

Bilirakis Biometrics Bill to Secure the Waters Passes the House

Would Require DHS to Create a Biometric Tracking System for Maritime Immigration Interdiction

WASHINGTON DC – HR 2490, introduced by Congressman Gus Bilirakis (R-FL), passed the House 394 - 3 (House Roll Call 534). After passage of this vital immigration legislation, Congressman Bilirakis released the following statement.

“With over 12,000 miles of coastline in the continental United States, securing our waterways is integral in securing the homeland. As the southwest border fence makes land crossing more difficult, smugglers and potential terrorists will look for other ways to enter the United States. We must stay ahead of the curve. Implementing a biometric tracking system for maritime interdictions is a crucial step forward in securing our border. Coast Guard personnel are the best in the world and this bill will give them another tool in their mission to protect and defend America’s waterways.”

HR 2490 would require the Secretary of Homeland Security, in conjunction with the Coast Guard, to create a program for the mobile biometric identification, in the maritime environment, of aliens unlawfully attempting to enter the United States. The bill also requires DHS to ensure this biometric system is integrated into other systems within DHS and other agencies.

According to the Coast Guard, since 1982, over 225,000 individuals seeking to enter the United States illegally have been interdicted at sea.

This bill was passed out of the Homeland Security committee, of which Rep. Bilirakis is a member, on June 26th.

BEGIN FLOOR STATEMENT

The Honorable Gus M. Bilirakis

Floor statement on H.R. 2490

July 29, 2008

I yield myself such time as I may consume.

I rise today in support of legislation I have introduced, H.R. 2490, which would codify and expand a Coast Guard pilot program to collect biometric information on aliens interdicted at sea.

I want to thank Homeland Security Committee Chairman Bennie Thompson for his willingness to move this bill through our committee and to the floor for consideration today.

I also want to thank Peter King for his support of this measure and his determined efforts to strengthen our homeland security, first as chairman of our committee and now as its Ranking Member. I am honored to serve with both of them.

The House unanimously adopted H.R. 2490 as an amendment to the Coast Guard Authorization Act several months ago.

However, I believe it is important for this body to act on H.R. 2490 independently given the uncertain prospects for enactment of the Coast Guard bill in this Congress.

My bill requires the Coast Guard to move forward on its biometrics at sea effort within one year and provide a cost analysis to Congress on expanding these capabilities to other Coast Guard and Department of Homeland Security vessels and units.

As part of this analysis, my bill also encourages DHS to give priority to expanding mobile biometric collection capability to assets and areas that are most likely to encounter illegal border crossings in the maritime environment.

The efforts of the Coast Guard in this area show great promise.

Since the collection of limited biometrics on individuals interdicted at sea began, the Coast Guard has collected biometric data from 1,513 migrants, resulting in nearly 300 matches against databases of wanted criminals, immigration violators, and others who have previously encountered government authorities.

Instead of being released to repeat their dangerous and illegal behavior, these individuals are now detained and prosecuted.

The U.S. Attorney's office in San Juan, Puerto Rico, has prosecuted more than 118 individuals for violations of U.S. immigration laws and other offenses based substantially on information obtained through the biometrics program.

The Coast Guard reports that illegal migration in the Mona Pass, an area between the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico, has been reduced by fifty percent in just the past year as a direct result of the biometrics program.

By leveraging its relationships within DHS, the Coast Guard now has access to millions of fingerprint files it can use to positively identify individuals encountered at sea, those who are without identification and are suspected of attempting to illegally enter the United States.

Now that the Coast Guard has determined the most effective way to collect biometrics at sea, the Department of Homeland Security needs to determine the most appropriate way to move forward and expand this effort as cost effectively as possible, which is what my bill requires.

Given the success of existing efforts on biometrics by the Coast Guard, I believe that it is imperative that we move forward on this bill so that these efforts are cost effective and will do the most good.

Mr. Speaker, it is clear that the collection of biometrics at sea by the Coast Guard is already helping greatly deter illegal migration and prevent the capture and release of dangerous individuals.

I urge our colleagues to help further that effort by voting for this bill.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I reserve the balance of my time.

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