



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Statement of Ranking Member Bennie G. Thompson

***From the 9/11 Hijackers to Amine el-Khalifi:
Terrorists and the Visa Overstay Problem***

March 6, 2012 (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 “From the 9/11 Hijackers to Amine el-Khalifi: Terrorists and the Visa Overstay Problem”:

“Some in Congress seem to believe that securing America’s southwest border is the answer to our Nation’s illegal immigration concerns.

But an estimated 40 percent of individuals unlawfully present in the U.S. actually entered this country legally and have simply overstayed.

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

Addressing this so-called “overstay” issue is essential not only to immigration control, but also to homeland security.

Certainly, the 9/11 attacks focused the Federal government on the importance of securing the visa process and addressing the potential threat posed by certain individuals who remain in the U.S. after their visas expire.

Under Democratic leadership in the 110th and 111th Congresses, this Committee held hearings on the issue of visa overstays.

I am pleased the Subcommittee is also examining the issue today.

I would like to hear from our DHS witnesses about what tools they need to be more successful at locating and addressing individuals who have overstayed their visas in the U.S. – particularly those who may pose a safety or security threat to this country.

I also hope to hear from our State Department witness about what they are doing to prevent individuals who are likely to overstay from receiving visas in the first place.

As part of the effort to address the overstay issue and in accordance with a 9/11 Commission recommendation, Congress has repeatedly required the Department of Homeland Security to deploy a biometric entry-exit system under US-VISIT.

Such a system would help DHS determine whether an individual has departed the U.S. or has remained in this country.

Yet more than a decade after September 11, 2001, DHS is still without a biometric exit system.

The lack of significant progress toward this mandate has been troubling to those of us who believe a biometric entry-exit system is essential to border security.

However, last year DHS made significant strides by eliminating about half of the 1.6 million record backlog in US-VISIT.

Much more remains to be done, however.

I hope to hear from our DHS witnesses today about how they are working to resolve the remaining backlog cases, as well as how the Department is moving forward to identify cost-effective technology for implementing biometric exit at ports of entry.

Finally, I would note that I was pleased to see the Administration's proposal in the fiscal year 2013 budget request to transfer US-VISIT's functions to CBP and ICE.

US-VISIT in its current configuration has so far failed to meet its mandate.

By moving the program's functions to CBP and ICE, it will be more closely aligned with the operational components that work with and rely on the program on a day-to-day basis.

The transfer should bring efficiencies, and hopefully more progress toward implementing the mandated biometric exit system.

I look forward to discussion about that transfer here today.

In closing, I would note that while the issue before the Subcommittee today is of great importance, I was dismayed to learn that "Part II" of last month's hearing on maritime cargo security hearing would not being held today as planned. It is my hope that the Subcommittee will complete its work on that hearing in the near future."

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