

AIRPORTS FACE IDENTITY CRISIS

Daily News (New York)

October 19, 2001, Friday, SPORTS FINAL EDITION

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Section: EDITORIAL;; EDITORIAL

Length: 755 words

Body

Congress can sew up a major hole in airline security by requiring that all carriers serving the United States transmit passenger manifests to American ***airports*** before the flights arrive. This mandate must be part of the anti-terrorism bill being negotiated by the House and Senate.

Already, 94 airlines use the electronic Advance Passenger Information System. But a dozen have refused. That should no longer be an option. If a carrier does not cooperate, it should be denied landing rights in the U.S.

APIS, developed in 1988, collects biographical information - name, date of birth, country of residence, etc., - from passengers before departure. Before the flight lands here, the list is checked against a database linked to the Customs Service, Immigration and Naturalization Service, FBI and 21 other federal agencies. Currently, Customs receives information on about 75% of passengers arriving on international flights. That puts an unacceptable 25% outside the security net.

Most of the carriers that have balked at sharing their passenger lists are from Middle Eastern countries such as Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Kuwait, Jordan and Pakistan. Pitiful.

They seem to have a philosophical problem. Sharing the manifests, they contend, would lead to racial profiling of their passengers. Such sensitivity. If they are truly serious about fighting terrorism, they might be a bit more sensitive to the security needs of a nation at war with terrorists.

The Bush administration and its Customs commissioner, Robert Bonner, have asked Congress to make APIS mandatory, but there have been jurisdictional squabbles over which committee should handle the bill. This is hardly the time for petty political wrangling.

Having the APIS program apply to all flights would enable Customs to target more high-risk passengers. Those who might be terrorists. Or drug traffickers. The system already has resulted in hundreds of narcotics arrests. Think how much more effective, and protective, it could be.

America has a right to know who will be landing on its soil. The carriers who refuse to divulge the information - for whatever reason - should be denied the privilege of a U.S. route. Over and out.

The smallpox threat

In late June, a war game code-named Dark Winter showed the devastation that could be wrought in the United States from a single case of the smallpox virus. Government stores of vaccine were rapidly exhausted, and by the end of the grim exercise, 10 million people in 25 states had been wiped out.

Dark Winter was just a drill played out at Andrews Air Force Base. Now, four months but a world of changed realities later, its dire results have terrifying new meaning. While it would be difficult for a terrorist to obtain the deadly virus, that horrific possibility cannot be ruled out. After Sept. 11, nothing can be ruled out.

AIRPORTS FACE IDENTITY CRISIS

The U.S. is speeding and expanding production of smallpox vaccine. By next year, there will be a stock of 300 million doses, one for every American. By next year. Obviously, we must produce it faster. If terrorists gain access to the virus, they will not be inclined to wait to use it.

Smallpox is highly contagious and perniciously lethal, killing roughly one in three victims. The vaccine may have side effects, some serious, but these affect only 1 in 13,000 vaccinated people.

Health and Human Services Secretary Tommy Thompson is negotiating with four companies to make the vaccine. One is rushing production from 40 million doses that were due by 2005 to 54 million available by next summer. By next summer.

He also is asking Congress for \$509 million to stockpile enough vaccine for every American. But there is no plan to inoculate every American. "Sometime in the future, there may be a discussion that may lead to voluntary vaccination," Thompson said.

The future, Mr. Thompson, is now. Having seen jets plow into skyscrapers, is it difficult to imagine a smallpox martyr deliberately becoming infected, then strolling through a crowd, sowing death?

The public has been told that the only stockpiles of the virus - to be used for vaccine - are under lock and key in Atlanta and Siberia. But some experts believe there are undeclared smallpox caches. In North Korea perhaps. Or Iraq. Enough said.

There is no need to panic. There is a need to act. The government must develop an adequate supply of the vaccine quickly. And, Secretary Thompson, don't put off discussion of a nationwide inoculation project. Protect us now, to avoid panic - or worse - later.

Classification

Language: ENGLISH

Subject: US FEDERAL GOVERNMENT (91%); TERRORISM (89%); SMALLPOX (87%); LEGISLATIVE BODIES (79%); AVIATION SECURITY (78%); VIRUSES (78%); SEPTEMBER 11 ATTACK (78%); ARRESTS (78%); SPECIAL INVESTIGATIVE FORCES (78%); CITIZENSHIP (77%); COUNTERTERRORISM (77%); AIR FORCES (77%); EXCISE & CUSTOMS (75%); IMMIGRATION (74%); PUBLIC FINANCE AGENCIES & TREASURIES (74%); RACIAL PROFILING (72%); RACE & ETHNICITY (72%); VACCINES (69%); CONTROLLED SUBSTANCES CRIME (67%); US AIR FORCE (65%); DRUG TRAFFICKING (62%); PROFILES & BIOGRAPHIES (55%); ARMED FORCES (50%)

Company: AL MUDON INTERNATIONAL REAL ESTATE CO KSCC (55%); AL MUDON INTERNATIONAL REAL ESTATE CO KSCC (55%); FEDERAL BUREAU OF INVESTIGATION (56%); FEDERAL BUREAU OF INVESTIGATION (56%)

Organization: FEDERAL BUREAU OF INVESTIGATION (56%); FEDERAL BUREAU OF INVESTIGATION (56%)

Ticker: ALMUDON (KUW) (55%)

Industry: AIRLINES (90%); AVIATION SECURITY (78%); AIRPORTS (78%); AIR FORCES (77%); PUBLIC

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FINANCE AGENCIES & TREASURIES (74%); VACCINES (69%); US AIR FORCE (65%); BIOLOGICS MFG (60%); ARMED FORCES (50%)

Geographic: MARYLAND, USA (79%); UNITED STATES (97%); SAUDI ARABIA (79%); PAKISTAN (79%); EGYPT (79%); KUWAIT (79%); MIDDLE EAST (79%); JORDAN (75%)

Load-Date: October 19, 2001

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