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U.S. to colour-code air travellers for security checks: Passengers will be tagged according to perceived threat

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WASHINGTON - Air passengers travelling to the United States are to be colour-coded to reflect their "threat" to airline security.

Days after U.S. authorities began photographing and fingerprinting millions of foreign travellers on arrival, The Washington Post reported yesterday the Transport Security Administration is pushing ahead with plans to demand access to passenger data held on airline computers.

The data collection project will affect anyone flying to, from or within the United States and will tag passengers' computer profile with a "threat" assessment.

A red code will bar a passenger from flying, while being tagged as yellow will force passengers to undergo extra security screening and questioning.

An estimated 95% of passengers will be coded as green, or low risk, and allowed to board through normal security channels.

The plan is designed to replace a much-derided computerized system used to detect potential terrorists, which picks out anyone paying cash for a flight or anyone flying on a one-way ticket.

The new system, expected to come into force next month, will collect passengers' names, dates of birth, home addresses, credit card numbers, passport and visa details and travel itineraries and compare them with criminal and terrorist watch lists.

Privacy lawsuits have scared U.S. airlines away from volunteering to hand over passenger records during the program's testing phase.

European airlines have been co-operating.

Negotiations between the European Union and the United States have resulted in some concessions, including guarantees that all data indicating racial or ethnic origin would be filtered and deleted as airline information is passed to U.S. databases.

Privacy and consumer advocates say the program could nevertheless be discriminatory because some passengers would be screened more carefully than others.

"These kinds of dragnet systems are feel-good but cost-inefficient," said Richard Sobel, a privacy policy researcher at Harvard Medical School.

"The government would do much better using resources to better identify people and deter people who might cause some harm than to use resources devoted to the 99% of people who are innocent."

Other nations are intensifying passenger checks, but not to the same extent as the United States.

In Australia, the government has stepped up the collecting of information about travellers entering or leaving the country.

Since Jan. 1, airlines have been expected to record and pass on details to the Department of Immigration, including the first four letters of a passenger's name, their travel documents, flight numbers, check-in time and date and expected port of arrival and departure as well as transit details.

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