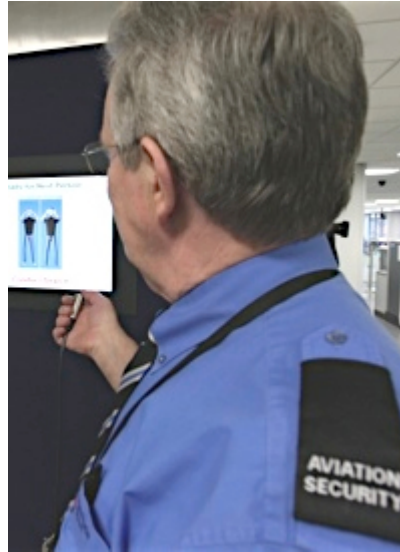# New American

Written by **Raven Clabough** on November 22, 2011

UK Keeps Airport X-ray Scanners Despite EU Ban

The United Kingdom has announced that it will continue to use airport body scanners and backscatter X-ray scanners and will not permit passengers to opt out of the machines if they are chosen for further screening — despite reports of the potential dangers posed by radiation from the machines. The announcement follows the European Commission's adoption of strict new guidelines regarding the limited use of the body scanners and a full ban of the backscatter X-ray scanners pending further studies.

The newly released EC regulations prohibit at European airports all scanners that use ionizing radiation, stating, "In order not to risk jeopardizing citizens' health and safety, only security scanners which do not use X-ray technology are added to the list of authorized methods for passenger screening at EU airports."

The statement indicates that the body scanners are allowed only ...

> in accordance with minimum conditions such as for example that: security scanners shall not store, retain, copy, print or retrieve images; any unauthorized access and use of the image is prohibited and shall be prevented; the human reviewer analyzing the image shall be in a separate location and the image shall not be linked to the screened person and others.

> Passengers must be informed about conditions under which the security scanner control takes place. In addition, passengers are given the right to opt out from a control with scanners and be subject to an alternative method of screening.

The European Commission will release another safety report by April of 2012, at which time it is expected that a more permanent decision regarding the use of the scanners in Europe will be made.

UK Transportation Secretary Justine Greening commented:

> The European Commission has called for further expert consideration of the potential health risks from security scanners and has asked the European Scientific Committee on Emerging and Newly Identified Health Risks to review the evidence. I look forward to the Committee's report and will consider it carefully before making decisions about which technologies should be deployed at UK airports in future.

Despite Greening's announcement, however, Britain will continue to use the controversial machines. UK officials defended their decision, referencing an alleged "security threat," though not providing details. Greening released a Commons statement indicating that passengers will have no alternatives to the machines, including the pat-down option available to fliers in the United States, regardless of the mandate by the EU to introduce the enhanced pat-downs.

Greening's statement referenced the attempted Christmas Day bombing in 2009 which targeted a flight from Amsterdam to Detroit, Michigan. She explained that the response from British authorities to that

thwarted attack was to introduce the body scanners at all three of the UK's largest airports. She claimed that most passengers are happy to comply with the use of the scanners because they are "quick and convenient." According to Greening, of the more than one million passengers who were asked to go through the body scanners, just 12 people refused, a figure that some skeptics believe to be unrealistic. However, not all passengers were comfortable in agreeing to having the machines used on them, and some have asked for an alternative method of screening such as a pat-down.

Greening has rejected these requests, providing the following reasons in her Commons statement:

> Firstly, I do not believe that a "pat down" search is equivalent in security terms to a security scan. The purpose of introducing security scanners in the first place was to protect the travelling public better against sophisticated terrorist threats: these threats still exist and the required level of security is not achieved by permitting passengers to choose a less effective alternative.

> I have considered carefully whether there are alternative screening methods which might deliver equivalent levels of security to a security scan. A full private search — involving the loosening and/or removal of clothing in the presence of security staff in a private room — would deliver a reasonable level of assurance. However, I believe that this is likely to represent a greater intrusion of privacy than a security scan, and that nearly all passengers, if they fully understand the procedures, would be unlikely to opt for this alternative. It is also likely to be operationally disruptive to airports and other passengers. Appropriately trained security staff would need to be diverted from the main search area to undertake these searches, leading to increased costs and longer queues for everyone else. I do not, therefore, believe that this represents a viable way forward.

Greening also referenced the declarations of the European Parliament that passengers should be permitted to opt out of the body scanners, but dismissed the parliament's proposal:

> I am aware that the proposals recently agreed by the European Parliament include the right for passengers to request an opt out from scanning. The UK did not support these proposals when they were presented to the aviation security committee.

A recent survey conducted by an online independent travel agent, www.sunshine.co.uk, seems to confirm Greening's assertion that most British travelers are willing to risk their health by going through the X-ray scanners and would in fact prefer that option over seeing those machines banned. The question posed to participants of the survey was, "Do you think airport 'strip-search' scanners should be banned, in light of the cancer risks they could pose?" Sixty-seven percent of those asked answered in the negative. When asked to explain their answer, more than half of those surveyed (54 percent) indicated that they would prefer to "risk their health and travel safe," with 22 percent of participants contending that they do not even believe the potential health risks of the machines to be true.

Furthermore, 46 percent of those surveyed indicated that they would like to see the body scanners at all major airports in the United Kingdom. Of that 46 percent, 38 percent asserted that though that they have concerns regarding their own privacy as it relates to the scanners, they would rather disregard that privacy and see everyone checked by the scanners.

Chris Brown, co-founder of sunshine.co.uk, remarked of the poll:

> We really wanted to gauge the general public's reaction to the EU's airport "strip-search" scanner ban, to find out if it was really what they would want. Is was interesting to see that many didn't even believe the claims that the devices could potentially cause cancer.

Some might see this as scaremongering, but obviously it makes sense to check the machines to rule out any health risks. If the assessment shows they don't pose a risk to people's health, I don't think it will be long before we see them in more and more airports. People evidently care a lot more about their own security than their health, or so it would seem.

The survey reflects minimal public knowledge of the true effectiveness of the machines, however, as aviation security experts and even the machines' designers have admitted that the devices are incapable of detecting major terrorist threats such as explosives.

U.S. critics of the controversial X-ray scanners for the most part assert that the minimal security they ensure is not worth the major loss of civil liberties.

Photo: Members of staff are seen demonstrating a new full body security scanner at Manchester Airport, Manchester, England, Jan. 7, 2010: AP

Images

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