

Biometric passports out next week

Claims of flawed technology untrue, says S'pore ICA, US-based smart card group

Friday • August 11, 2006

Ansley Ng

ansley@newstoday.com.sg

BY NEXT Tuesday, Singapore will roll out its first biometric passports, or BioPass, which are implanted with a computer chip that identifies passport holders through their facial features and fingerprints.

Already, the Immigration and Checkpoints Authority (ICA) has received some 1,000 applications for the new passport, which many countries are adopting in an effort to fight forgery and increase security.

However, at a security conference in Las Vegas last week, a German expert suggested that information on a biometric passport could be cloned.

Calling the passport "a waste of money", Mr Lukas Grunwald claimed that it took him just two weeks and equipment that cost US\$200 (\$314) to hack into the system.

Reacting to that report, Today reader Istiandra Abdullah wondered if the new BioPass would allow someone with the right technology to steal his identity by scanning the chip surreptitiously.

Yesterday, the ICA said that the BioPass "complies with the recommendations and requirements laid down by the International Civil Aviation Organization ... these include security standards established to ensure the integrity of passports."

"The claims by Mr Grunwald that the Radio Frequency Identification (RFID) technology is flawed have not been supported by other experts," said the ICA.

Biometric passports use RFID technology to pick up and read information.

Smart Card Alliance, a United States-based smart card technology group, also disagreed with the Mr Grunwald's assessment.

"Recent reports that there is a 'major vulnerability' that criminals could use to 'enter countries illegally' are untrue and demonstrate a lack of understanding of how the multiple security layers in place at the US border work in the new e-passport system," said the group's executive director Randy Vanderhoof.

"Even if someone could copy the information on your e-passport chip, it doesn't achieve anything, because all of the

information is locked together in such a way that it can't be changed.

"It's no different than someone stealing your electronic passport and trying to use it. No one else can use it because your photo is on the chip and they're not you," said Mr Vanderhoof.

The ICA says results from overseas trials of the BioPass have been positive, and it does not expect any major glitches.

Besides putting the new hardware in place, the ICA will also implement strict measures before issuing the passports, which cost \$80.

The ICA expects to process some 3,000 applications a day for the new BioPass when the counters are ready on Tuesday, up from 2,000 applications a day for the old passports.

It hopes the public will make use of self-service terminals and the Internet to cut waiting time.

The non-biometric passports will be phased out by 2016.

Singapore's introduction of biometric passports before Oct 26 this year keeps the country on the US' Visa Waiver Programme, which removes the need for citizens from participating countries to get visas to visit the US for trips of not more than 90 days.

While Singaporeans do not have to wait for their current passports to expire to apply for the new BioPass, the ICA says there is no need to rush to convert the non-biometric passports, even for travel to the US, which remains visa free.

Copyright MediaCorp Press Ltd. All rights reserved.