

U.S. EMBASSY IN SAUDI ARABIA TO FINGERPRINT VISA APPLICANTS

Associated Press

November 20, 2003 Riyadh -- U.S. authorities here will begin fingerprinting all people in Saudi Arabia applying for visas to visit the U.S., the U.S. Embassy said in a statement Thursday.

The new measure will begin Nov. 22 at the U.S. Embassy in Riyadh and Dec. 7 at the American consulate in Jiddah and apply to people of all nationalities aged between 14 and 79 wanting to obtain a visa to enter the U.S.

Embassy spokeswoman Carol Kalin said people applying for diplomatic visas, or "certain humanitarian cases" where someone is unable or too ill to provide fingerprints, will be exempt from the fingerprinting procedure.

The stricter visa protocol has been introduced following a straining in U.S.-Saudi relations in the light of the Sept. 11, 2001 attacks on the U.S. Fifteen of the 19 plane hijackers who carried out the attacks were Saudis belonging to the al-Qaida network, headed by Saudi-born dissident Osama bin Laden.

The embassy statement, a copy of which was obtained by The Associated Press, said an electronic inkless scanner "will digitally record the prints of only two fingers and will take less than a minute to complete."

The new procedure is being introduced under the United States Visitor and Immigrant Status Indicator Technology program, which was passed by Congress last year. The program calls for stricter border controls and closer scrutiny of visa applicants wanting to travel to America. The fingerprinting scheme is expected to be operational worldwide by early 2004.