

June 06, 2007

WASHINGTON - Following the disregarded warning of a passenger infected with an extensive drug-resistant tuberculosis (XDR TB), U.S. Rep. Gus Bilirakis (R-FL), today questioned Department of Homeland Security (DHS) officials about the potential impact an error like this could have had on the public health and well-being of Americans.

After further investigation by DHS authorities, it was concluded that the XDR TB infected person who wrongly entered the U.S. on May 24, 2007, did so despite the fact that a customs and border agent was provided warnings about the individual's highly dangerous illness.

"I was extremely alarmed when I learned that someone with a very dangerous form of tuberculosis had entered into this country undetected; potentially endangering the health of many Americans," said Bilirakis. "I was more concerned when I discovered that this security breach could have been prevented.

Bilirakis asked the Commissioner of U.S. Customs and Border Protection, Ralph Basham, about the types of additional measures that can be taken by DHS to prevent this error from being repeated. He also inquired about how such warnings can be better communicated to customs and border officials in the future.

"This real world test of our homeland security defenses has showed glaring deficiencies that make me doubt whether we are as prepared as we need to be to stop someone with malicious intentions from entering our country and causing unimaginable harm," said Bilirakis. "While I am pleased that DHS will use the lessons learned from this incident to strengthen our homeland security, I hope that the Department is proactive instead of reactive when it thinks about potential risks to our country's safety."

###