

ICE Plans for More Visa Security Units

By Mickey McCarter

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US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) will put visa investigators into four more countries this year and one more next year, ICE chief John Morton told HSToday.us<<http://HSToday.us/>> in a recent interview.

'I intend to make ensure that we continue to expand the program,' Morton elaborated. 'It works well from our perspective. We are in 12 different countries with 14 offices right now. We are expanding to another four. We ultimately will expand to yet another office in 2011.'

To facilitate the screening of US visa applications, ICE closely works with the Bureau of Consular Affairs at the US State Department to identify posts where ICE agents will be assigned to Visa Security Units.

Morton and Janice Jacobs, assistant secretary of State for Consular Affairs, appear before the Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee Wednesday to update senators on US visa security efforts.

'We have a joint list with the State Department where together we identified high-risk posts,' Morton explained. 'Our goal is working, with the State Department, to keep measured movement each year on moving forward down the list in rank order until we ultimately cover all of the places we agree need the resources.'

ICE received \$7.3 million in fiscal 2010 to expand Visa Security Units to four additional posts, which remain classified as sensitive information so far.

Morton declined to specify if that list included any of the 14 high-risk nations identified by the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) after the Christmas Day bombing attempt. Citizens of those nations underwent mandatory secondary screening when traveling to the United States for several months until DHS implemented new rules this past month.

Ten of those high-risk nations included Afghanistan, Algeria, Iraq, Lebanon, Libya, Nigeria, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Somalia and Yemen. DHS also required secondary screening for four nations officially recognized by the United States as sponsors of terrorism--Cuba, Iran, Sudan and Syria.

ICE presently staffs Visa Security Units in Canada, Egypt, Germany, Hong Kong, Indonesia, Jordan, Morocco, Pakistan, Philippines, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, and Venezuela.

Funding represents the biggest obstacle to setting up the units at additional consular posts at a faster rate, Morton said.

'The challenge is that getting to all of the high-risk posts in a reasonable amount of time in a world of limited resources,' Morton stated.

'The federal budget is not unlimited. I am looking at the program from a very positive perspective. I'm

trying to work with the State Department. They are our partner in the expansion of the program. We need to continue to grow the program in a measured way that makes sense from a budgetary perspective, makes sense from a State Department perspective, and makes sense from our perspective,' he continued.

On March 4, Sen. John Cornyn (R-Texas) and Rep. Lamar Smith (R-Texas) introduced companion bills, titled the Secure Visas Act of 2010 (HR 4758), to fund the addition of 16 Visa Security Units in high-risk nations. They seek to establish Visa Security Units in Algeria, Colombia, India, Iraq, Jerusalem, Kuala Lumpur, Kuwait, Lebanon, Mexico, Nigeria, South Africa, Syria, Tel Aviv, Turkey, United Kingdom, and Yemen.

The United States could have denied entry to Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, who is a citizen of Nigeria, if the visa of the suspected Christmas Day bomber had received scrutiny by a Visa Security Unit, some lawmakers argue.

While ICE seeks to expand within the confines of the White House budget request every year, the agency would follow the will of Congress should it receive more money to establish more Visa Security Units, Morton confirmed.

'We have spent every penny that Congress has appropriated for us for this program and we are going to make sure we spend the money we were appropriated this past year to continue the expansion. From our perspective, it was money well appropriated,' Morton commented.

The Senate hearing Wednesday also includes testimony from David Heyman, assistant secretary of Homeland Security for Policy.