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Border Control Takes One Leap Forward

By ERIC LIPTON

WASHINGTON, Dec. 29 - Antelope Wells, N.M., and Morses Line, Vt., are hardly the most populated spots on the map. But with the installation of a new immigration control system at those and 16 other border-crossing posts last week, the Department of Homeland Security has reached a milestone.

Every port of entry into the United States - land, sea or air - is now equipped with the system, US-Visit, which takes fingerprints and digital photos of many entering foreigners to check them against criminal and terrorist watch lists.

"We have enhanced security," said James A. Williams, director of US-Visit.

Even longstanding critics of the Homeland Security Department's often-belittled efforts to protect the nation better say it deserves some credit for this accomplishment.

Trying to develop a comprehensive entry and exit control system to fight illegal immigration and discourage terrorism has in some ways "been a mission impossible," said Rey Koslowski, an associate professor of political science who is director of the program on border control and homeland security at the State University of New York at Albany. "And they have been able to take the first steps," he said.

But Professor Koslowski, among many others who have studied US-Visit, said the task was still far from complete.

The nation's 115 airports with international traffic, as well as 15 sea and 154 land ports of entry, all now have US-Visit equipment, which is linked to a national computer network that in a matter of seconds can check a visitor's fingerprints against a database of known terrorists and criminals.

But most Canadians and Mexicans, in addition to American citizens and legal permanent residents, are not subject to the checks. As a result, only about 42 percent of people arriving at the airports or seaports must submit to fingerprinting. At land borders, the number is only about 2 percent.

Because of those and other limitations, some question whether the program, which has cost more than $1 billion so far and could ultimately cost as much as $10 billion, is a worthwhile investment.

"US-Visit is an attractive showpiece, but it is not capable of delivering all that it is being sold to deliver," said Kathleen Campbell Walker of El Paso, vice president of the American Immigration Lawyers Association.

Mr. Williams, the program's director, noted that by January 2008, Americans and Canadians who enter the United States across a land border will need a passport or other official travel document; they now need show only a driver's license.

Further, US-Visit could eventually be extended to include Mexicans and Canadians, Mr. Williams said, although the Homeland Security Department would have to figure out how to avoid major delays.

Janice L. Kephart, who was a counsel to the Sept. 11 commission, said that simply having equipment at every border entry was a crucial first step, even if only some travelers were subject to the checks.

"As long as the system is available everywhere, they can eventually broaden it to include more folks who are seeking entry into the U.S.," Ms. Kephart said. "This is shoring up one of the significant loopholes in our border system."

Since its inception in January 2004, US-Visit - United States Visitor and Immigrant Status Indicator Technology - has completed fingerprint checks and recorded digital photos of 45 million visitors. For travelers required to have visas before entering, the system checks to see if the visa holder is the same person who applied for the visa overseas.

The fingerprint check at the borders has turned up just 970 hits of visa violators or criminal suspects. The total rises to about 15,000 with inclusion of the cases identified overseas at the time of an application for the visa, a process that is considered an extension of US-Visit because it too requires fingerprints and a digital photo.

Most such instances are relatively modest: those of people who have previously been denied visas or committed some kind of immigration violation. But the system has also identified some criminals, including drug smugglers, and, in Jordan, one person who had been detained by the United States military in Iraq on terrorism-related charges.

Still, critics say any would-be terrorist who has no prior record or encounter with law enforcement officials could most likely escape suspicion. That could be especially easy for visitors from one of the 27 countries whose people are not required to obtain visas or undergo background checks before they arrive.

"US-Visit is not going to screen out people with terrorist intentions from Western Europe who aren't on our radar screen," said Mark Krikorian, executive director of the Center for Immigration Studies, a Washington-based research group that supports greater immigration controls.

Another big weakness so far is that most of the installed equipment monitors only entry into the United States, not the exit. The Homeland Security Department has found that perhaps a third of the estimated seven million illegal immigrants who were in the United States as of 2000 had entered the county legally but then overstayed their visas. That was the case with at least 3 of the 19 hijackers on Sept. 11, 2001.

At 13 airports and 2 seaports, US-Visit has set up kiosks that record exits of foreigners. The program is also experimenting with a system that uses radio signals to monitor entries and exits at five land borders.

But Mr. Williams said it would be years before there was a comprehensive exit control system, particularly at the land borders.