

Britain to Issue Identity Cards for Foreigners in November

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By REUTERS

LONDON (Reuters) — Britain's home secretary said Thursday that the government would begin in months to carry out its plan for national identity cards.

Home Secretary Jacqui Smith said that the government would start distributing cards to foreigners in November.

The nation's 200,000 airport workers, who are expected to receive cards next year, will be the first British citizens required to have them, because of the high level of security needed for their jobs, Ms. Smith said.

Beginning in 2010, students will be encouraged to apply voluntarily for identity cards, which will store the holder's fingerprint on a chip.

"It will make it easier to enroll on a course, apply for a student loan, open a bank account or prove your age," Ms. Smith said at a meeting with a research agency in London.

By 2011, the government will begin widespread distribution of the cards and passports containing electronically stored fingerprints.

The cards will not initially be compulsory for British citizens — although airport employees will not be permitted to work without them. But they will be required for foreigners from outside the European Union staying in Britain on visas.

The government is phasing in the policy until most of the population is covered before deciding whether to pass laws to make the cards compulsory.

Ms. Smith said the cards would prevent identity theft, help reduce illegal immigration, fight terrorism and make it easier for people to obtain public services. But civil rights groups and the opposition parties, the Liberal Democrats and the Conservatives, say the cards are unnecessary, expensive and intrusive.

The two opposition parties say they will end the plan if they are able to form a government.