

Statement of Ranking Member Sheila Jackson Lee (D-TX)

Subcommittee on Border and Maritime Security

Hearing - "Passport Fraud: An International Vulnerability"

April 4, 2014

I would like to thank Chairman Miller for holding today's hearing to discuss security concerns regarding individuals traveling on lost, stolen, or fraudulent passports.

While many questions remain unanswered regarding the tragic disappearance of Flight 370, we do know that two passengers on that flight boarded the aircraft using stolen passports. Two Iranian nationals were allowed to travel using Italian and Austrian passports that had been entered into INTERPOL's Stolen and Lost Travel Document (SLTD) database in 2012 and 2013. Reports suggest that these individuals were not criminals or terrorists, but rather asylum-seekers hoping to reach Europe.

Nevertheless, the fact that at least in certain countries travelers can readily board aircraft using passports that do not belong to them is cause for serious concern. If a couple of asylum-seekers can do it, so can terrorists or criminals. In fact, there are known examples of terrorists traveling on fraudulent documents.

According to INTERPOL, Ramzi Yousef, convicted of masterminding the 1993 World Trade Center bombing in New York, committed his crimes after traveling internationally on a stolen passport. Also, Samantha Lewthwaite, the so-called "White Widow" of a London July 2005 suicide bomber, is wanted in Kenya and currently at large with aliases linked to a fraudulent passport and a passport reported stolen.

It is my understanding that the U.S. is ahead of most of the rest of the world when it comes to preventing individuals from traveling on lost, stolen, or fraudulent documents. The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) systematically checks all travelers' documents against appropriate lost and stolen databases. These checks yield results.

For example, in fiscal year 2013, U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) reviewed 17,710 possible hits against lost and stolen databases, resulting in 496 individuals being denied from boarding planes to the U.S. Already in fiscal year 2014, CBP has reviewed 10,806 possible hits, resulting in 159 individuals being denied boarding.

Since the Flight 370 incident, DHS has expanded its checks to include not just arriving passengers, but also those departing this country. While overdue, this step should close a remaining loophole regarding travelers using fraudulent documents to fly to or from this country.

I hope to hear from our DHS witnesses today about why departing passengers had not previously been included in their checks, and whether any analysis has been done subsequently to determine whether passengers had been departing the U.S. on documents that do not belong to them.

I hope to hear from all of our witnesses about how we can encourage our international partners to follow the lead of the U.S. and a handful of other countries that regularly check travel documents against INTERPOL's SLTD database.

It is my understanding that traveling on lost, stolen, or otherwise fraudulent travel documents is relatively commonplace in certain parts of the world. Doing so is made possible because fewer than 20 of INTERPOL's 190 countries systematically check passports against the SLTD. Although the Flight 370 incident has focused attention on this vulnerability, it was already known to INTERPOL.

In fact, speaking at the seventh Annual ID WORLD Summit in February, just before the Flight 370 incident, INTERPOL Secretary General Ronald K. Noble lamented that only a handful of countries are systematically using SLTD to screen travelers, leaving our global security apparatus vulnerable to exploitation by criminals and terrorists. This is unacceptable.

I hope to hear from our witnesses today about how we can encourage other countries, particularly those we work closely with on aviation security matters, to begin regularly screening passengers' documents against INTERPOL's database. The security of the traveling public, including U.S. citizens traveling between foreign countries, could well be at stake.