

**Thursday, 10 July 2008**

**HOME OFFICE**

**Visa Waiver Test**

**The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Jacqui Smith):** Today my right honourable friend the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (David Miliband) and I are announcing the final stage of the UK's first global review of visa regimes.

Britain thrives as a society and economy which is open for business and tourism to people from around the world, but only on the basis that there are clear and effective ways to distinguish legitimate from illegitimate travellers. This year we will introduce some of the biggest ever changes to strengthen Britain's border security as we complete implementation of a system of triple checks: stronger overseas checks and wider pre-arrival screening; tougher checks at the UK border itself; and strong new measures within the UK - against illegal immigration, organised crime and other threats.

We believe our tough checks abroad, working with foreign governments, are amongst the most important. Overseas controls start with fingerprint visas, pre-arrival watch list checks and officers stationed overseas at key crossing points. As part of these overseas defences our Visa Waiver Test helps us determine whether our visa regimes are in the right places. The Test was announced in March 2007. Travel from every country beyond the European Economic Area and Switzerland was measured against a range of criteria including illegal immigration, crime and security concerns. The Test has been taken forward in close collaboration with other Departments across Whitehall. We have now reached the final stage of the Test.

Our assessment found that there was a strong case for introducing a visa regime for a number of currently visa free countries, based on the current level of risk posed to the UK by sufficient numbers of their nationals, or travellers claiming to be such. A visa regime is a simple but very effective immigration, crime and security control measure.

We recognise that we have historic, economic and political ties with the countries being examined; the introduction of a visa regime is a significant step and a decision we do not take lightly. For this reason, we will now enter a period of detailed dialogue with the governments concerned to examine how risks can be reduced in a way that obviates the need for a visa regime to be introduced. This activity will last for six months. During this period, countries identified will need to demonstrate a genuine commitment to put into effect credible and realistic plans, with clear timetables, to reduce the risks to the UK, and begin real implementation of these plans by the end of the dialogue period.

The countries we are working with through the mitigation process are: Bolivia, Botswana, Brazil, Lesotho, Malaysia, Mauritius, Namibia, South Africa, Swaziland,

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Trinidad and Tobago and Venezuela. Promising and constructive dialogue has already begun with a number of countries but more is required.

The Test also indicated that a number of changes were possible for countries currently with visa status. Over the next six months, we will study the options further to see how the visa process can be more closely calibrated to the risks nationals from these countries pose, with consequent benefits for legitimate travellers.

We expect the first consequent changes from the Test to be introduced in 2009.

The British Government is determined to operate a firm but fair immigration policy. It gives a high priority to treating all foreign nationals coming to or present in the UK with dignity and respect, and the highest legal standards. However, it expects all visitors to the UK to play by the rules. The UK will always welcome genuine visitors, whether business, tourist, student or family, but will continue to take all steps necessary to protect the security of the UK.