Homeland Security

DHS Signs Visa Waiver Program Agreement with Korea

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For Immediate Release
Office of the Press Secretary
Contact: 202-282-8010

U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) Secretary Michael Chertoff signed today a Visa Waiver Program (VWP) Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with Korean Minister of Foreign Affairs and Trade Yu Myung-hwan. The security enhancements outlined in the agreement puts Korea on the path toward visa-free travel to the U.S., and potential designation as a VWP member as early as later this year.

"I commend Korea for their collaboration on improving our bilateral security measures, and I share our partner's anticipation for the time when Korean visitors may travel without visas to the United States," said Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff. "In our global fight against violent extremism, cooperation is paramount against a patient and adaptive enemy. This agreement demonstrates that enhanced security can also facilitate legitimate travel, which is a win-win for both our nations."

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 VWP has been authorized by U.S. law for over 20 years, with 27 current members from Asia and Europe. The U.S. has signed enhanced VWP agreements with the Czech Republic, Estonia, Latvia, Slovakia, Hungary, Lithuania and Malta in recent weeks. Each country committed to meeting the new requirements of the program, to include an electronic system of travel authorization.

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Remarks by Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff and Korean Minister of Foreign Affairs and Trade Yu Myung-Hwan at a Memorandum of Understanding Signing

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Secretary Chertoff: Well, Mr. Minister, welcome. And to all the members of the delegation from the Republic of Korea, we're delighted to sign this memorandum of agreement, as we move forward with the Visa Waiver Program process for the Republic of Korea. It's obviously a great day for both countries, and a great milestone in moving forward to increasing the travel that we have between our countries, which, of course, have longstanding ties of friendship.

As you know, the Visa Waiver Program plays two roles for the United States: It's a way of making it easier to have travelers and tourists come into the United States, but it's also a mechanism through which we make sure we have security to assure ourselves that nobody dangerous is coming into the United States. And by signing this agreement, we've been able to move forward, both to facilitate travel and to enhance security.

Now I should emphasize that the signing of the agreement does not mean that immediately Korea has been admitted to the Visa Waiver Program. I wouldn't buy my tickets yet on the assumption that you're not going to need a visa, but it is the foundation of our moving forward to implement the various arrangements that will be necessary so that hopefully by the end of this year we can begin to see visitors coming under this new Visa Waiver Program.

We are going to proceed forward with this, sending a technical assessment team to the Republic of Korea in June of 2008, and hopefully in that where we can identity precisely how to implement the final stages of this process. One element that I should mention is the electronic system for travel authorization, which will be a key element of the way we deal with visitors from all of the Visa Waiver countries.

This program is going to be up and running by the fall of this year. Essentially, it takes the information that's currently collected on the I-94 form, of which you fill out on the airplane, and it has people provide that information online before they come so they get a travel authorization, of which will be good for a period of two years. This will allow us a little bit more time to examine information that we get, and identify whether there are any potential problems for visitors. So it's a layer of additional security, but it does not require that people provide any additional information beyond what they're currently providing. And, of course, the value of this is it's online and therefore it's easy to file, and we can take it out either directly or through a travel agent.

So with this in place, and the agreement now signed, and our team scheduled to go to the Republic of Korea, I'm very hopeful that within months, we'll be able to see the benefits of the program and extend it to the Republic of Korea.

Again, Mr. Minister, thank you very much for coming to sign this agreement.

Minister Yu: Well, good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. It is indeed, of course, my great pleasure to sign this historic memorandum of understanding with Secretary Chertoff. First of all, I'd like to express my deep appreciation to President George W. Bush for his continuous support for the inclusion of Korea in the U.S. Visa Waiver Program. I'd also like to thank Secretary Chertoff and all officials from various related government agencies who have worked very closely together with us to make this event take place.

As you know, today is a very special day for us, for Koreans, since we have in place a legal framework for Korea's entry into the Visa Waiver Program. It is an important step forward in bringing our two nations ever closer, and strengthening our bilateral alliance relationship.

While the ROK-U.S. FTA -- I mean, free trade agreement -- will promote a free flow of goods and services, our

participation in the U.S. Visa Waiver Program will greatly increase people-to-people exchanges between our two countries, thus bringing our overall cooperation to its new height.

In addition, this Visa Waiver Program will enable us to achieve our common goal of freedom in travel, and a safer society that is free from terrorism and international crimes. And I sincerely look forward to a day when our two peoples can enjoy benefit of this program within this year. Thank you very much, Secretary.

Secretary Chertoff: We will take a few questions. I should say the Minister has got to leave very shortly to go up to Camp David with the President, so we'll have to be a little brief. But please tell us who you are, and ask away.

Yes.

Question: Thanks for having us along this morning -- or this afternoon. It's our first chance to ask you about the earthquake this morning in the Midwest, and whether it's a warning to really get the National Earthquake Reduction -- Risk-Reduction Program expedited at this point.

Secretary Chertoff: Well, the good news, as far as it's currently being reported to us, is it doesn't look like there was any serious injuries, or -- there's some damage, but not a tremendous amount of damage. I think in general it's a reminder to us we're not limited to earthquakes; that we live in a dangerous world -- and natural dangers as well as man-made dangers.

Earthquakes are, in certain areas, obviously a serious concern, both in the New Madrid fault and out in the West. We're currently engaged in the planning effort with respect to the response to earthquakes, although obviously the mitigation of damage begins with proper building codes and things of that sort.

So I don't think we need to remind about the importance of moving forward with this; we're continuing to do it. And, again, we're thankful that the damage wasn't worse, but we're going to continue to move forward with preparation.

Question: But with appropriations down 30 percent, and the sensor program only at 10 percent, this didn't happen in California. And is it time to really focus on other parts of the country?

Secretary Chertoff: Well, I think, first of all, in general we don't only focus in California. One of the major areas we are focused on planning for is New Madrid, which, as you know, runs down the center of the country. And then there are a couple of other places as well. So we definitely take a national focus to the issue of earthquakes, as we do with respect to all other disasters. And the key here is to have plans in place so that when there is a warning, or an earthquake occurs, you can respond effectively. And that's, of course, something which not only we're working on, but states and localities are working on as well.

Moderator: Other questions?

Question: Yes, my question is to both Secretary and Minister. You've said that you wish this program to be effective within this year, but can you be more specific? Do you have a specific month in mind at this point? And also, if you could walk us through some technical procedures that is necessary before this will take effect?

Secretary Chertoff: We don't have a specific month in mind. But I want to emphasize, this is not a -- it's an aspiration, it's a hope; it's not a guarantee. Part of the process of what's set forth in the agreement is to make sure we are exchanging the necessary information about, for example, terrorists; that we have proper protections in place in the passport itself -- what we call an e-passport -- that meets certain security standards; making sure that we have a good system for reporting lost and stolen passports. These are exactly the technical issues we'll be dealing with over the next months.

Minister Yu: Regarding e-passport, we'll start to issue it to the public from the first of August of this year.

Question: Secretary Chertoff, you were talking about the electronic authorization system, and the travelers are supposed to give -- provide personal data, which is similar to the data that we write --

Secretary Chertoff: Yes.

Question: -- on I-94 form. Online, that may worry some of the travelers because of the concerns that our personal data goes online, and that may be illegally used by the criminal groups, through hackings, for instance. So what kind of measures do you prepare to prevent those things that happen? And one other thing

is that this data, personal data, that we provide online, which organizations or institutions of departments in the United States government do you share with?

Secretary Chertoff: Well, it's -- this is exactly the same information that we obtain in written form, currently. If you flew over, for example, you would have had to fill out a form like this if you were not an American citizen. So there's no additional information.

Obviously what is transmitted to us we will maintain securely, just as we maintain the data securely when it comes in paper form. In the end, whether the information comes on a piece of paper or electronically, it is contained within the same database and under the same strict security and privacy measures. We obviously use it for immigration purposes, for admission purposes. It's available in some circumstances, for example, for law enforcement, and other purposes, but, again, not for commercial purposes -- all used by the United States government.

Moderator: Other questions? Okay, thank you very much.

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