

U.S.-bound fliers required to register; Year-old program applies to travelers from 35 countries

USA TODAY

January 25, 2010 Monday, FINAL EDITION

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Section: NEWS; Pg. 3A

Length: 429 words

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Body

WASHINGTON -- Citizens from **35 countries** could be barred from boarding **U.S.-bound** flights starting in March if they don't **register** online before flying, according to the Homeland Security Department.

The government hopes that registration will flag visitors with criminal records or immigration problems before they enter the USA.

Travel groups worry that thousands of people could be kept from the **country** because they don't know about the requirement.

"We lose if these people don't come," said Geoff Freeman, senior vice president of the U.S. Travel Association, a trade group. The association is urging the government to launch an aggressive publicity campaign.

The registration requirement affects **35 countries** -- including the United Kingdom, Japan and Germany -- whose citizens can enter the United States without a visa. In 2009, about 15 million people from those **35 countries** visited the United States.

Online registration enables Customs officials to keep convicted criminals or illegal immigrants from boarding planes to the United States, Customs spokeswoman Joanne Ferreira said. "This makes sure **travelers** who do not **require** a visa do not pose any threat by traveling to the U.S.," she said.

The registration requirement is not connected to the Dec. 25 attempted bombing of Flight 253 near Detroit. Suspect Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, a Nigerian, would not have **registered** because he had a visa, which **requires** a background check.

Congress mandated the registration **program** in 2007, and Customs launched it one **year** ago. The online form asks biographical information and background questions, and it can be completed a few hours before boarding.

Before the registration **program** began, Customs agents checked visitors when they arrived at U.S. airports.

In recent months, about 91% of the people flying to the USA without visas had enrolled online, Customs figures show. Even with that compliance rate, travel-industry groups note that more than 4,000 people a day had not.

Those people have been allowed to board flights to the U.S. But starting March 21, Customs said it may start fining airlines up to \$3,300 for each passenger who has failed to **register** and is allowed on a **U.S.-bound** flight. That will likely result in airlines barring such passengers, Freeman said.

Freeman said people fail to **register** because they don't know about the **program** or don't have Internet access.

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"We've come a long way in improving compliance," said Steve Lott of the International Air Transport Association. "But it's important we close that gap before the summer travel period begins."

Classification

Language: ENGLISH

Publication-Type: NEWSPAPER

Subject: IMMIGRATION (90%); US FEDERAL GOVERNMENT (90%); EXCISE & CUSTOMS (89%); SPECIAL INVESTIGATIVE FORCES (89%); PASSPORTS & VISAS (78%); AVIATION ADMINISTRATION (78%); NATIONAL SECURITY (77%); BACKGROUND CHECKS (77%); REGULATORY COMPLIANCE (77%); ILLEGAL IMMIGRANTS (72%); MIGRATION ISSUES (72%); CRIMINAL CONVICTIONS (72%); CHRISTMAS 2009 AIRLINE BOMBING ATTEMPT (70%); PROFILES & BIOGRAPHIES (50%)

Company: AIRLINES FOR AMERICA (51%)

Organization: US DEPARTMENT OF HOMELAND SECURITY (84%); VICE PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES (57%); US CUSTOMS & BORDER PROTECTION (55%)

Industry: AIRLINES (89%); AVIATION ADMINISTRATION (78%); AIRPORTS (78%); COMPUTER NETWORKS (72%); INTERNET & WWW (72%)

Geographic: UNITED STATES (97%); JAPAN (79%); UNITED KINGDOM (79%); GERMANY (79%)

Load-Date: January 25, 2010