

Committee Backs Bilirakis Biometric Measure

WASHINGTON (26 Jun) - On Thursday, legislation authored by U.S. Rep. Gus M. Bilirakis (R-Fla.), which creates a pilot program for the mobile biometric screening of aliens interdicted in the maritime environment, was approved by the House Committee on Homeland Security.

Congressman Bilirakis's proposal (H.R. 2490), would create a pilot program enabling the U.S. Coast Guard, the lead federal agency for maritime homeland security, to collect biometric information on waterborne aliens and screen them against existing federal databases of those wanted for immigration violations and other transgressions of U.S. laws. The bill also requires the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) to evaluate the results to determine the feasibility and appropriateness of expanding such capability throughout the DHS maritime border system.

"This legislation will greatly enhance the safety and security of America's maritime environment by ensuring that the Coast Guard has every tool at its disposal to protect America's maritime borders," said Bilirakis. "I am pleased the Committee acted decisively to include this very important weapon in our nation's maritime border security defenses."

Each year, DHS estimates that more than 10,000 unknown migrants attempt to cross in small boats from the Dominican Republic to Puerto Rico alone; representing almost 50 percent of maritime migrant apprehensions. Most interdicted migrants currently are repatriated because the United States lacks the ability to verify their identity, posing a potentially serious risk to national security.

"The instant processing of illegal aliens in our maritime domain through biometric identifiers is critical to clamping down on immigration violators, criminals, previous deportees and possible terrorists," said Bilirakis. "Without it, these often repeat offenders will continue to bounce off our existing maritime border security efforts until they successfully gain entry into the United States."

The language of the bill previously passed the U.S. House of Representatives when it was unanimously adopted as an amendment to the Coast Guard Authorization Act

(H.R. 2830) on April 24, 2008.