

May 24, 2007

WASHINGTON -U.S. Rep. Gus Bilirakis (R-FL), member of the House Homeland Security Committee, today introduced legislation that would strengthen national maritime security by screening interdicted aliens against Department of Homeland Security (DHS) biometric watch lists.

In an effort to effectively track immigration violators, criminals, previous deportees and possible terrorists, this legislation would create a pilot program for immigration and law enforcement officials to collect biometric information from waterborne migrants seeking illegal entry into the United States.

"I am very concerned by the fact that those who seek to break our nation's immigration laws, and those who may wish to commit terrorist acts, remain undetected and are simply repatriated to their home country without consequence; leaving them free to continue their illegal and dangerous behavior," said Rep. Bilirakis. "The biometric identification of aliens interdicted in the maritime environment has the potential to greatly improve the security of America's coastal borders. Developing this capability will help DHS law enforcement personnel at sea quickly identify migrant violators using biometrics. They will be able to act immediately to detain those who may pose a threat to our security or consistently flout their disregard for our nation's laws."

Every year, DHS estimates that more than 10,000 unknown migrants attempt to cross in small boats from the Dominican Republic to Puerto Rico. Almost 50 percent of maritime migrant apprehension occurs in this area alone. Current procedure dictates that interdicted migrants be repatriated because the United States lacks the ability to verify the identity of these apprehended migrants, posing a serious risk to national security.

Congressman Bilirakis had initially included this biometric collection pilot program as an amendment in the Fiscal Year 2008 Department of Homeland Security Authorization Act, H.R. 1684, which was unanimously approved by the Homeland Security Committee. Unfortunately, this amendment was stripped from H.R. 1684 on the House floor during the debate on final passage for procedural reasons.

In February, Coast Guard Rear Admiral David Pekoske testified before Congressman Bilirakis's Border, Maritime, and Global Counterterrorism (BMGC) Subcommittee regarding the challenges of coastal security. During his testimony, RADM Pekoske highlighted an on-going partnership with US-VISIT to deploy mobile biometrics collection equipment on Coast Guard cutters operating in the Mona Pass between the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico,

Since starting this effort in November 2006, the Coast Guard has interdicted more than 21 vessels containing almost 600 undocumented aliens. Approximately 22 percent of those interdicted were enrolled in US-VISIT as prior felons or immigration violators.

This legislation would expand this effort into a formal pilot program and require DHS to evaluate the results to determine the feasibility and appropriateness of expanding such

capability to all DHS maritime vessels. It has garnered original co-sponsorship by Homeland Security Committee Ranking Member Peter King (R-NY), as well as BMGC Subcommittee Ranking Member Mark Souder (R-IN) and Congressman David Davis (R-TN).

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