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INTERVIEW

Frank Paul, Head of Unit, Large-Scale Information Systems, European Commission DG FSJ speaks to Johnny Ryan, EBF Project Manager.

We are particularly interested in the recent announcement on an entry/exit system, which was part of the Commission's package of Communications unveiled on 13 February 2008. Could you outline the system's goals and objectives? Perhaps you could also walk us through the timetable for its approval and implementation?

FRANK PAUL: The Commission Communication on preparing the next steps in border management outlines current measures and tools available for developing the concept of integrated border management and identifies some key gaps as regards the control of third-country nationals crossing the EU external borders. Even with the introduction of the second-generation Schengen Information System (SISII) and Visa Information System (VIS), there are limited means for systematically and no means for electronically recording the entries and exits of third-country nationals into and out of the Schengen territory. It is estimated that several million persons residing illegally in the EU are 'overstayers', that is, third-country nationals who have entered the territory legally but have remained beyond their authorised length of stay as determined by their visa or defined visa-exempt period. Alerts would be generated by the entry/exit system on such overstayers once their authorised length of stay expires and upon departure from the EU. The objective of the system is therefore to be able to identify with accuracy, through the use of biometrics, such overstayers, deter third-country nationals from overstaying, and provide information for operational purposes on patterns of overstaying that could aid in developing future visa policy.

The idea of an entry/exit will be discussed among Member States during the coming months. Such a system would not be implemented, however, before the VIS is fully operational at all Member State consular posts and border crossing points, and in any case not likely before 2015.

The US Department of Homeland Security has operated US-VISIT since 31 December 2003. What can we in Europe learn from four years of US-VISIT?

FRANK PAUL: US-VISIT has been an ambitious programme that has dealt with many challenges, especially as concerns its successful implementation at land borders. Europe will face similar challenges with the implementation of the VIS and the use of biometrics at borders, and will have to learn lessons from the implementation of US-VISIT. It must be recalled, however, that the configuration of Europe's external borders differs rather substantially from US points of entry, so a different approach for Europe must be followed. Once the VIS is in place, no new biometric equipment would need to be introduced for an entry/exit system and maximum synergies with the VIS must be leveraged in order to keep costs low. It must also be ensured that real added-value and an increase in the level of border security is gained from the introduction of such a system in Europe.

It should be noted that US-VISIT has recently adopted the European approach towards the VIS by capturing ten fingerprints of visa holders at its consular posts, so there are perhaps some lessons the US can also learn from European initiatives.

The recent package of Communications also mentioned a registered traveller programme. Could you discuss the goals and objectives of this programme? Could you also give some information about its timetable?

FRANK PAUL: A European-wide Registered Traveller programme would aim to facilitate border crossings for low-risk travellers from third countries to the EU. The possibility is introduced as a counterbalance to an entry/exit system, since the introduction of a Registered Traveller programme could speed up border crossings by third country nationals through the use of automated gates, allowing for eventual savings in border control resources. Security would also be heightened, as those third-country nationals who apply for Registered Traveller status would undergo a thorough screening process prior to travelling, and border authorities would be able to focus their resources on other groups of travellers. Member States would be able to implement facilitation measures at those border crossing points where the flow of passengers is increasing and where added-value could be gained from the introduction of automated gates. Depending on the outcome of discussions with Member States in the Council, the extension of existing programmes in Member States and perhaps an international pilot project with a third country could be put in place in the near future, but a fully-fledged European RT programme would not likely be implemented until the entry/exit system is in place.

The EU Commission continues to be one of the leaders in the field of biometric programmes - what is your view of biometrics as a technology in 2008 and what features do you look for in biometric technologies?

FRANK PAUL: Significant advances in biometric technologies have been made over the past several years, including improvements to enrolment and accuracy rates, hardware, software and applications for capturing and storing different types of biometrics. However, improvements are still required to mobile devices that could be used for quickly and accurately capturing fingerprint images, scanning and reading biographic and biometric data from travel documents, visas and RFID chips in e-passports. The interoperability of fingerprint templates is still a key area in which progress continues to be made but an international standard must still be agreed. The European Commission is currently developing large-scale biometric IT systems for border control that are based on fingerprints and facial images, in alignment with the types of biometric identifiers to be stored on European e-passports. As the use of biometrics becomes more prevalent in many facets of society, then for individuals, ease-of-use and understanding of the benefits biometrics bring to identity management is crucial. For governments, large-scale deployments will require interoperability, low costs and flexibility.

Migration, border management, and the prevention of terrorism were among most prominent elements of the 2005-2010 Hague programme. Looking beyond 2010, could you offer an insight into the next, post-Hague, programme, and do you anticipate that matters relating to border management will continue to be prioritised?

FRANK PAUL: The use of new technologies as tools to efficiently manage the EU's external borders, maintaining a high level of security while keeping Europe open to bona fide travellers is very much likely to feature high on the European agenda in the future. Illegal immigration and the threat of terrorism are unfortunately not phenomena that are likely to disappear any time soon, and measures must be taken to ensure that Europe remains a safe place. Nevertheless, Europe is the number one destination for tourists and our economy also depends on trade and investment in cooperation with our third-country partners. Therefore keeping Europe accessible and open to those with legitimate intentions will certainly be visible on the future justice and home affairs agenda.