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U.S. to Start Airline Background Checks

By LESLIE MILLER Associated Press Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) - Homeland Security officials say a government plan to check all airline passengers' backgrounds before they board a plane could be implemented by this summer.

It's such an urgent priority that the government will order airlines to provide background information on their customers to test the program, Homeland Security Undersecretary Asa Hutchinson said Monday.

In an interview with The Associated Press, Hutchinson said he wants to begin testing this spring. His spokesman, Dennis Murphy, said the plan could be fully operational by summer.

"The information that is given by a passenger to the airlines is important for us to have - in terms of name, address, date of birth - so we can properly assure the safety of a particular flight," Hutchinson said.

The Computer-Assisted Passenger Prescreening System, or CAPPS II, would screen all passengers by checking that information against commercial and government databases. Each passenger would be given one of three color-coded ratings.

Suspected terrorists or violent criminals would be designated "red" and forbidden to fly. Passengers who raised questions would be classified "yellow" and would receive extra security screening. Most would be "green" and simply go through routine screening.

Screening some foreigners after fingerprinting and photographing them already has resulted in 70 people being stopped from entering the country, although the foreigners-only program is only three weeks old, Hutchinson said.

Though none was a terrorist suspect, Hutchinson said the program, called US-VISIT, proved its ability to spot people trying to use fraudulent immigration documents to gain entry, he said.

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US-VISIT is in place at 115 airports and a dozen seaports and allows U.S. authorities to check people instantly against terrorist watch lists and a national criminal database.

It's CAPPs II that has been criticized by privacy advocates, who contend it infringes on civil liberties and might wrongly label people as security threats.

U.S. airlines have been reluctant to cooperate with the government because of those concerns and possible backlash from passengers.

Northwest Airlines, JetBlue Airways and Delta Air Lines already have come under fire for sharing passenger information with the government without letting customers know. They were criticized for voluntarily passing information in violation of their privacy policies.

Jim May, president of the Air Transport Association, the major airlines' trade group, said it's imperative that protections for passengers be in place before the government issues any directives to make the procedure mandatory. He questioned whether that can happen fast enough to allow full implementation this summer.

Top airline executives met at the Air Transport Association last week to discuss their misgivings about CAPPs II and agreed to work with the Homeland Security Department to ensure that traveler privacy is protected.

Hutchinson said the government will work with airlines to deal with their uneasiness but will compel them to participate.

"We expect at this point the airlines will want a clear rule or directive from the government before they'd release information," he said.

European airlines already have agreed to provide data, he said.

Testing would use old passenger data from the airlines' reservation systems, spokesman Murphy said. If it should happen to identify a terrorist suspect, Murphy said law enforcement officials would be notified.

In a wide-ranging discussion, Hutchinson said air cargo also is getting increased attention from federal security officials. Just before the national threat level was raised to orange, or high risk of terror attack during the Christmas and New Year's holidays, the government required random physical inspections of cargo loaded into the bellies of passenger planes, he said.

Hutchinson also said the National Football League's Super Bowl has been designated a special security site, which means extra resources will

be devoted to security for the game in Houston. Pilots already have been notified of temporary flight restrictions over the stadium.

On the Net:

Homeland Security Department: <http://www.dhs.gov>

Transportation Security Administration: <http://www.tsa.gov>

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