

Are new airport screening procedures making U.S. travelers safer?

English.news.cn 2010-11-25
09:59:37

[Feedback](#) [Print](#) [RSS](#) [RSS](#) [+](#) [-](#)



A passenger receives full-body scanning by millimeter wave detection at a security check point at the Ronald Reagan Washington National Airport outside Washington D.C., capital of the United States, Nov. 23, 2010. As the uproar around the new security measures at U.S. airports gets intense, a new poll finds that Americans mostly support the full-body scanning but are divided on the intensive frisking. (Xinhua/Zhang Jun)

by Matthew Rusling

WASHINGTON, Nov. 24 (Xinhua) -- As all U.S. airports are sure to be swelling with travelers during this week's Thanksgiving holidays, passengers will have to go through a new set of safety screenings before boarding their flights.

In less than one-fifth of U.S. airports, that could mean passing through body scanning and imaging equipment that can detect explosive devices beneath a passenger's clothing.

Those who do not wish to go through the scanner must undergo a new pat-down procedure that allows agents to feel around passengers' clothed genitals and breasts to search for weapons. The previous practice was to use the back of the hand, but new rules allow agents to use their fingertips.

The new procedures have already stirred controversy, as many passengers report feeling embarrassed and angry over being touched in that way, and others are uncomfortable with being scanned by the body imaging machines.

A Washington Post-ABC News poll released on Tuesday found that around half of respondents said the new pat-downs went overboard, while almost two-thirds support the Transportation Security Administration (TSA)'s use of body scanning machines.

TSA chief John S. Pistole said on the agency's website that it would "work to make (the screening procedures) as minimally invasive as possible while still providing the security that the American people want and deserve."

Still, the public should not forget that "less than one year ago a suicide bomber with explosives in his underwear tried to bring down a plane over Detroit," he said, referring to Umar Abdul Mutallab, who attempted to detonate an explosive device last Christmas Day.

Aside from such statements, however, TSA has failed to effectively relay to the public exactly how safe the new procedures will make travelers, nor has it communicated to what degree it can deter militants bent on blowing up fellow passengers.

"If the traveling public had an idea of what they were getting in return for these scans, I think they'd be a lot more willing to accept it. So far all we've gotten was vague promises," said Noah Shachtman, non-resident fellow at the Brookings Institution, of the scanning equipment.

And that begs the obvious question of how effective the new rules really are, and whether the implementation of the new procedures is worth the hassle and embarrassment to passengers.



A TSA security official checks passengers at a security check point at the Ronald Reagan Washington National Airport outside Washington D.C., capital of the United States, Nov. 23, 2010. As the uproar around the new security measures at U.S. airports gets intense, a new poll finds that Americans mostly support the full-body scanning but are divided on the intensive frisking. (Xinhua/Zhang Jun)

TERRORISTS CIRCUMVENT NEW DEFENSES

A common refrain heard among security experts is that al-Qaida and other terrorist networks are constantly trying to stay one step ahead of airport security measures. If the United States builds a wall, militants try to find a way around it.

And that is the criticism of body imaging technology: while some experts say it provides somewhat of a deterrent, terrorists are busy trying to find a way to circumvent any new security technology or procedures.

That means that many security measures the United States has implemented at air terminals since the 9/11 attacks -- from requiring passengers to remove shoes to restrictions on carrying liquids onboard -- in theory provide only temporary security.

Body scanning technology, for example, cannot tell whether an explosive is hidden in a body cavity, such as a suicide bomber's rectum.

That method has been used before. Last year terrorist operative Abdullah Asieri hid explosives and a detonator in his rectum in a bid to assassinate Prince Mohammed Bin Nayef, Saudi Arabia's counterterrorism chief. While the blast failed to kill the prince, it demonstrated the effectiveness of hiding deadly materials in a body cavity. Experts said extremists could use the technique again.

Jim Harper, director of information policy studies at the Cato Institute, said the scanning technology could probably make travelers safer by a small margin, but questioned whether it was worth the high price tag.

Harper also noted that out of millions of flights and billions of flyers in the United States over the last decade, not one terrorist bomb had successfully exploded in a U.S. airport.

Some experts said one reason is because al-Qaida, once the preeminent terror organization, is no longer the threat it once was, as its numbers and finances have dwindled because of heavy U.S. pressure since the 9/11 attacks on New York and Washington.

SEARCHING FOR THE BOMB, NOT THE BOMBER

Ben West, tactical analyst at private intelligence company Stratfor, said the problem is that authorities are searching for the bomb instead of the bomber. While technology has its place, it cannot identify suspicious behavior, he said, adding that only humans have the right instincts to understand when someone is behaving suspiciously.

Despite the brainwashing that happens before a suicide bombing is carried out, most bombers would likely be under extreme stress while attempting to carry a bomb on board an aircraft, which would lead them to exhibit strange behavior.

"Humans have an instinctual ability to recognize that," he said. "It's a matter of honing that instinct, rather than relying on technology, which has its shortcomings."

Indeed, many analysts note that countries such as Israel, with track records of excellence in airport security, use highly trained security personnel, unlike many airports in the United States.

"Being able to identify body language and unusual demeanor takes lots of training," he said. "And until we see a significant investment (in that)...we are not going to see a whole lot of advances in airline security."