



PRESS RELEASE

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For immediate release

HEATHROW FINGERPRINTING: WHO'S IN CHARGE?

BUCK-PASSING RAISES SECURITY CONCERNS OVER MASS "BIOMETRIC CAPTURE" AT INTERNATIONAL AIR HUB.

EXPATS' GROUP ADVISES TRAVELLERS TO AVOID HEATHROW.

London's Heathrow airport has introduced what it appropriately calls the "biometric capture" both of domestic passengers and of international travellers who are transiting to a domestic flight. The website¹ of BAA, the Spanish-owned company that runs Britain's airports, explains: "If you're departing on a domestic flight, or transferring from an international to a domestic flight, you'll be asked to provide fingerprints and have your photograph taken..." This is so that all biometric captives can "enjoy the same great facilities and wide choice of shops and restaurants". In other words, Heathrow is unable to keep transit passengers airside. According to BAA, passengers who "refuse to provide their data, or to validate it prior to boarding" will be "denied entry and will not be able to board their flight".

NO2ID Expats' Group strongly objects to the forced "capture" of highly sensitive personal data. This practice obviously raises serious privacy issues. The use of fingerprints for identification purposes opens up frightening new opportunities for identity theft. If your credit card details are stolen, you can at least cancel the card and get a new one. If your scanned fingerprints are stolen, what will you do? Hygiene is a further concern. No assurances have been given that the hand scanners will be disinfected between "captures". And the new procedure will further slow down the processing of passengers at what is already Europe's worst major airport for flight delays.²

Another big failing is the confusion over who is ultimately responsible for the "biometric capture". The BAA site says that the measure is "required by the Government". On some pages³ the site is more specific: biometric capture is "required by the Department for Transport". But when a NO2ID member asked Britain's Department for Transport (DfT) about this, he received the following reply: "This is a border and immigration issue (Border & Immigration Agency) and may I suggest you contact them with your query". He did so. In response, the agency sent him (presumably by mistake) an internal e-mail chain revealing interdepartmental chaos. It includes the following view from Her Majesty's Inspector, Border & Immigration Agency: "This is certainly not a BIA issue". The

¹ http://www.baa.com/portal/controller/dispatcher.jsp?CiID=a5f5104cf8e28110VgnVCM20000039821c0a___&ChID=217bf54776d4110VgnVCM10000036821c0a___&Ct=B2C_CT_GENERAL&CtID=448c6a4c7f1b0010VgnVCM200000357e120a___&ChPath=Home%5eHeathrow%5eGbl%5eHeathrow%5eGeneral%5eAirport+information%5eFlight+Connections

² Association of European Airlines, press release 19 Feb. 2008, <http://files.aea.be/News/PR/Pr08-008.pdf>

³ See, for example,

http://www.baa.com/portal/controller/dispatcher.jsp?CiID=a5f5104cf8e28110VgnVCM20000039821c0a___&ChID=217bf54776d4110VgnVCM10000036821c0a___&Ct=B2C_CT_GENERAL&CtID=448c6a4c7f1b0010VgnVCM200000357e120a___&ChPath=Home%5eHeathrow%5eGbl%5eHeathrow%5eGeneral%5eAirport+information%5eFlight+Connections

biometric checks are, the inspector argues, "for domestic flights which is most certainly a DfT and/or BAA issue around how they have set up Terminal 5". So the enquirer turned to BAA. Who, he asked, is actually responsible for the introduction and implementation of biometric capture at Heathrow? And would BAA agree with the BIA's view that "biometric capture" is a response to the way in which Heathrow's new Terminal 5 has been set up? To date, no reply has been received. But the BAA website still states that the measures are "required by the Department for Transport".

All of this raises two particular issues:

- If there is such confusion about responsibilities, who will ensure that the following promise, made on BAA's website, is actually kept: "Your personal data will be encrypted immediately to keep it secure, and will be destroyed within 24 hours of use, in accordance with the Data Protection Act. It will not be used for any other purpose. Data stored does not include your personal details."
- Given that at least one of the government departments concerned has sent a string of sensitive internal e-mails to a casual outside enquirer over an unsecured link, can the services involved be entrusted with the scanned images of travellers' fingerprints?

So far, Heathrow is the only airport to enforce "biometric capture" of those with connecting flights to the UK and Ireland (whether or not via Terminal 5). The UK Information Commissioner's Office has now stated that the fingerprinting may be illegal. It advises passengers who are ordered to give their fingerprints to do so "under protest".⁴

But NO2ID Expats' Group suggests that international travellers with connecting domestic flights should avoid flying via Heathrow at all, until such time as "biometric capture" is discontinued. Other hubs, whether in the UK or in other EU countries, should be preferred for the time being. This may entail using airlines other than BA. Rail or sea links may also be an option in some cases.

It should be emphasised that British officialdom has a particularly poor data protection record. Over the past year alone, UK government services have managed to lose: a child benefit payments database with the personal data, including bank account details, of around 25 million people; the unencrypted details of 7,500 vehicles in Northern Ireland and the names and addresses of their owners; records of 3 million British driving test candidates (they were on a hard drive that disappeared from a "secure facility" in Iowa, USA); and a Ministry of Defence laptop containing details of some 600,000 people, most of whom had expressed interest in joining the British armed forces.

NO2ID Expats' Group is a branch of the British organisation NO2ID, which is campaigning against the introduction of ID cards and the database state in the UK. NO2ID is backed by a wide range of organisations and political parties. More details on its main website: www.no2id.net

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⁴ Mail on Sunday, 23 March 2008,

http://www.mailonsunday.co.uk/pages/live/articles/news/news.html?in_article_id=542373&in_page_id=1770