

New U.S. Air Traveller Screening Focuses on 14 Nations

By [James Vicini](#)

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WASHINGTON (Reuters) – Air travellers from Nigeria, Yemen, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia and nine other countries will face full-body pat downs before boarding airliners under new security screening procedures targeting foreign passengers announced by the United States on Sunday.

The procedures, which go into effect on Monday, follow the botched Christmas Day bombing attempt on a Detroit-bound U.S. airliner blamed on a Nigerian man who U.S. officials believe was trained by al Qaeda in Yemen.

Passengers travelling from or through nations listed as “state sponsors of terrorism” — Cuba, Iran, Sudan and Syria — as well as Afghanistan, Algeria, Iraq, Lebanon, Libya, Nigeria, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Somalia and Yemen will face heightened screening, an Obama administration official said.

Nearly all of those are Muslim countries.

Such passengers will be patted down, have their carry-on luggage searched and could undergo advanced explosive detection or imaging scans, according to the official, who spoke on condition of anonymity.

The Transportation Security Administration, the U.S. agency responsible for air security measures, announced the “enhanced screening” procedures, adding that any passengers on U.S.-bound flights could be subjected to random security searches.

Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, a 23-year-old Nigerian, was arrested by U.S. authorities after being accused of carrying a bomb sewn into his underwear onto a Northwest Airlines flight from Amsterdam to Detroit on December 25. He got through security screening in Amsterdam, and was subdued by passengers and crew after trying to blow up the plane.

U.S. President Barack Obama said on Friday it appeared Abdulmutallab was a member of al Qaeda and had been trained and equipped by the Islamic militant network in Yemen.

Rising Criticism

The announcement of the new security steps comes amid rising criticism by U.S. Republicans and others that American diplomatic and intelligence officials failed to prevent the December 25 incident despite having evidence about Abdulmutallab.

U.S. intelligence officials have said they believe that al Qaeda leaders are hiding out in Pakistan after being chased from Afghanistan during the war that began in 2001 in the weeks after the group's September 11 attacks on the United States. Most of the men who carried out the September 11 hijackings of U.S. airliners were Saudi-born.

Yemen also is emerging as a major area of al Qaeda activity, according to security experts.

The new rules apply to anyone with a passport from any of the 14 countries, and anyone stopping in those countries, the administration official said.

The Transportation Security Administration said it issued security directives to all U.S. and international airlines with inbound flights to the United States that would include random screening of passengers. This random screening policy applies to any airport in the world for flights coming to the United States, the official said.

"Because effective aviation security must begin beyond our borders, and as a result of extraordinary cooperation from our global aviation partners, TSA is mandating that every individual flying into the U.S. from anywhere in the world travelling from or through nations that are state sponsors of terrorism or other countries of interest will be required to go through enhanced screening," the agency said in the statement.

"The directive also increases the use of enhanced screening technologies and mandates threat-based and random screening for passengers on U.S.-bound international flights," it added.

New Rules Agreeable to Airlines

All passengers are screened electronically for weapons and bombs regardless, and the new rules that include random enhancements appear more agreeable to airlines, which chafed at broad requirements imposed after the December 25 incident.

Carriers complained about widespread delays and other passenger inconveniences, especially in Canada and Europe.

However, airlines will not be able to assess the full impact of the new regime on their operations for a few days.

Last week, airlines told Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano that the system could not manage efficiently under a 100 percent pat-down mandate over the long term. Any changes to that routine would be welcome.

"Our goal remains to improve security and reduce the hassle factor for passengers," the International Air Transport Association, the lead trade group for international airlines, said in a statement to Reuters.

There were 25 million visitors to the United States in 2008 from Europe and Asia, according to IATA figures.

Carriers with trans-atlantic and trans-pacific flying include Delta Air Lines; Continental Airlines; American Airlines, a unit of AMR Corp; United Airlines, a unit of UAL Corp; British Airways; Air France/KLM; Germany's Lufthansa; and Japan Airlines.

Additional reporting by John Crowley; writing by [Deborah Zabarenko](#); editing by [Will Dunham](#) and [Mohammad Zargham](#)

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