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Bahamas e-passport system working well, minister says

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NASSAU, Bahamas (BIS): The multi-million dollar machine readable passport system in The Bahamas is "working fairly well" with over 550 e-passports issued since the official launch in December 2007, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs Brent Symonette said this week.

As of January 15, 2008, the Passport Office in New Providence has issued a total of 557 passports: 415 regular passports, 120 children's passports, 15 frequent flyer passports, and seven Diplomatic passports.

Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs Brent Symonette holds his Diplomatic e-passport as he responds to questions from a businessman at a meeting on the launch of the e-passport. (BIS Photo/Tim Aylen)

"That system is up and running in New Providence and seems to be working fairly well," said Symonette, who has oversight for the Passport Office. "It takes about two weeks to get the new e-passport; but that timeframe is expected to be reduced as the system progresses.

"We anticipate that both the passports and Visa Issuance Systems will be fully operational by mid-2008."

The system is up and running in New Providence; Family Island residents can have their passports extended until further notice. An estimated 170,000 passport holders and 2,000 Certificate of Identity holders will be processed.

The Bahamas officially launched the Machine Readable Passport or e-Passport on December 5, 2007, a move intended to increase protection against identity theft, heighten aviation security and combat illegal immigration.

The International Civil Aviation Organisation (ICAO), of which The Bahamas is a member, has mandated that all countries must begin issuing Machine Readable Passports by 2010.

The passport is being upgraded from a simple paper document to a more secure one – with biometrics features including facial characteristics and fingerprinting. Each passport holder is required to have a National Insurance Number in order to facilitate the new passport.

In 1994, the Government of The Bahamas began exploring the process of upgrading passports and other travel documents. On December 22, 2006, the Government signed a contract with Indusa Global, a Greenville, South Carolina-based information technology development and consulting firm, for an estimated $12.7 million to provide four systems to initiate the project.

Those systems are: an ePassport issuance system, a Machine Readable Visa system, an E-Identification issuance system (smart cards for holders of work permits, spousal permits, home owners residence permits, permanent residence), and a Border Control Management System.

"The Bahamas' ePassport, Visa, E-Identification and Border Control Initiative is of significant national and international importance. It will enhance the security of our state and it is anticipated that, over time, it will ease the passage of our citizens throughout the world," Symonette said.

It also calls for a supporting Key Management System for the generation and management of digital

security keys, to protect and access the data stored in the passports and cards. This particular system is used to add security to The Bahamas passport chips and smart cards, and forms the basis of authenticating that the ePassport and e-Ids are issued by The Bahamas Government.

This is an integrated project involving the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Department of Immigration (Ministry of National Security), and the Data Processing Unit of the Ministry of Finance.

The project involved four phases of implementation, which commenced in mid-January and will progress through the end of July 2008.

During these phases, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs will implement the ePassport System in the Passport Office in New Providence. The system will later be implemented in Grand Bahama, the Family Island Administrator's offices and in the Overseas Missions. The implementation of the Visa Issuance System in the Counsular Division in New Providence and Overseas Missions will also occur in these phases.

Foreign nationals would also be able to apply for and be issued machine-readable visas in New Providence and at the Overseas Missions. However, passport holders are being advised to continue to travel on their existing passports until expiration or until further notice.