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U.S. Inquiry Traces Foreigners With Visas
By Julia Preston
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A vast investigation by the Department of Homeland Security of 1.6 million cases of foreigners suspected of remaining in the United States after their visas expired has shown that more than half of them have already left the country or obtained legal immigration status, officials told Congress on Tuesday.

Department officials put the remaining cases of foreigners who could still be in the country through an intensive electronic screening. About 2,000 of them were determined to be here and to pose a potential national security or public safety threat, they said.

After further investigation of that group, the department opened "several hundred" new investigations of the foreigners where there was evidence of substantial risk, the officials said. The department said its priority was to detect and prosecute those high-risk immigrants.

In two separate hearings, department officials reported the results of a review of all cases in the department's files of foreigners suspected of overstaying their visas. The review was ordered in May by Secretary Janet Napolitano in advance of the 10th anniversary of the Sept. 11 attacks. The review yielded the first solid information about illegal immigrants in the country who first entered legally. Previously, officials relied on imprecise estimates.

John D. Cohen, a senior department official for counterterrorism, told a House Homeland Security subcommittee that after running all the cases in the backlog through databases of law enforcement, border security and intelligence agencies, officials had found that 843,000 of the possible visa violators had left the country or fixed their status.

The officials said the investigation showed that the Homeland Security Department had developed technology to track foreigners in the United States and determine if they had left when their visas expired. The new electronic search methods would greatly improve the ability to identify and punish those who overstay visas, they said.

Speaking before the Senate Homeland Security Committee, Ms. Napolitano said the department was moving on a "fast track" to create a nationwide electronic exit system to determine when foreigners leave the country.

While security checks of arriving foreigners have sharply improved since the Sept. 11 attacks, the United States still does not have any system for keeping track of when foreigners leave. Many Republicans and some Democrats in Congress have called on the Homeland Security Department to create an exit system based on biometric inspections of travelers as they leave through airports and land border crossing points. But Obama administration officials have argued such a system would be too complex and expensive to create.

"Officials are saying they are now going to be able to determine on a real-time basis who has overstayed visas," said Edward Alden, senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations, noting that the administration was making a clear shift away from the goal of a more cumbersome exit system.