

Few checks for stolen passports-August 23, 2004.

Craig S. Smith/NYT. Monday, August 23, 2004

Terrorists benefit, Interpol warns

<http://www.iht.com/articles/535301.html>

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Lyon

Despite heightened terror alerts around the world, people traveling on stolen passports continue to slip across international borders because few countries check to see if incoming passports are among those known to be missing, says Interpol, the international police organization based here.

For example, Milorad Ulemek, believed to have ordered the assassination of Prime Minister Zoran Djindic of Serbia in March 2003, traveled in the previous two years with a stolen passport that border control officers in six countries stamped 26 times, including 6 times in Switzerland and 14 times in Greece.

“What's most shocking for me is how few countries are checking to see what passports coming in are stolen,” Ronald Noble, the secretary general of Interpol, said in a recent interview. He said that if European border controls had been tighter, Djindic might not have been killed. The lack of vigilance in screening for stolen passports is one of most disturbing lapses in an anti-terrorism effort that remains frighteningly lax, Interpol officials say.

Any review of the many terrorism investigations around the world shows the extent to which Al Qaeda and other terrorist organizations rely on falsified travel documents to move operatives. Often such documents are traded among associates in a terrorist network, but more frequently they are stolen or bought on the black market and changed with a photograph.

Noble is leading an effort to stop that by linking Interpol's 181 member countries to a stolen travel documents database that will let immigration officials at any border post screen incoming passports and ensure that they are not among the thousands of such documents reported stolen each year.

The database, which includes information for 1.7 million stolen passports and other travel documents, is available to all member states, though participation has been sluggish. Two months after the database was ready to receive information in June 2002, only two countries had sent Interpol lists of their stolen passports. Even today, only 49 countries have done so.

Noble has since won support from the European Union to encourage its member states to take part. By Dec. 31, Interpol expects to have several million stolen documents registered from dozens of countries. Interpol would like to be the repository for such information, Noble said, but privacy laws bar many countries from disclosing data from travel documents, even if they have been stolen. For such data, Interpol is developing a system that will send searches to databases in its member countries: If there were hits, the requesting party would receive a notice reporting which country had the corresponding record and the two countries could then exchange information.

Interpol is developing similar systems to allow countries to check fingerprints and DNA samples against those on file in other member countries. Noble said the systems were intended to protect the privacy while allowing the police to check whether people implicated in one country had been involved in crimes in another. "In the future, we hope that if a country sends a fingerprint, for example, we can relay the request to all our member countries and get a reply, yes or no," Noble said. Many travel documents listed in the Interpol database are blank passports stolen from consulates around the world. Blanks present a particular problem because once a photo and personal information have been added, there is no way to see that the document is false

unless the border police check the passport number, which normally exists in no database outside the home country.

The passport used by Ulemek was one of 100 blank Croatian passports stolen from a consulate in Mostar, Bosnia, in 1999. He used it to travel through Switzerland, Austria, Macedonia, Greece, Singapore and Croatia, before being arrested in Belgrade in May. The Afghan Northern Alliance leader, Ahmed Shah Massoud, was assassinated in September 2001 by two men carrying false Belgian passports created from stolen blanks. Belgium has had a special problem because many towns formerly issued passports, and thieves have broken into mayors' offices and stolen the blanks.

Interpol officials say it is not enough to check people on lists of terrorists. Even with the new security features on passports, like watermarks, holograms and laser-etched photographs, criminal syndicates can change stolen passports enough to pass the cursory inspection typical at border crossings. Meanwhile, it will take years before a standardized biometric system, like thumbprint or iris scans, is agreed upon internationally to make it effective for screening border crossers. "It's good to talk about biometrics, but we've wanted machine-readable passports for years, and most countries don't have them yet and don't even check the database that's available," Noble said. "It's the most significant vulnerability in any country and it's the easiest to address."

Interpol's database, available via a secure Internet connection, is only useful if it is used at

border control points around the world, but few countries have made it available to their immigration services. Instead, the Interpol database is accessible only to the Interpol National Central Bureau in most countries - including the United States, where the Interpol National Central Bureau is in Washington. If given access, immigration officers at airports or border crossings could enter a passport number and get a near instantaneous response as to whether the passport had been stolen. From January to the end of July, nearly 200 stolen travel documents were discovered by police agencies checking the system. The stolen documents on file are a small fraction of those circulating around the world, but still, Interpol says member countries should check all issued visas against the database to see which ones were obtained with a false document. The list of 1.7 million stolen documents fits on one floppy disk.

"Definitely, if we did a search of our database, you'd find people who were issued a valid visa by the U.S. using a stolen passport," an Interpol official said. He said countries had a moral obligation to take part in the system, adding that the next time a stolen passport was used to commit a major terrorist attack, "if you haven't done your job to warn the world, you're in trouble."

Should Greece Be Admitted to the Visa Waiver Pilot Program?

Testimony Before the
Subcommittee on Immigration and Claims of the
Judiciary Committee of the U.S. House of Representatives
by Wayne Merry
The Atlantic Council of the United States
(speaking in a personal capacity)
Thursday, February 10, 2000.

Mr. Chairman,

Is Greece eligible for the Visa Waiver Pilot Program? Arguments in favor include encouraging tourism, reducing the costs of consular services, foreign policy considerations, and even sentiment. With a background in Greek political and security affairs, I wish to address issues of law enforcement.

The visa is first and foremost an instrument of American law enforcement at our national borders, as are Coast Guard cutters and drug-sniffing dogs in airports. The visa is a screening mechanism and a deterrent to prevent criminal and other ineligible persons entering our territory. Waiver of the visa requirement is therefore a suspension of one of our frontier defenses, the furthest forward of those defenses in fact. The United States should set aside this tool only for countries whose own standards and performance in relevant aspects of law enforcement are comparable with our own.

Last spring the Clinton Administration established two criteria for Greece to qualify for visa

waiver; neither has been met. The first criterion was reform of the hopelessly outmoded Greek passport issuance procedures to prevent large-scale fraud. At present, there is little to prevent an enterprising retailer of false passports from obtaining a new passport every day of the week in different cities; there is also little effective control of document fraud in obtaining passports. The U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service offered its Greek counterparts assistance in creating a country-wide data base to deal with these problems, but to no avail. During a recent visit to Athens, a senior American official told me privately there has been no Greek action on this issue at all.

Worse, for many years Athens has been a major regional entrepot for fraudulent visas and passports (including lost and stolen American passports). This problem has greatly increased with the opening of the country's northern borders with its Balkan neighbors. Were Greece added to the Visa Waiver Pilot Program, the incentive for passport and other document fraud would obviously skyrocket. In the absence of effective controls by Greek authorities, the result would be a flood of ineligible persons seeking entry into the United States using forged Greek passports.

Note, please, that I am not talking about Greek citizens overstaying their allotted time as tourists or taking employment inconsistent with their status in this country. I am talking about people around the world looking for a gap in our border controls who would find a gaping loophole in Greece were the visa requirement lifted. Surely, the most elemental and necessary standard of law enforcement to justify visa waiver is effective control of passport issuance. Greece has not yet attained this standard.

The Administration's second criterion was Greek adherence to the so-called Schengen regime, the European Union's common frontier and crime-fighting accord. Let me make an important distinction: membership in Schengen is not the same as fulfillment of its standards. It is no secret that Greek entry into Schengen early this year was a political decision of the European Union made despite serious reservations by many law enforcement officials of the other member states. It is no secret these reservations about Greece persist. In January the Italian Government requested a special bilateral summit meeting to address deficiencies in Greek performance and their impact on Italy. The BBC aired a program (in which I took part) on prime-time television questioning whether Greece was ready for Schengen. More recently in Athens, a top government official responsible for public order admitted to me off the record that full adherence to Schengen standards would require the complete closure of the country's northern borders.

For many years Greece was denied entry into Schengen because it could not control the movement of illegal refugees into the European Union due to its proximity to the Middle East, its long coastal frontiers, and its notoriously poor police work. In recent years this problem has increased enormously by huge numbers of Balkan peoples fleeing south across the borders with Albania, the former Yugoslavia, and Bulgaria. For the United States, this is a direct problem

only insofar as these persons obtain false passports in the flourishing Greek personal documents market. However, a very real and more serious concern for us is the permeability of Schengen standards in Greece as a medium for international organized crime.

The Schengen regime is a defense structure against the global trade in narcotics, arms, prostitution, money laundering, and so forth. International organized crime groups view Greece as a weak spot in Schengen and have established themselves on Greek soil, not to exploit the modest domestic market but with the entire European Union in mind. This is the nightmare facing law enforcement officials throughout the EU with Greece only a half-hearted member of the regime. By lifting the United States visa requirement we would enter the nightmare and compound the already excessive burden on our law enforcement agencies in dealing with global crime.

More broadly, Schengen is a test of a government's commitment to standards of law enforcement. Many other European countries have met the test and thus met our standards for the Visa Waiver Pilot Program. Greece has not. Mr. Chairman, I strongly believe a third criterion should be added and I am appalled the Administration neglected to do so. The most basic and fundamental requirement of national law enforcement in the world today is the fight against organized terrorism. Greece takes satisfaction in the fact that its domestic terrorist problem is not among the world's worst. That satisfaction has produced a complacency reflected in the worst record on counter-terrorism anywhere on earth over the past quarter century. The salience of this problem for the U.S. Congress is that the primary target of this terrorism is the United States of America and its representatives.

I refer to the Greek domestic terrorist organization called "17 November". In nearly twenty-five years of lethal activity, not a single member of this group has ever been identified, apprehended, or punished in any way. Last year, this group carried out five attacks, nearly killing the German and Dutch ambassadors (the terrorists are learning new weapons and tactics, so have had a few near misses). This group is well-organized and disciplined, has recruited a new generation of killers, and is supremely self-assured. Worse, it is unopposed. Recent public statements by the terrorists show they know they are unchallenged by law enforcement and pretty much free to proceed as they choose. During a recent visit to Athens I had occasion to raise this issue with senior responsible government officials and with some of the country's top commentators. The response was a generalized shrug of indifference. I did not hear a single firm and unequivocal statement that these terrorists should be defeated and the country's laws enforced.

Greek official passivity on counter-terrorism is relevant to the visa waiver question on two grounds. First, if a government performs so poorly and is so negligent in fighting home-based terrorism, how can it be expected to be serious or competent in any other form of organized crime fighting?

Second, "17 November" has American blood on its hands. Five of our country's servants have died, but had all the bombings and other attacks against Americans succeeded, that toll would be at least fifteen times as high. Our Government designates five cities in the world as "Critical Threat" from terrorism. Athens is one. Our taxpayers spend more money protecting our representatives in the Greek capital than anywhere else on earth. The dollar savings (not to mention the human savings) we would garner from Greek arrest of the terrorists dwarf any potential economy at the Athens Embassy from elimination of the visa requirement.

Until the Greek Government takes the minimal step of apprehending the murderers of our diplomatic and military representatives, I believe the United States should deny approbation to Greek law enforcement through waving the visa requirement. We must not signal that passivity against terrorism is acceptable. At the most basic level, without the visa requirement as a deterrent, what would prevent the terrorists coming to this country to continue their activities on American soil if they chose?

Mr. Chairman, many people see the visa requirement as an impediment to human and business contacts or as a lack of American openness to the world. It may be these things, but the visa is also as much a tool of law enforcement in today's world as the metal detector or fingerprints. When we deprive ourselves of this tool for any country's citizens, we must be certain that country is dedicated to law not only in principle but in practice, that it has a record of strong enforcement rather than just strong rhetoric. The Hellenic Republic fails these standards and should not be admitted into the Visa Waiver Pilot Program. I urge the Administration to communicate these realities clearly and forcefully to the Greek Government so it may understand what needs to be done and why.

Mr. Chairman, it is an honor to appear before your Committee. Thank you.

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FORGED DOCUMENTS WARNING

- The Submission of Forged Documents in your Visa Application is an offence under the Ghanaian Law and could lead to arrest & prosecution by Ghana Police CID
- The British High Commission is working with the Bank of Ghana, as well as the ARB Apex and major Banks in the detection of forgery and this has led to a number of recent arrests.

POLICY STATEMENT ON FORGED DOCUMENTS

British High Commission Policy Statement regarding the use of Forged & Stolen Documents in Support of Visa Applications

Your visa application will be carefully scrutinised by an Entry Clearance Officer and comprehensive checks will be carried out to check the authenticity of the documents supplied by you in support of your application.

Many visa applicants are under the mistaken impression that they can use forged documents to support their applications. This is a criminal act in Ghana, which the British High Commission cannot ignore. I feel that it is my duty to warn you that presentation of forged documents in support of a visa application may lead to arrest and prosecution by the Ghanaian Police Service.

The British High Commission and the Ghana Police Service are determined to stamp out the use of forged documents in support of visa applications. It is the policy of the British High Commission, Accra to report the use of forged and stolen documents to the Ghana Police and to co-operate fully with subsequent investigations. Over the next few weeks the High Commission will be undertaking a number of enquiries into the documents you have submitted. If it is discovered that you have used a forged document (such as a bank statement, passport copy, invitation letter or employment letter) the matter will be reported to the Police. Any new documents that you submit subsequently, for example with your appeal, will be subjected to the same scrutiny and forged document use will also be reported to the Police.

We work closely with the Ghana Police Service and with other concerned organisations such as Ghana's banks and have developed a close working relationship over the years. Our co-operation has resulted in many successful prosecutions by the Ghanaian Police Service. The penalties that may be imposed if a conviction results are severe and may involve imprisonment.

Please think carefully before you submit your application. If you are not absolutely sure of the authenticity of your documents do not take the risk of submitting them.

Director of Visa Services

British High Commission
Accra