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DHS Signs Visa Waiver Program Agreements with Slovakia, Hungary and Lithuania

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U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) Secretary Michael Chertoff signed today Visa Waiver Program (VWP) Memoranda of Understanding (MOU) with Slovak Minister of the Interior Robert Kaliňák, Hungarian Ambassador Ferenc Somogyi and Lithuanian Ambassador Audrius Brūzga. The security enhancements outlined in the agreements put all three countries on track for visa-free travel to the U.S., and potential designation as VWP members later this year.

"I applaud Slovakia, Hungary and Lithuania for their leadership on these enhanced security measures, and I look forward to the day when their citizens can travel to the United States without a visa," said Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff. "In today's interconnected world, facilitating travel between partner nations with a common focus on security is not only beneficial, it's imperative. We're fortunate to have strong ties with each of these countries, and with the European Union. As we move forward with other aspiring allies toward visa free travel, we will also continue to collaborate with the European Union, especially in areas where it has unique legal authority."

The U.S. Congress authorized DHS in August 2007 to reform the VWP and strengthen the security arrangements required of existing participant countries, as well as to expand the conditions for aspiring countries to join the program.

Among the security enhancements required, DHS will establish an electronic system of travel authorization for air passengers. VWP travelers will be asked to provide some basic information online, which will generate an authorization number for travel. DHS will announce complete details on how the authorization systems will work, and when they will begin, later this year. VWP partners also must ensure reporting of lost and stolen passports to avoid fraudulent use and enhance security measures for airports that originate flights to the U.S., to include permitting air marshals on certain flights.

The VWP has been authorized by U.S. law for over 20 years, with 27 current members from Asia and Europe. The department has signed enhanced VWP agreements with the Czech Republic, Estonia and Latvia in recent weeks. Each country committed to meeting the new requirements of the program, to include an electronic system of travel authorization.

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