

**NEWS ALERT**



U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

**Homeland Security Committee**

*Rep. Bennie G. Thompson, Ranking Member*



**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

## **Statement of Ranking Member Bennie G. Thompson**

### ***Ten Years after 9/11: Can Terrorists Still Exploit our Visa System***

September 12, 2011 (Washington) – Today, Committee on Homeland Security Ranking Member Bennie G. Thompson (D-MS) delivered the following prepared remarks for the Border and Maritime Security subcommittee hearing entitled “Ten Years after 9/11: Can Terrorists Still Exploit our Visa System”:

“In the aftermath of the September 11th attacks, Congress recognized the importance of securing the visa process and required it to be used as a counterterrorism tool.

Since that time, the Departments of Homeland Security (DHS) and State have made important strides toward better securing the visa and passenger prescreening processes for travelers to the United States.

Efforts include establishing Visa Security Units at high-risk embassies and consulates, deploying Immigration Advisory Program personnel at foreign airports, and enhancing pre-screening of airline passengers before they arrive in the U.S.

However, the attempted bombing of Northwest Flight 253 on Christmas Day 2009, by an individual with a valid U.S. visa, served as a wakeup call about persistent visa security vulnerabilities.

During the 111th Congress, the Committee on Homeland Security and this Subcommittee held hearings to examine the circumstances surrounding the attempted Christmas Day bombing. From our examination of the chain of events leading up to the incident, it is clear there were several failures that allowed the perpetrator to board the U.S.-bound flight.

Today, I look forward to hearing what progress has been made in closing those security gaps since that incident nearly two years ago.

I also hope to hear that DHS and the State Department have taken proactive measures to address possible emerging threats to visa security.

I have long held we must develop a layered security approach that pushes borders out and begins the screening process far in advance of a passenger boarding a flight to this country.

Both DHS and the State Department have vital roles to play in this effort.

Clearly defined responsibilities and close coordination between the Departments are essential to success.

I want to hear from the witnesses today whether the turf battles between the Departments are now a thing of the past, or if they still linger.

I certainly hope it is the former and not the latter. Of course, these security efforts require appropriate personnel and resources – and that, in turn, requires adequate funding.

Members of Congress who talk a good game on border security will need to put their money where their mouths are when it comes to funding these programs, even in tight budgetary times.

Just as we must ensure the security of the visa process for those entering the U.S., we must also ensure individuals depart this country in a timely manner.

An estimated 40 percent of persons unlawfully present in the U.S. entered this country legally and have overstayed.

Among those millions of people may be a handful who seek to do us harm.

In accordance with a 9/11 Commission recommendation, Congress has repeatedly required DHS to deploy a biometric entry-exit system under US-VISIT to track visitors to the U.S.

Yet, a decade after September 11, 2001, we are no closer to having such a system than we were on that fateful day.

The lack of progress toward this mandate, under this Administration and its predecessors, is simply unacceptable.

I hope to hear from our witnesses about how DHS can finally fulfill this 9/11 Commission recommendation and congressional mandate.

We will never truly have visa security until an entry-exit system is completed.”

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