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Probe of French passports sought

By Bill Gertz
THE WASHINGTON TIMES

The chairman of the House Judiciary Committee yesterday urged the Bush administration to investigate accusations that France provided passports to fleeing Iraqi officials.

Rep. F. James Sensenbrenner Jr. said the Paris government should be punished if the allegations, made by U.S. intelligence sources, are confirmed.

Mr. Sensenbrenner told the Homeland Security Department that France should be excluded from a special visa waiver program if the reports about the passports are true.

"These reports, if true, are disturbing and deserve investigation," Mr. Sensenbrenner, Wisconsin Republican, wrote in a letter sent yesterday to Homeland Security Secretary Tom Ridge.

"In particular, such actions would show a complete disregard for our nation's security interests as well as a willingness to allow individuals who may have engaged in criminal acts to avoid detection and prosecution."

Mr. Sensenbrenner's request was prompted by reports that appeared first in The Washington Times on Tuesday. U.S. intelligence officials told The Times that the French government had provided passports to fleeing Iraqi officials in Syria that helped them to escape to Western Europe.

The French government denied that it had granted passports or visas to any former Iraqi officials. Foreign Affairs Ministry spokesman Francois Rivasseau said on Radio France Internationale that no visas had been issued to former Iraqi leaders.

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However, U.S. officials said the passports allowed the Iraqis to escape capture by coalition forces. Because France is part of the European Union, the passports gave the Iraqis the ability to travel freely among 12 European nations.

They said the passports have also made it difficult to track the officials.

The number of officials who received the passports and their ranks in the regime of Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein could not be learned.

The discovery has prompted a search for Iraqi officials in Europe by U.S. and allied intelligence and security services.

Rep. Christopher Cox, California Republican and chairman of the House Homeland Security Committee, also is investigating the French passport matter, an aide said.

Rep. Joe Pitts, Pennsylvania Republican, said French efforts to support Saddam's regime before the war, along with reports that Paris supplied passports to Iraqi officials, had undermined U.S. efforts against Iraq and the war on terrorism. "If France wants to be an ally in the war on terrorism, it is time it started to act like one," Mr. Pitts said in remarks on the House floor.

Mr. Sensenbrenner said that providing passports to Iraqi officials could jeopardize U.S. national security because French passport holders are part of a visa waiver program.

"If the French government did, in fact, issue its country's passports to fleeing Iraqi officials, those officials would be able to enter the United States under the visa waiver program.

"The entry of such individuals into the United States would pose a direct threat to the American public, and any action by the French government to provide those individuals with French passports would have been taken in reckless disregard of that threat."

Mr. Sensenbrenner said the investigation by the Homeland Security Department should be assisted by the State and Justice departments, the CIA and the National Security Agency.

If any information is uncovered indicating that France improperly issued passports to non-French nationals, "you should consider this the coup de grace for France and you should give the most urgent consideration to suspending France from the visa waiver program," he said.

Mr. Ridge has the power to stop the visa waiver program if it poses a threat to U.S. security. The waiver program permits visitors to enter the United States without having to obtain visas. In the past, terrorists have used fraudulent passports and valid passports to enter the United States undetected, Mr. Sensenbrenner said.

"The risk that French nationals might use the visa waiver program to seek to enter the United States to perform terrorist



acts is not merely theoretical," he said. "Zacarias Moussaoui, who many believe was the '20th September 11th hijacker,' came to the United States as a French national under the visa waiver program, using his legitimately issued French passport."

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