



DHS Signs VISA Waiver Program Agreements with Estonia and Latvia

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U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) Secretary Michael Chertoff signed today Visa Waiver Program (VWP) Memoranda of Understanding (MOU) with Estonian Minister of Internal Affairs Juri Pihl in Tallinn, Estonia, and with Latvian Minister of Foreign Affairs Maris Riekstins in Riga, Latvia. The agreements outline security enhancements that put both countries on the path toward visa-free travel to the U.S., and possible designation as VWP members later this year.

"I commend Estonia and Latvia for their commitment to these security measures, and for the leadership they demonstrate to other aspiring partners," said Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff. "We have a common adversary whose stated intent is to strike at our freedoms, wherever and whenever they can. But, we also have a common resolve and vision with the European Union and its member states to enhance security in a way that facilitates travel for our citizens. We respect European Union law and will continue to work collaboratively, particularly in the areas where the European Union has unique authority, as we enter into agreements with aspiring Visa Waiver Program countries."

The VWP has been authorized by U.S. law for over 20 years, with 27 current members from Asia and Europe. The U.S. Congress authorized DHS in August 2007 to reform the VWP and strengthen the security arrangements required of existing participant countries, as well as to expand the conditions for aspiring countries to join the program.

Among the security enhancements required, DHS will establish an electronic system of travel authorization for air passengers. VWP travelers will be asked to provide some basic information online, which will generate an authorization number for travel. DHS will announce complete details on how the authorization systems will work, and when they will begin, later this year. VWP partners also must ensure reporting of lost and stolen passports to avoid fraudulent use and enhance security measures for airports that originate flights to the U.S., to include permitting air marshals on certain flights.

The department signed the first enhanced VWP agreement with the Czech Republic on Feb. 26, 2008, who committed to meeting the new requirements of the program, to include an electronic system of travel authorization.

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