

THE NEW YORK TIMES

December 15, 2006

U.S. Is Dropping Effort to Track if Visitors Leave

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WASHINGTON, Dec. 14 — In a major blow to the Bush administration's efforts to secure borders, domestic security officials have for now given up on plans to develop a facial or fingerprint recognition system to determine whether a vast majority of foreign visitors leave the country, officials say.

Domestic security officials had described the system, known as U.S. Visit, as critical to security and important in efforts to curb illegal immigration. Similarly, one-third of the overall total of illegal immigrants are believed to have overstayed their visas, a Congressional report says.

Tracking visitors took on particular urgency after the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, when it became clear that some of the hijackers had remained in the country after their visas had expired.

But in recent days, officials at the Homeland Security Department have conceded that they lack the financing and technology to meet their deadline to have exit-monitoring systems at the 50 busiest land border crossings by next December. A vast majority of foreign visitors enter and exit by land from Mexico and Canada, and the policy shift means that officials will remain unable to track the departures.

A report released on Thursday by the Government Accountability Office, the nonpartisan investigative arm of Congress, restated those findings, reporting that the administration believes that it will take 5 to 10 years to develop technology that might allow for a cost-effective departure system.

Domestic security officials, who have allocated \$1.7 billion since the 2003 fiscal year to track arrivals and departures, argue that creating the program with the existing technology would be prohibitively expensive.

They say it would require additional employees, new buildings and roads at border crossings, and would probably hamper the vital flow of commerce across those borders.

Congress ordered the creation of such a system in 1996.

In an interview last week, the assistant secretary for homeland security policy, Stewart A. Baker, estimated that an exit system at the land borders would cost "tens of billions of dollars" and said the department had concluded that such a program was not feasible, at least for the time being.

"It is a pretty daunting set of costs, both for the U.S. government and the economy," Mr. Stewart said. "Congress has said, 'We want you to do it.' We are not going to ignore what Congress has said. But the costs here are daunting."

“There are a lot of good ideas and things that would make the country safer. But when you have to sit down and compare all the good ideas people have developed against each other, with a limited budget, you have to make choices that are much harder.”

The news sent alarms to Congress, where some Republicans and Democrats warned that suspending the monitoring plan would leave the United States vulnerable.

Representative Dana Rohrabacher, a California Republican who is a departing subcommittee chairman on the House International Relations Committee, said the administration could not say it was protecting domestic security without creating a viable exit monitoring system.

“There will not be border security in this country until we have a knowledge of both entry and exit,” Mr. Rohrabacher said. “We have to make a choice. Do we want to act and control our borders or do we want to have tens of millions of illegals continuing to pour into our country?”

Representative Bennie Thompson, the Mississippi Democrat who is set to lead the Homeland Security Committee, also expressed concern.

“It is imperative that Congress work in partnership with the department to develop a comprehensive border security system that ensures we know who is entering and exiting this country and one that cannot be defeated by imposters, criminals and terrorists,” Mr. Thompson said in a statement Thursday.

In January 2004, domestic security officials began fingerprint scanning for arriving visitors. The program has screened more than 64 million travelers and prevented more than 1,300 criminals and immigration violators from entering, officials said.

Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff and other officials often call the program a singular achievement in making the country safer. U.S. Visit fingerprints and photographs 2 percent of the people entering the country, because Americans and most Canadians and Mexicans are exempt.

Efforts to determine whether visitors actually leave have faltered. Departure monitoring would help officials hunt for foreigners who have not left, if necessary. Domestic security officials say, however, it would be too expensive to conduct fingerprint or facial recognition scans for land departures. Officials have experimented with less costly technologies, including a system that would monitor by radio data embedded in a travel form carried by foreigners as they depart by foot or in vehicles.

Tests of that technology, Radio Frequency Identification, found a high failure rate. At one border point, the system correctly identified 14 percent of the 166 vehicles carrying the embedded documents, the General Accountability Office reported.

The Congressional investigators noted the “numerous performance and reliability problems” with the technology and said it remained unclear how domestic security officials would be able to meet their legal obligation to create an exit program.

Some immigration analysts said stepping away from the program raised questions again about the commitment to enforce border security and immigration laws.

A senior policy analyst at the Center for Immigration Studies, Jessica Vaughn, said the government had long been too deferential to big businesses and travel groups that raised concerns that exit technology might disrupt travel and trade.

“I worry that the issue of cost is an excuse for not doing anything,” said Ms. Vaughn, whose group advocates curbing immigration. Domestic security officials said they still hoped to find a way to create an exit system at land borders. “We would to do more testing,” a spokesman for the department, Jarrod Agen, said. “We are evaluating the initial tests to determine how to move forward.”