

Rep. Bilirakis Questions Chertoff on USF Case

WASHINGTON (Sep. 5) -- During a House Homeland Security Committee hearing Wednesday, U.S. Rep. Gus Bilirakis (R-Fla.) questioned Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff on the wider security concerns raised in light of the federal indictment of two foreign-born University of South Florida (USF) students on explosives charges.

Last Friday, Youssef Megahed and Ahmed Mohamed were indicted by a federal grand jury on explosive charges following their Aug. 4 arrest near a military prison for enemy combatants in South Carolina. Both men are Egyptian citizens; Mohamed in the U.S. on a student visa and Megahed a permanent U.S. resident.

During Wednesday's hearing, Bilirakis pressed Chertoff on the number of foreign students since September 11, 2001, who have enrolled in classes but failed to attend. He also inquired about the Department's ability to monitor the actions of foreign students once in the country, and whether there is proper coordination between all of the responsible federal agencies on cases of this nature.

"There remains considerable concern over how we approve, verify and track foreign students entering this country on a visa," said Bilirakis following the hearing. "Nearly all international students who enter this country on student visas are here to learn. What I am concerned about is how we are dealing with those few who have other intentions in mind."

Bilirakis also commented on reports that Mohamed had a criminal record in Egypt prior to entering the United States on a student visa. "It would be very troubling if it is true that this student was improperly issued a visa despite his criminal background, which could potentially make him ineligible for admission," he said following the hearing.

Bilirakis asked Chertoff for a listing of specific criminal acts that would preclude the issuance of a visa or deny entry into the United States of a nonimmigrant foreign student.

In a letter sent to Chertoff on Wednesday, Bilirakis requested a full briefing by appropriate DHS officials on the specifics of the USF case and the related security issues it has raised.

"I believe we must more closely examine the backgrounds of those seeking student visas and then carefully monitor their activities once they have entered the country to ensure

that they have come here for legitimate academic purposes," Bilirakis wrote. "I would appreciate your efforts to facilitate a briefing on this case and the related issues it raises for me with the appropriate Department officials at the soonest possible time."