

Press Release

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STATEMENT BY SECRETARY JEH C. JOHNSON ON THE SAFETY AND SECURITY OF THE HOMELAND, AND HOW CONGRESS CAN HELP

Yesterday, Sunday, I was in New York City to observe first-hand the NYPD's active shooter exercise in the City's subway system. That exercise, planned weeks ago, was partially funded by the Department of Homeland Security, and it highlights the many different ways our Department supports state and local law enforcement counterterrorism activities.

As we approach the Holiday season, it is important to note that, at present, we know of no credible and specific intelligence indicating a Paris-like plot on the U.S. homeland. But, the public should know that those of us in national security, homeland security, and law enforcement are working overtime to monitor threats, continually evaluate our security posture, and guard the homeland.

In light of recent events, there is anxiety across our country. I understand that anxiety. But, we must guard against actions that are misdirected and counterproductive. Here are just a few things we are doing to secure the homeland, and ways in which Congress can provide effective help:

- First, many have asked that we re-evaluate our security screening of Syrian and Iraqi refugees in particular, in light of current circumstances. The process for vetting refugee applicants is extraordinarily thorough and strong. But we are not complacent and never cease in our efforts to make it stronger. We continually seek to improve our screening, and continue to evaluate whether more precautions are appropriate in light of new circumstances. We are doing so now. I note also that it is always the applicant's burden of proof to demonstrate that he or she qualifies for refugee status in this country. This includes providing information to confirm identity, and to properly assess whether the applicant will represent a security risk to the country. If we do not have information to reach a sound decision, or the application raises questions not satisfactorily addressed, the case is put on hold until we have more, or is denied. We must not forget that the overwhelming majority of Syrian refugees are women, children and families who are fleeing the very same terrorism and violence we are concerned about.
- Second, at present there are 38 countries from which someone may travel to the United States without a visa. The Visa Waiver Program is a valuable and popular tool to promote lawful trade and travel with our best foreign allies. There are statutory requirements for admission to the Program. Many have noted that thousands of ISIL's force consists of foreign terrorist fighters, including from countries in the Visa Waiver Program. It is for this reason principally that I directed a series of security enhancements to our Visa Waiver Program which took effect at the beginning of this year. Those

enhancements have proven effective. In August I announced even more security enhancements to the program. Many in Congress have asked whether legislation would assist in these efforts. The answer is yes. Working with Congress, we can put legislative teeth in our existing enhancements, and possibly make others.

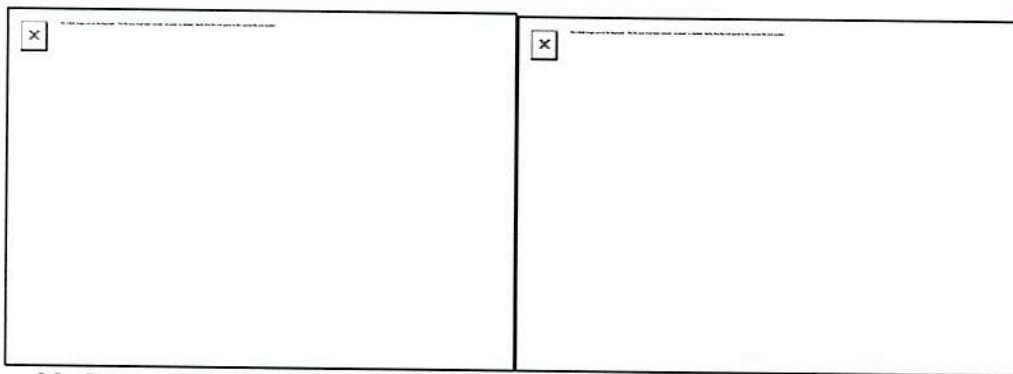
- Third, Congress can also fully fund the President's budget request for aviation security.
- Fourth, we are pressing to build preclearance capability at foreign airports around the world that have flights directly to the United States. Preclearance means screening by our customs personnel at the front end of the flight, not the back end. This provides us with a greater ability to prevent those who should not be flying here from doing so. Preclearance exists at 15 overseas airports now, and we are building more. In May I announced 10 overseas airports we have prioritized for preclearance. There are ways in which Congress can support and expedite our efforts to expand this program.

These are just some of the things Congress and we can do together to further secure the homeland and protect the American people.

The public can help too. We continue to urge all Americans to exercise their freedom to travel, attend public events, celebrate the Holidays, but be vigilant and aware, and report suspicious things and activity. "If You See Something, Say SomethingTM" is more than a slogan.

In a free and open democratic society, we cannot eliminate all risk. Nor should we succumb to panic, fear and anxiety and compromise our values.

Terrorism cannot prevail in a society that refuses to be terrorized.



On Nov. 22, Secretary of Homeland Security Jeh Johnson visited New York City to observe a New York Police Department active shooter exercise. The exercise was supported by the Department of Homeland Security. (Photo credit: Barry Bahler/DHS)

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