

Hartsfield to test border ID system;

Government will fingerprint foreign visitors

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Body

Washington --- Atlanta's **Hartsfield** International Airport **will test** a nationwide security **system** that **will** collect **fingerprints** and take photographs of millions of **foreign visitors** each year.

After **testing** next month in Atlanta, the tightened **border** procedures are scheduled to go into effect at all 115 major U.S. airports and 14 seaports in January.

As demonstrated by Department of Homeland Security officials Tuesday, arriving **visitors will** place their index fingers on a scanner, which **will** record the prints electronically. Computers **will** then check the data against watch lists for criminals and terrorists.

Cox Washington Bureau

At the same time, a digital camera **will** snap a photo of the **visitor**.

The process **will** add "a matter of seconds" to the **border** inspection process while offering new capabilities for enhancing security and improving immigration enforcement, said Asa Hutchinson, undersecretary of **border** and transportation security for the Department of Homeland Security.

The entry verification program is the first piece of a massive entry-exit **system**, known as US-VISIT, that Congress has ordered for all 300 land, air and seaports of entry.

Visitors who are required to have U.S. visas for travel must submit to the screening or be refused entry. Citizens of most European countries, Canada, Japan and a handful of other nations are exempt because they are not required to obtain visas for travel to the United States.

Jim Williams, director of the US-VISIT project, said that by the middle of November, immigration inspectors **will** be **fingerprinting** and photographing many **foreign** passengers arriving in Atlanta. In early December, immigration inspectors at **Hartsfield will** be able to match the **fingerprints** to the federal **government's** computerized "watch lists," Williams said.

Hartsfield, the nation's busiest passenger airport, was one of several airports and **border** crossings to conduct a smaller-scale **test** of the technology earlier this year.

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Atlanta's airport was selected for the first full-fledged **test** in part because of its wide variety of international flights and its extra inspection booths, which were built for the 1996 Olympics.

Williams said he hoped to fine-tune the identification **system** after seeing the results in Atlanta.

The Homeland Security Department's unveiling of the **system** in Washington drew a crowd of **foreign** journalists, including some who raised questions about whether the new requirements **will** seem onerous to travelers.

Hutchinson promised the department **will** safeguard the privacy of information gathered on travelers who clear the new **border** procedures. He said the records **will** not be shared with other U.S. law enforcement agencies.

However, records **will** be kept on those who have overstayed their visas. Such travelers may be excluded the next time they seek entrance to the United States, officials said.

Williams said the inkless **fingerprinting** device, developed by Cross Match Technologies Inc. of Palm Beach Gardens, Fla., has a touch pad that can take an FBI-quality forensic print in less than five seconds.

Hutchinson conceded that gaps **will** remain in the nation's **border** security even as the first phases of US-VISIT take effect. For example, the nation has no systematic way of gathering information from **visitors** as they depart.

The Homeland Security Department on Tuesday displayed a prototype of a self-serve machine, much like an ATM, to allow exiting travelers to scan their visas and **fingerprints**. Officials said data **will** be used to verify whether travelers have exceeded their authorized stay.

The exit **system** is to be phased in at airports and seaports next year.

An even more difficult challenge is setting up the entry-exit procedures at land **borders**, where major facilities **will** have to be built. Business groups and **border** cities have raised concerns that US-VISIT **will** mean longer waits to cross **borders** and **will** hurt commerce.

Congress recently cut President Bush's proposed \$400 million budget for US-VISIT to \$330 million for the current year.

Hutchinson said he would soon submit a spending plan to Congress that would show the effects of the cutbacks on the deadlines for completing all phases of US-VISIT by 2006.

Graphic

Photo: The **border** entry verification **system** uses inkless scanners to collect digital **fingerprints**. / RICK McKAY / Staff; Photo: **Border** Protection Officer Paul Trump demonstrates the new **system** Tuesday in Washington. After a scanner records **fingerprints** of **foreign visitors**, a digital camera **will** snap a photo as computers check the data against watch lists for terrorists. / RICK McKAY / Staff

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