

U.S. STATE DEPARTMENT CLARIFICATION ON VISA ISSUES

(7/03)

BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

- Starting October 1, 2003, each Visa Waiver Program traveler must present a machine-readable passport at a U.S. port of entry to be admitted to the U.S. without a visa. Those travelers without machine-readable passports must obtain a non-immigrant visa.
- This requirement includes all categories of passports - regular, diplomatic, and official - when the traveler is seeking to enter the U.S. for general business or tourist (B-1/B-2 visa) purposes.
- It has long been a requirement that countries whose nationals use the Visa Waiver Program have a machine-readable passport issuance program, but, previously, not all VWP travelers had to present a machine-readable passport. The October 1 requirement for admission simply stipulates that no one without a machine-readable passport will be able to enter under the auspices of the Visa Waiver Program.
- Machine-readable passports enhance security on several fronts. Not only can they be scanned at entry and exit points to verify integrity of the data, they also allow for the provision of advance passenger information which can enable border officials to process, much in advance of the arrival of the flight, the information received for further action, if necessary. In addition, lost or stolen machine-readable passports are easier to track.
- Since machine-readable passports facilitate rapid and precise identification, they also enable faster processing of travelers at ports of entry.
- The United States Government issued the first U.S. machine-readable passport in the Spring of 1981.

Questions and Answers:

1. What is a machine-readable passport?

-- In accordance with international standards, a machine-readable passport has two typeface lines printed at the bottom of the biographical page which can be read by machine. When read, these lines electronically provide identical information to that contained on the biographical page. The standards regarding size of the passport and photograph, and arrangement of data fields, especially the two lines of printed machine readable data, are set by the International Civil Aviation Organization, Document 9303, Part 1 Machine Readable Passports.

2. Who sets the standards for machine-readable travel documents?

-- The International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) is the international authority charged with developing global standards for machine-readable travel documentation (more information can be found at www.icao.int). In 1986, the International Civil Aviation Organization established a Technical Advisory Group on Machine Readable Passports.

3. What about the biometric requirement?

-- The Enhanced Border Security and Visa Entry Reform Act of 2002 requires the Department, no later than October 26, 2004, to issue visas using biometric identifiers.

-- The Enhanced Border Security and Visa Entry Reform Act also requires that the passport of any Visa Waiver Program traveler issued after October 26, 2004, must contain a biometric identifier that meets standards set by the International Civil Aeronautics Organization (ICAO).

-- We are working closely with those countries participating in the Visa Waiver Program, as well as other countries, to enhance data sharing with regard to travel documents.

-- In the process of screening visas and passports in the United States and abroad, biometrics will be a useful adjunct to existing screening processes that identify individuals who might be terrorists, criminals, or other aliens who might represent a security risk to the United States.

-- 27 countries participate in VWP: Andorra, Australia, Austria, Belgium, Brunei, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Japan, Liechtenstein, Luxembourg, Monaco, Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Portugal, San Marino, Singapore, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom.

-- Travelers carrying Belgian passports must have an MRP or appropriate B visa as of May 15, 2003.