Bush approves bio passport delay
Correspondents in Washington
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US President George W Bush has agreed to give countries an additional year to issue high-tech passports that were to have been required for visa-free visits in October, the US State Department said. The delay in the deadline gives the 27 countries, including Australia, currently enrolled in the so-called Visa Waiver Program until October 26, 2005 to issue passports that include "biometric indicators" - computer chips with a digitally encoded record of the bearer's face and possibly fingerprints - so that their citizens can remain eligible for the scheme, the department said.

Mr Bush signed the law on Monday and while it is not the two-year delay requested by his administration, the department said the move would prevent disruption to travellers and address concerns about the deadline expressed by the 27 nations in the program.

"The extension was necessary to avoid potential disruption of international travel and provide the international community adequate time to develop viable programs for producing a more secure, biometrically enabled passport," deputy spokesman Adam Ereli said in a statement.

The 2002 law that set the original 2004 deadline was aimed at tightening US border security and immigration procedures after the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks whose perpetrators had all come to the United States on valid visas.

But because biometric science is relatively new and rapidly changing, many visa waiver countries said they could not technologically comply with the initial deadline, forcing their citizens to apply for previously unneeded US visas to enter the United States for even short visits.

In April, US Secretary of State Colin Powell and Tom Ridge, the homeland security secretary, asked Congress for a two-year extension in the deadline, warning that without it the visa issuance process would be swamped and the US economy devastated without the delay.

Not only would consular officials at US embassies abroad be overburdened but many potential visitors from travelling to the United States would likely be deterred from coming, possibly costing the US travel and tourism industry billions of dollars in lost revenue, they said.

To address lawmakers' concerns that the delay might compromise national security, the Bush administration said it would end, beginning next month, an exemption for visa waiver country citizens from fingerprinting and photographing requirements that other foreign nationals are subject to.

Even with that safeguard, however, Congress did not agree to the two-year extension requested by Powell and Ridge and the administration was forced to accept the one-year compromise.
Countries that participate in the visa waiver program are: Andorra, Australia, Austria, Belgium, Britain, Brunei, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Japan, Liechtenstein, Luxembourg, Monaco, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Portugal, San Marino, Singapore, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden and Switzerland.

Citizens of those nations are allowed to enter the United States for up to 90 days without a US visa.

*Agence France-Presse*

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