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Britain Plans to Cut Flow of Foreign Students

By JOHN F. BURNS

LONDON — In the face of mounting concern about abuse of student visa rules by migrant jobseekers and potential terrorists, Britain said Sunday that it was planning an immediate tightening of its border controls that could reduce the flow of people entering the country as students by tens of thousands a year.

The new rules will apply to all applicants from outside the European Union, including the United States. But the primary focus appeared likely to be the Indian subcontinent and countries in the Arab and Muslim world, both because of the large numbers of allegedly fake applicants who originate there and because of concerns about combating terrorism by Islamic extremists.

The controls appeared to have been drawn up, in part, to meet American pressure for a tougher British approach to combating terrorist threats. While officials from both countries say counterterrorism cooperation has been close, United States officials have warned that Britain, with its large Muslim population and its relatively open borders, is among the countries that are central to American concerns as potential planning grounds for terrorist attacks against the United States.

Announcement of the new controls came six weeks after the failed attempt on Christmas Day to bomb an American airliner approaching Detroit on a trans-Atlantic flight. The 23-year-old Nigerian charged in that attack, Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, spent three years in Britain as an engineering student and while in London associated with radical Muslim groups, though British and American intelligence officials have said he was prepared for the bombing attempt by associates of Al Qaeda in Yemen.

British officials announcing the new controls made no reference to the Detroit attack, and noted that the policy review that prompted the new restrictions had been ordered in November, before the airliner bombing attempt. They said their main concern lay in stopping the abuse of student visas by people seeking to find jobs and settle in Britain.

They said 240,000 student visas were issued in the 2008-9 statistical year, accounting for a third of all migrants reaching Britain.

The rapid rise in immigration, and the strain it has imposed on public services like education, medical care and the welfare system, promise to be a major issue in a general

election that must be held before June. The ruling Labour Party has come under growing pressure from the opposition parties — in particular the Conservatives, who are leading in pre-election polls — to defend policies that have brought three million migrants to the country since the party took power in 1997.

Still, the Christmas Day attack appeared to have had an influence. Prime Minister Gordon Brown has said that Britain regarded the thwarted attack as "a wake-up call" requiring a review of airport security measures and border controls, among other things. And British officials were at pains to explain a sequence of events that led Mr. Abdulmutallab to be denied a student visa to re-enter Britain in May 2009, but not flagged to the United States as a potential security risk.

They have said that the Nigerian was rejected because he had applied to study at a "bogus college" not on a visa-approval list, not because of his radical links, and that monitoring of his activities as a student at University College London from 2005 to 2008 showed him to be a "peripheral figure" among Islamic radicals, and not at the time a terrorist threat. Still, the attempt heightened American concerns about efforts by terrorists to gain entry to Britain through what critics had often described as the "gaping holes" in the student visa system.

Home Secretary Alan Johnson, responsible for overseeing domestic security, said in a BBC interview that care would be taken not to damage "a major part of the U.K. economy," the $8 billion to $13 billion a year generated by the education of foreign students here. But in a formal statement, Mr. Johnson said that "those who are not seriously interested in coming here to study, but come primarily to work, should be in no doubt that we will come down hard on those that flout the rules."

The restrictions will include a requirement that students speak English well enough to pass British high school exams, not just the "beginner's English" required previously. Applicants for courses lasting less than six months will no longer be allowed to bring family members with them, and the dependents of students on courses not leading to degrees will be barred from working. Colleges will be more tightly monitored, to eliminate the kind of fake institutions that one critic described last year as "a couple of people above a chip shop."

The restrictions come only nine months after a major overhaul aimed at weeding out false applicants. But the new system — requiring applicants to show they have offers from approved colleges and adequate finances — was quickly overwhelmed, particularly in the Indian subcontinent, where applications soared and British officials complained that they were approving applications on paperwork alone, with no interviews.

Last week, the government halted all student visa approvals from northern India, Nepal and Bangladesh while the system was under review.