



DEPARTMENT OF STATE

**STATEMENT
OF
JANICE L. JACOBS**

ASSISTANT SECRETARY OF STATE FOR CONSULAR AFFAIRS

**BEFORE THE
SENATE COMMITTEE ON HOMELAND SECURITY AND
GOVERNMENTAL AFFAIRS**

**HEARING
ON
THE LESSONS AND IMPLICATIONS OF THE CHRISTMAS DAY
ATTACK: SECURING THE VISA PROCESS**

APRIL 21, 2010

Chairman Lieberman, Ranking Member Collins, and distinguished Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to address you today on the security of the visa process. As a result of the terrorist attack on Flight 253, the President ordered corrective steps to address systemic failures in procedures we use to protect the people of the United States. Secretary Clinton reiterated this direction when she stated, “we all are looking hard at what did happen in order to improve our procedures to avoid human errors, mistakes, oversights of any kind. We in the State Department are fully committed to accepting our responsibility for the mistakes that were made, and we’re going to be working hard with the rest of the Administration to improve every aspect of our efforts.” In the months following this attack, the Department of State has reviewed its Visas Viper reporting requirements as well as its visa issuance and revocation criteria, and introduced technological and procedural enhancements to facilitate and strengthen visa-related business processes.

Our immediate attention was on addressing the deficiencies identified following the attempted attack on Flight 253. In the case of Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, on the day following his father’s November 19 visit to the Embassy, we sent a cable to the Washington intelligence and law enforcement community through proper channels (the Visas Viper system) stating that “Information at post suggests [that Farouk] may be involved in Yemeni-based extremists.” At the same time, the Consular Section entered Abdulmutallab into the Consular Lookout and Support System database known as CLASS. In sending the Visas Viper cable and checking State Department records to determine whether Abdulmutallab had a visa, Embassy officials misspelled his name, but entered it correctly into CLASS. As a result of the misspelling in the cable, information about previous visas issued to him and the fact that he currently held a valid U.S. visa was not included in the cable. At the same time, the correctly-spelled CLASS lookout was shared automatically with the primary lookout system used by the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and accessible to other agencies. On the basis of this CLASS entry Abdulmutallab was identified by DHS Customs and Border Protection (CBP) for secondary screening had the flight landed normally in Detroit. Additional reporting on

this case carried the correct spelling, with additional reports reaching the same file in Washington.

After reviewing these events, we took immediate action to improve the procedures and content requirements for Visas Viper cable reporting to call attention to the visa application and issuance material already present in the data that we share with our national security partners. In cabled instructions to the field, all officers were instructed to include complete information about all previous and current U.S. visa(s) in Visas Vipers cables. The guidance cable included specific instructions on methods to comprehensively and intensively search the database of visa records so that all pertinent information is obtained. I can confirm that these new requirements have been followed in all Visas Viper cables submitted since December.

In addition to these changes, we have reviewed the procedures and criteria used in the field to revoke visas and we are issuing new instructions to our officers. Revocation recommendations will be added as an element of reporting through the Visas Viper channel. In a March 22 cable to the field, we reiterated our guidance on use of the broad discretionary authority visa officers have to deny visas under section 214(b) of the Immigration and Nationality Act with specific reference to cases that raise security and other concerns. Instruction in appropriate use of this authority has been a fundamental part of officer training for several years.

The State Department has broad and flexible authority to revoke visas and we use that authority widely to protect our borders. Since 2001, we have revoked 57,000 visas for a variety of reasons, including over 2,800 for suspected links to terrorism. We have been actively using this authority as we perform internal reviews of our data against updated watchlist information provided by partner agencies. For example, we are re-examining information in our CLASS database regarding individuals with potential connections to terrorist activity or support for such activity. We continue to review all previous Visas Viper submissions and cases that other agencies are bringing to our attention from the No Fly and Selectee lists, as well as other sources. In these reviews, we have identified cases

for revocation and confirmed that substantial numbers of individuals in these cases hold no visas, and of those few who did, a significant portion had visas that were revoked prior to the current review. We recognize the gravity of the threat we face and are working intensely with our colleagues from other agencies with the desired goal that no person who may pose a threat to our security holds a valid visa.

Revocation is an important tool in our border security arsenal. We will use revocation authority prior to interagency consultation in circumstances where we believe there is an immediate threat. At the same time, expeditious coordination with our national security partners is not to be underestimated. There have been numerous cases where our unilateral revocation without interagency coordination would have disrupted important investigations that were underway by one of our national security partners. They had the individual under investigation and our revocation action would have disclosed the U.S. Government's interest in the individual and ended our colleagues' ability to quietly pursue the case and identify terrorists' plans and co-conspirators.

Had these Visas Viper and revocation refinements been in place in Abuja on November 20, 2009, the actions taken by the officer, and the outcomes from those actions would have changed in the following ways:

- The consular officer would transmit a Visas Viper cable – as was done in the Abdulmutallab case – but, as mandated by our updated procedures, the officer would use our robust search engine to uncover Abdulmutallab's visa record in the database of visa records and report that information in the cable.
- The consular officer would enter a P3B (possible terrorist) entry into the Consular Lookout and Support System (CLASS, our automated repository of watchlist information) – as was done in the Abdulmutallab case.
- The Department would review the Visas Viper Cable upon receipt and, following expedited consultation with our interagency partners, revoke Mr. Abdulmutallab's visa, consistent with our post-12/26 policy that no one with a P3B entry holds a valid

visa. This revocation likely would occur on the day the Visas Viper cable is transmitted.

In addition to these changes in Visas Viper procedures, we immediately began working to refine the capability of our current systems. For visa applications, we employ strong, sophisticated name searching algorithms to ensure matches between names of visa applicants and any derogatory information contained in the 27 million records found in CLASS. This strong search capability has been central to our procedures since automated lookout system checks were mandated following the 1993 World Trade Center bombing. We are using this significant experience with search mechanisms for visa applications to improve the systems for checking our records of visas issued.

The Department of State has been matching new threat information with our records of existing visas since 2002. We have long recognized this function as critical to the way we manage our records and processes. This system of continual vetting has evolved as post 9/11 reforms were instituted and is now performed by the Terrorist Screening Center (TSC). All records added to the Terrorist Screening Database are checked against the Department's Consular Consolidated Database (CCD) to determine if there are matching visa records. Matches are sent electronically from the TSC to the Department of State to flag cases for visa revocation. All such cases are carefully reviewed and most are revoked. Sometimes additional information is required from partner agencies. In addition, we have widely disseminated our data to other agencies that may wish to learn whether a subject of interest has a U.S. visa. Cases for revocation consideration are forwarded to us by DHS/Customs and Border Protection's (CBP) National Targeting Center (NTC) and other entities. Almost every day, we receive requests to review and, if warranted, revoke visas for potential travelers for whom new derogatory information has been discovered since the visa was issued. Our Operations Center is staffed 24 hours per day/7 days per week to address urgent requests, such as when the person is about to board a plane. In those circumstances, the State Department can use its authority to prudentially revoke the visa and prevent boarding.

Since the Presidentially-ordered Security Review, individuals have been added to the Terrorist Screening Database, No Fly, and Selectee lists to counter the specific vulnerability observed on December 25, 2009. The number of revocations has increased substantially as a result. As soon as information is established to support a revocation, an entry showing the visa revocation is added electronically to the Department of State's lookout system and shared in real time with the DHS lookout systems used for border screening.

Consular officers refused over 2 million visas out of some 8 million applications in FY2009. No visa is ever issued without it being run through security checks against our partners' data, including screening applicants' fingerprints against U.S. databases as well.

Even as we instituted immediate measures, we planned for the future, incorporating new technology, increasing data sharing and enhancing operational cooperation with partner agencies. We have a record of quickly adapting and improving our procedures to respond to security imperatives. We have a highly trained global team working daily to protect our borders and fulfill the overseas border security mission and other critical tasks ranging from crisis management to protection of American interests abroad. Within the Department we have a dynamic partnership between the Bureau of Consular Affairs and the Bureau of Diplomatic Security, the Office of the Coordinator for Counter Terrorism, and the Bureau of Intelligence and Research that add valuable law enforcement and investigative component and intelligence analysis to our capabilities. We use these strengths to address the continuing security threats.

The Department has a close and productive partnership with DHS, which has authority for visa policy. Over the past seven years both agencies significantly increased resources, improved procedures, and upgraded systems devoted to supporting the visa function. DHS receives all of the information collected by the Department of State during the visa process. DHS has broad access to our entire CCD, containing 136 million records related to both immigrant and nonimmigrant visas and covering visa actions of the last 13 years. Special extracts of data are supplied to elements within DHS, including

the Visa Security Units (VSUs) of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). These extracts have been tailored to the specific requirements of those units.

We are working closely with ICE Visa Security Units (VSUs) established abroad and with domestic elements of DHS, such as CBP's National Targeting Center. Pursuant to an October 2004 Memorandum of Understanding between the Department of State and the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, Visa Security Unit (ICE/VSU) on the Administrative Aspects of Assigning Personnel Overseas, and National Security Decision Directive 38 (NSDD-38) we work collaboratively with DHS to determine where the establishment of a VSU is appropriate based on a number of factors, including the effectiveness of alternative arrangements for DHS staff, available space at the embassy, support capabilities, and security concerns.

VSUs currently operate at 14 visa adjudicating posts in 12 countries. Since January 19, 2010, we received requests from DHS's Immigration and Customs Enforcement to open four additional VSUs and to augment staff at two existing VSUs. The Chiefs of Mission at those respective posts approved the four new VSUs and one request for expansion; with one request for expansion pending. Later this year, a joint State Department (consisting of officers from the Bureaus of Consular Affairs and Diplomatic Security)-DHS team will visit more Foreign Service posts to consider the establishment of additional VSUs.

DHS has access to U.S. passport records, used by CBP to confirm the identity of citizens returning to the U.S. We developed new card-type travel documents that work with the automated systems CBP installed at the U.S. land borders. We are collecting more information electronically and earlier in the process. Expanded data collection done in advance of travel will give DHS and partner agencies richer information and more time for analysis.

We make all of our visa information available to other involved agencies, and we specifically designed our systems to facilitate comprehensive data sharing. Other

agencies have immediate access to over 13 years of visa data, and they use this access extensively. In November 2009, more than 16,000 employees of DHS, the Departments of Defense (DOD) and Commerce, and the FBI made 920,000 queries on visa records. We embrace a layered approach to border security screening and are fully supportive of the DHS Visa Security Program.

The Department of State is at the forefront of interagency cooperation and data sharing to improve border security, and we have embarked on initiatives that will position us to meet future challenges while taking into consideration our partner agencies and their specific needs and requirements. We are implementing a new generation of visa processing systems that will further integrate information gathered from domestic and overseas activities. We are restructuring our information technology architecture to accommodate the unprecedented scale of information we collect and to keep us agile and adaptable in an age of intensive and growing requirements for data and data sharing.

We proactively expanded biometric screening programs and integrated this expansion into existing overseas facilities. In partnership with DHS and the FBI, we established the largest biometric screening process on the globe. We were a pioneer in the use of facial recognition techniques and remain a leader in operational use of this technology. In 2009, we expanded use of facial recognition from a selected segment of visa applications to all visa applications. We now are expanding our use of this technology beyond visa records. We are testing use of iris recognition technology in visa screening, making use of both identity and derogatory information collected by DOD. These efforts require intense ongoing cooperation from other agencies. We successfully forged and continue to foster partnerships that recognize the need to supply accurate and speedy screening in a 24/7 global environment. As we implement process and policy changes, we are always striving to add value in both border security and in operational results. Both dimensions are important in supporting the visa process.

The Department of State is an integral player on the border security team. We are the first line of defense. Our global presence, foreign policy mission, and personnel structure

give us singular advantages in executing the visa function throughout the world. Our authorities and responsibilities enable us to provide a global perspective to the visa process and its impact on U.S. national interests. While national security is paramount, the issuance and refusal of visas has a direct impact on foreign relations as well. Visa policy quickly can become a significant bilateral problem that harms U.S. interests if handled without consideration of foreign policy impacts. The conduct of U.S. visa policy has a direct and significant impact on the treatment of U.S. citizens abroad. The Department of State is in a position to anticipate and weigh those possibilities.

We developed and implemented intensive screening processes requiring personal interviews, employing analytic interview techniques, incorporating multiple biometric checks, all built around a sophisticated global information technology network. This frontline of border security has visa offices present in virtually every country of the world. They are staffed by highly trained and multi-lingual personnel of the Department of State. These officials are dedicated to a career of worldwide service and provide the cultural awareness, knowledge and objectivity to ensure that the visa function remains the frontline of border security.

In addition, we have 145 officers and 540 locally employed staff devoted specifically to fraud prevention and document security, including fraud prevention officers at overseas posts. We have a large Fraud Prevention Programs office in Washington, D.C. that works very closely with the Bureau of Diplomatic Security, and we have fraud screening operations using sophisticated database checks at both the Kentucky Consular Center and the National Visa Center in Portsmouth, New Hampshire. Their role in flagging applications and applicants who lack credibility, who present fraudulent documents, or who give us false information adds a valuable dimension to our visa process.

The Bureau of Diplomatic Security adds an important law enforcement element to the Department's visa procedures. There are now 75 Assistant Regional Security Officer Investigators assigned to 73 consular sections overseas specifically devoted to maintaining the integrity of the process. This year, the Bureau of Diplomatic Security

approved up to 48 additional investigator positions to work in consular sections overseas. They are complemented by officers working domestically on both visa and passport matters. These Diplomatic Security officers staff a unit within the Bureau of Consular Affairs that monitors overseas visa activities to detect risks and vulnerabilities. These highly trained law enforcement professionals add another dimension to our border security efforts.

The multi-agency team effort on border security, based upon broadly shared information, provides a solid foundation. At the same time we remain fully committed to correcting mistakes and remedying deficiencies that inhibit the full and timely sharing of information. We have and we will continue to automate processes to reduce the possibility of human error. We fully recognize that we were not perfect in our reporting in connection with the attempted terrorist attack on Flight 253. We are working and will continue to work not only to address that mistake but to continually enhance our border security screening capabilities and the contributions we make to the interagency effort.

We believe that U.S. interests in legitimate travel, trade promotion, and educational exchange are not in conflict with our border security agenda and, in fact, further that agenda in the long term. Our long-term interests are served by continuing the flow of commerce and ideas that are the foundations of prosperity and security. Acquainting people with American culture and perspectives remains the surest way to reduce misperceptions about the United States. Fostering academic and professional exchange keeps our universities and research institutions at the forefront of scientific and technological change. We believe the United States must meet both goals to guarantee our long-term security.

We are facing an evolving threat. The tools we use to address this threat must be sophisticated and agile. Information obtained from these tools must be comprehensive and accurate. Our criteria for taking action must be clear and coordinated. The team we use for this mission must be the best. The Department of State has spent years developing the tools and personnel needed to properly execute the visa function overseas

and remains fully committed to continuing to fulfill its essential role on the border security team.