

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE****Statement of Ranking Member Bennie G. Thompson*****Combating Terrorist Travel: Does the Visa Waiver Program Keep Our Nation Safe?***

March 17, 2015 (Washington) – Today, Committee on Homeland Security Ranking Member Bennie G. Thompson (D-MS) delivered the following prepared remarks for the Border and Maritime Security subcommittee hearing entitled “Combating Terrorist Travel: Does the Visa Waiver Program Keep Our Nation Safe?”:

“I would also like to thank the witnesses for appearing today to testify about the Visa Waiver Program (VWP) and its implications for our Nation’s security. Since its establishment in the wake of the terrorist attacks of 9/11, this Committee has been actively engaged in helping to address the threat of terrorist travel. Our focus has included addressing the potential security vulnerabilities of the VWP and ways to prevent terrorists from exploiting the program.

For example, as Chairman I authored a key provision of the 9/11 Act requiring the implementation of an Electronic System for Travel Authorization (ESTA) to provide DHS with more information about VWP travelers prior to their departure for the U.S.

From the inception of the ESTA program in August 2008, CBP has approved over 80 million ESTAs but denied over 4,300 applications as a result of vetting against the Terrorist Screening Database. Also, CBP has denied over 35,000 applications for individuals who applied for an ESTA using a passport reported lost or stolen.

Recently, the VWP has been the subject of renewed attention due to concerns about the potential threat posed by foreign fighters with the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), and particularly those holding western passports who could attempt to travel under the VWP.

In response to this foreign fighter threat, late last year DHS took the step of enhancing the ESTA program by requiring travelers to provide additional data elements on their ESTA applications. This additional data allows DHS to better vet VWP travelers prior to departure to the U.S., in turn better securing the VWP. It is imperative that DHS and their Federal partners continue to work with Congress to identify and address any new or outstanding vulnerabilities within the VWP. At the same time, it is important not to focus exclusively on western foreign fighters and the VWP such that we lose sight of other individuals who may seek to do us harm via other means.

Finally, we should remain mindful that the overwhelming majority of travelers to the U.S., whether under the VWP or otherwise, are legitimate travelers coming to this country for business or pleasure. About 19 million people from VWP countries visited the United States in fiscal year 2012, accounting for 40 percent of all international visitors. We welcome their visits, embrace the cultural exchange, and recognize their important contributions to America’s economy.

Today, I look forward to hearing from the witnesses about their perspectives on VWP as it currently exists, and whether the program can be made more secure while continuing to allow us to welcome visitors from around the world.”

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