

THE WHITE HOUSE

Office of the Press Secretary

---

For Immediate Release

October 17, 2008

STATEMENT BY THE PRESIDENT

ON THE VISA WAIVER PROGRAM

Rose Garden

11:13 A.M. EDT

THE PRESIDENT: Thank you all. (Applause.) Please be seated, thank you. Welcome to the White House. I'm pleased to stand with the representatives of seven countries -- the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Slovakia, and South Korea -- that have met the requirements to be admitted to the United States Visa Waiver Program. Soon the citizens of these nations will be able to travel to the United States for business or tourism without a visa. I congratulate these close friends and allies on this achievement, and I thank you for joining us here.

I also thank Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and Secretary of the Homeland -- Department of Homeland Security Michael Chertoff for working hard to make sure this day has finally arrived. Appreciate other members of the administration here and members of the Diplomatic Corps.

All of the nations represented here today allow American citizens to travel to their countries visa-free.

The United States has not accorded their citizens the same privilege. For years the leaders of these nations have explained to me how frustrating it is for their citizens to wait in lines and pay visa fees to take a vacation or make a business trip or visit their families here in the United States. These close friends of America told me that it was unfair that their people had to jump through bureaucratic hoops that other allies can walk around.

I told them I agree with them. I also told them that in the world after September 11th, we could only expand travel opportunities if we increased security measures at the same time. So nearly two years ago, my administration asked Congress to modernize our Visa Waiver Program in a way that accomplished both of these goals. I appreciate the bipartisan support this initiative has received on Capitol Hill. My administration worked with Congress to pass a law allowing us to admit new countries to the Visa Waiver Program. These countries agree to share information about threats to our people. They also agree that their citizens use a new system that requires travelers to register online ahead of their visits to the United States. These citizens will travel to the United States only if they have tamper-proof biometric passports. I'm grateful to the dedicated officers from the United States and our allies who worked hard to complete the agreements to meet these new requirements.

Because of this good work, Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff has notified our Congress that the administration intends to use its new authority to admit seven countries into the Visa Waiver Program. In about a month, we will be proud to extend to citizens of these seven countries the privilege of visa-free travel.

Today's announcement signifies a new chapter in the relationship between the United States and your nations. It is a testament to the strong bonds of friendship that unite our people.

This is a significant achievement, but it is only the start. A number of America's other close friends are participating in a process called the "visa waiver road map" that is helping them qualify for the Visa Waiver Program. I welcome the ambassadors from these "road map" countries -- Bulgaria, Cyprus, Greece, Malta, Poland, and Romania. We thank you for coming today. We thank you for

your friendship. And we look forward to the day when your countries join the Visa Waiver Program.

I believe the best foreign policy for America is one that lets people from other countries get to know this country firsthand. Throughout our history, some of the strongest advocates of freedom have been those who came to America and saw the blessings of liberty with their own eyes. Extending this opportunity to some of our closest allies deepens our friendship and makes all our countries safer. I'm grateful to all the countries here for seeking to strengthen the ties between our citizens. I look forward to even stronger partnerships in the years ahead.

Thank you for coming. (Applause.)

END

11:17 A.M. EDT