner visitors," said Tom Ridge, Secretary of the Department of Homeland Security, while greeting passengers at Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport.  "US-VISIT is an important new element in the global war against terrorism and will serve as a catalyst in the growing international use of biometrics to expedite processing of travelers.  We want to show the world that we can keep our borders open and our nation secure."

US-VISIT requires that most foreign visitors traveling to the U.S. on a visa have their two index fingers scanned and a digital photograph taken to verify their identity at the port of entry.  The US-VISIT program will enhance the security of U.S. citizens and visitors by verifying the identity of visitors with visas.  At the same time, it facilitates legitimate travel and trade by leveraging technology and the evolving use of biometrics to expedite processing at our borders.

"US-VISIT represents the greatest improvement in border inspection in more than three decades, and is a shining example of what we can achieve when government works together," said Asa Hutchinson, Under Secretary of Border and Transportation Security of the Department of Homeland Security.  "US-VISIT is actually a continuum of security measures that begins overseas, at the U.S. consular offices issuing visas, where biometrics will be collected to determine if the applicant is on a database of known or suspected criminals or terrorists.  When the visitor gets to our border, we use the same biometrics - these digital "fingerscans" - to verify that the person at our port is the same person who received the visa or to see if we have learned new information about any involvement in terrorism or crime.  This type of identity verification helps our Customs and Border Protection Officers make better admissibility decisions and enhances the overall integrity of our immigration system."

The Department of Homeland Security has been testing the new entry procedures since November 17 at Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport. The test showed that the new procedures add an average of 15 seconds to the entry process at primary inspection for foreign nationals traveling with visas.  More than 20,000 passengers from Central and South America, Europe, Asia and South Africa participated in the voluntary test, which confirmed the program's ability to verify identity without adding significant time to the process.

The Department of Homeland Security today also began a pilot test of exit procedures for departing passengers holding visas. A departure confirmation program using automated kiosks is being tested at Baltimore-Washington International Airport and at selected Miami Seaport cruise line terminals.  Foreign visitors exiting the United States from those locations will be required to confirm their departure at the kiosk.  US-VISIT officials will evaluate the tests and consider alternatives to the automated kiosks for departure confirmation throughout 2004.

Congress has mandated that an automated entry-exit program be implemented at the 50 busiest land ports of entry by December 31, 2004, and at all land ports by December 31, 2005.  A Request for Proposal (RFP) was issued in November to engage the private sector to help the US-VISIT program develop the optimum solutions for entry and exit processing.  The contract will be awarded in May 2004.

 For more information, visit www.dhs.gov/us-visit.