

Remarks by Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff on the Beginning of 10 Fingerprint Collection at U.S. Airports

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Dulles International Airport

Secretary Chertoff: Thank you all for coming out. I'm joined here by Robert Jamison, who is our acting under secretary for NPPD, Ralph Basham, the commissioner of Customs and Border Protection, Bob Mocny, who is the director of US-VISIT, and Jerome Pender, who is deputy assistant director of the FBI, who took a very long trip this morning – (laughter) – to be here from West Virginia. I also want to thank Washington-Dulles International Airport for hosting today's event. And I want to commend them for their model port of entry.

What we're here talking about today is our new upgrade of biometrics, going from two prints to 10 prints. And we've had an opportunity now to actually watch how the system works. It's efficient; it doesn't take any more time than the old system and it has some real value in terms of increased security, as I will explain. But before I get into that, let me just make an observation. We've just come out of the Thanksgiving travel period and I'd like to note that, despite the extraordinary heavy travel volume of Thanksgiving week, Dulles officials and, particularly, our TSA personnel did a great job keeping wait times as short as possible while continuing to keep our flights secure. Checkpoint waiting times were an average of 14 to 16 minutes that weekend. On the busiest travel day, Sunday, November 25th, we screened nearly 32,000 people and over 28,000 checked bags without any major disruptions.

What that means is that we had a good news story. And despite some of the fears and concerns about whether there would be slow-ups because of the heavy travel volume, TSA and CBP and the local airports stepped up to the plate and did a very good job. Sometimes, it's easy to run stories about things that don't work well. In this case, I'm hoping we get some stories about things that do work well. And as we get into the Christmas season, I hope this gives everybody the confidence to know that they can fly with convenience, but also, even more important, with continued security.

Now, on November 29th, coming out of Thanksgiving, Dulles became the first U.S. port of entry to collect the 10-print additional fingerprints from international visitors. This is, of course, a change from the existing current system where we collect simply two prints, two index fingers, which is the case with respect to most of our ports of entry at present. And our movement from two prints to 10 prints has been the result of intergovernmental cooperation between the Department of Homeland Security, the FBI, and the State Department.

Now, why do we care about this? Well, we rely on biometrics, unique physical characteristics like fingerprints, to keep dangerous people out of the United States and at the same time, to keep the lines moving so that travel is fast and convenient for legitimate citizens and visitors. US-VISIT, which is our biometric fingerprint program, uses fingerprints and photographs to verify the visitors are who they say they are and that they do not pose a threat to the United States. CBP officers use this technology at our ports of entry and State Department consular officers use it at our visa-issuing posts overseas.

Since we've begun collecting biometrics in 2000, and that was just the two prints, we've stopped almost 2,000 criminals and immigration violators based on their fingerprints alone. Let me give you some examples. Here at Dulles airport, a man arrived here with all of the appropriate travel documents, but when his fingerprints were collected, they matched a different name, the name of someone on our watch list. Although the person claimed never to have been arrested on charges related to a controlled substance and claimed never to have been deported, his fingerprints told us a different story. Biometrics revealed that we had deported the person after we had arrested him for conspiracy to distribute a narcotic controlled substance. And today, he is being held at a nearby U.S. Marshal facility for criminal prosecution.

In February of this year, Oakland police and San Francisco ICE officers were contacted regarding victims of alien smuggling. Fingerprints were lifted from a suspect's car to a local motel used by the smugglers. The prints were sent to US-VISIT to be run against all latent prints and a positive match was made to a person with

an immigration criminal history. He was placed on a watch list and later arrested by the border patrol in Arizona.

And in 2002, a person obtained a visa and visited the U.S. Three years later, he attempted to return to the U.S., but was refused admission because he had not complied with the terms of his original 2002 visit. In 2007, he wanted to come back again. So he applied for a visa at a U.S. embassy using fraudulent documents. When his fingerprints were checked against US-VISIT's watch list, as part of the application process, it was revealed that he had previously been denied entry to the U.S. and that he had committed fraud. And therefore, he was denied a visa.

Now, I've talked about some of the value of two prints. But let me tell you what the value of 10 prints are, because with 10 prints, we can not only compare people's fingerprints to prints we have in databases, but we can also compare them with latent prints. Latent prints, if you look to our left, are fingerprints that we can lift off of vehicles or pieces of paper that we find on crime scenes or scenes of terrorist attacks. We enter the latent fingerprints into a database and when someone with the same fingerprints encounters us in US-VISIT by putting their 10 prints on the reader, we can get a match. And that match tells us that the person who has presented himself is the same person who left their fingerprints at a crime scene or on a bomb vehicle.

And here's an example of a bomb vehicle in Iraq, where we have gone and literally lifted latent fingerprints off of the vehicle. One of the stories I like to tell is that, kind of a reverse story, going back a few years when we had an individual who we fingerprinted here, we refused them admission. And later, we found their latent prints on the steering wheel of a car bomb in Iraq. So now, we can work it both ways. We can both track someone who we've rejected entry for who then later goes and builds a bomb. More important, we can track someone who builds a bomb who is trying to get entry into the United States. This is going to mean a more secure system, a quicker system, and a system that guarantees both convenience and safety for everybody involved.

I'm also delighted to say this is not just an innovation that the United States is pioneering, but it's one that, increasingly, other countries are turning to as well. The United Kingdom and the European Union are moving toward 10-fingerprint collection for their immigration and border management. And Japan has also recently begun collecting fingerprints from visitors. Ten-fingerprint collection also enables us more efficiently to share information about criminals and immigration violators because now, our database is integrated and uses the same standard as the FBI's 10-fingerprint standard. This means that we can move more rapidly among different kinds of databases.

Since we've rolled out this 10-print program, which began overseas and now encompasses more than half of our foreign consulates, we've already seen some positive results. Recently, we got a match on a latent fingerprint from a piece of paper that was picked up in a safe house that was searched as part of an investigation. Although it turned out that there was an innocent explanation for that fingerprint being there, the fact that we had the fingerprint and we knew to conduct further investigation is exactly what we wanted to be able to do in order to guarantee the people of this country higher measures of security against dangerous people who might come in.

Finally, let me say that moving to 10 fingerprints is completely consistent with and, in fact, enhances our ability to protect privacy. We view privacy as a fundamental human right, and preserving it is an integral part of our mission. In fact, we published a privacy impact assessment when we made the transition to 10-print collection, which, of course, is a standard practice anytime we change our operational procedures.

The bottom line is this: this transition to 10-fingerprint collection will further enhance security and protect our nation, but will continue to make it efficient to come into our country, and make it welcoming. And all the people that we saw here today who were able to pass without any hindrance, didn't take any more time difference to put their fingerprints down. But the combination of the fingerprints, the passport, and the photograph give us a very serious set of protective measures on which the American public can rely. So we're looking forward to continuing to roll out this 10-print capability across the country by the end of this coming year, and also overseas. And that's going to mean better results for the American people and a happier experience for people coming into the U.S.

Anybody else got some remarks or – all right, I guess we'll take some questions. If you tell us where you're from and ask the question, we'll do our best to respond.

Question: (Off mike.)

Secretary Chertoff: Well, actually, I think travel has regained the ground that was lost since 9/11. But if you

actually look at what we just saw demonstrated, and which most of you filmed, putting the fingerprints down takes about three seconds. It adds no time to the process of getting people through the line. The experience remains, I think, an efficient experience, a pleasant experience. And I don't think the fingerprints add any dimension that would make it less friendly or less welcoming.

In fact, I think almost everybody that I've talked to about this understands why we take the fingerprints. For the vast majority of people, it doesn't cause any problem. And those few people who do have a problem when we see that their fingerprints match are exactly the kinds of people that we don't want to have in the country. We're not interested in having convicted criminals enter the country or people whose fingerprints have been lifted off of car bombs. So I think this is a win-win.

We also have our new videotape, which was showing in the waiting area, which again is designed to make this process as efficient and as painless as possible.

Yes?

Question: (Off mike) – and they were – some of them were worried about their biometric information remaining in the United States forever. How will the information, you know, remain in the United States. Does it stay, remain here forever?

Secretary Chertoff: It will stay for a long period of time. And one of the reasons for that is because the value of the system is it allows us to compare when the person comes back again. And this is a protection for the traveler.

Let me give you an example. Supposing an individual comes in from Korea; we get their fingerprints; we have their name. They're a legitimate traveler. Supposing in two years, someone steals their passport or steals their identity and tries to pretend to be the person who came in legitimately. We're going to catch that person, because their fingerprints won't match. That's actually going to be a protection; not only for this country, but it's going to be a protection for the legitimate visitor. So I don't think anybody needs to be concerned.

And as I say, the Japanese are now moving to this system. The Europeans are moving to this system. Maybe Korea will move to this system, because in the same way as keeping your passport information and your pictures, it is a unique way to identify an individual traveler, which is a protection for everybody involved.

Question: (Off mike) – there is this perception – (inaudible) – a perception in Europe that it's very complicated to come to the United States now, and I know – I realize that Homeland Security has a different function than – (inaudible) – but do you work together? How –

Secretary Chertoff: We do work together. That's why I'm glad you're all out here. That's why we're here, so that you can actually film and show folks back home that the system we have is very easy to deal with. We timed the amount of time it took to get through for an individual. It was about two minutes from the time they presented themselves to the time they got through the system, which is about the same as it is in any country when you come. In this case, the lines were not particularly long.

Obviously, when there's a lot of travel volume, there will be a little bit of a longer line. But the actual process itself, as you can see and as you filmed, is a very simple and easy process. You present your passport. You get asked a few questions. It takes literally a matter of a few seconds to put your hands on the reader. We take a photograph. And then you go on your way.

So what I'm hoping is that events like this will actually explode the myth that it's hard to get into the U.S. We're always working with the tourist industry to make it as clear as possible that we welcome tourists. And it's good for tourists to know that when they come into this country, we're protecting them as well as American citizens against the small minority of people who would be dangerous if they were allowed in.

Question: (Off mike.)

Secretary Chertoff: There's no more cost for the traveler.

Question: (Off mike.)

Secretary Chertoff: What is the cost of –

Jamison: About 1500 bucks a piece.

Secretary Chertoff: The readers are about \$1500 a piece. But that's – we absorb the cost.

Moderator: Other questions?

Secretary Chertoff: Yes.

Question: (Off mike.)

Secretary Chertoff: We started rolling this out last fall. We announced that we would be – late last year, late in 2006 – we began the process of doing this at the consulates. We now have slightly over half the consulates have these in place.

In terms of lessons learned, the best lesson I can give you is one drawn from real life. A few months ago, we had a case where someone applied for a visa overseas. They used 10 prints. We got a match to a piece of paper that had been found in a location that had been searched as part of an investigation relating to an attempted bombing. That obviously caused us to take a closer look at the person who was coming in. It turned out there was a reasonable explanation for why the fingerprint was there, and so it didn't prevent the visa from being issued.

But that's a great lesson in the value of this, because you know, we get millions of visitors. We get 88 million air travelers a year. We get 400 million travelers in general. We need to know which ones we should focus on. And the better the tools we have to allow us to focus on the people that we really should be looking at, the less inconvenience and hindrance there is for the vast majority of people who are coming across who we really don't have any concerns about. So this system has actually literally paid off in the time we've had it out there.

Moderator: Last question.

Secretary Chertoff: I guess I've answered everything. Thanks everybody.

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