OPENING STATEMENT TO THE 4th MRTD SYMPOSIUM

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Good morning ladies and gentlemen. It is a distinct pleasure for me to open this 4th Symposium and Exhibition on ICAO MRTDs, Biometrics and Security Standards.

We have brought together at this year's event an impressive roster of speakers who have kindly accepted our invitation to share with us the most recent developments, achievements and challenges in the rapidly evolving sector of MRTDs. All of the presentations have been carefully coordinated so as to provide a comprehensive, holistic appreciation of the technological, operational and policy issues involved as we move forward in the implementation of an MRTD infrastructure that meets the dual objectives of optimum security and facilitation.

We have also arranged for a record number of exhibitors to showcase the products and services that can expedite the handling of international passengers by all modes of transportation – whether road, rail sea and air – through security, customs, immigration and other control points. We encourage you to take advantage of this one-stop consultation environment to familiarize yourselves with the tools you and your organizations may need to ensure the successful implementation of MRTD systems and procedures in your respective States.

I take this opportunity to thank all speakers, exhibitors and sponsors for their availability and enthusiasm in ensuring the success of this event.

Much has happened since we held our first Symposium in 2005. I would say that most, if not all stakeholders concerned have a much deeper comprehension of the inherent value of standard and electronic MRTDs relative to authenticity and security of documents, ID management, identity confirmation – including biometrics and facilitation at border control points.

We are particularly pleased with the pace of introduction of ePassports enhanced with biometrics around the world. As we will learn during the Symposium, 54 ICAO Member States now issue ePassports and at least 90 others plan to issue them by the end of 2009.

What we will emphasize at this 4th Symposium is the need for more States to issue ePassports and to join the PKD, or Public Key Directory. We will emphasize that the more States join the PKD, the more effective it becomes - for States, operators, travellers and all institutions that make use of ePassports or electronic ID documents for identity confirmation.

Another critical consideration to be raised over the next few days is the need for a more universal implementation of reading systems at border control points especially. This is critical given, as we have seen, the steadily increasing number of ePassports issued worldwide and the expected increase in MRPs due to the ICAO Standard requiring all States to issue them by April 2010. Since reading systems are effective with both MRPs and ePassports, their early and rapid introduction could greatly contribute to the overall efficiency of airport and immigration procedures everywhere, as well as greater security.

What I find especially encouraging about the ICAO MRTD programme is that it has expanded to the point that it now transcends the aviation world and has spread to many other applications where authenticity and security of personal identification are paramount. We now find the ICAO technical specifications and guidance being applied to drivers' licenses, permanent resident cards and many other forms of ID cards.

As you will see throughout this Symposium, the ICAO MRTD programme is in tune with the realities of today's global society and in line with the needs of States, industry and law enforcement agencies for a forward-looking universal security net that is as foolproof as it is effective and user-friendly.

Actually, to attribute the MRTD programme to ICAO is perhaps a misnomer. Although it is definitely carried out under the leadership of ICAO and has received the unconditional support of the Organization's 190 Member States, it is ultimately the creation of a relatively small group of incredibly dedicated and knowledgeable individuals. These top experts from States, international organizations and industry have gone beyond the call of duty in terms of time and effort to continuously enhance a system upon which so many have come to depend. Most of the work is done through the Technical Advisory Group on MRTDs and its New Technologies Working Group, in collaboration with ISOWG3 through a special mechanism of cooperation whereby ICAO Standards are endorsed as ISO Standards. with ICAO. We now also have the newly-created Implementation and Capacity Building Working Group which will encourage cooperative effort to help States to introduce MRPs so as to meet the 2010 ICAO deadline and also to upgrade to ePassports.

These individuals, many of whom are speakers at this Symposium, represent a broad range of institutions and interests who have committed considerable human and financial resources to ensuring the systematic and successful development of the MRTD programme. They include: national passport agencies, border control authorities and industry.

I take this opportunity to express to all of them our deepest appreciation for the quality of their work, the singleness of purpose they have brought to the task and the fine example of teamwork and cooperation. The world is certainly a safer place because of them.

And of course, we thank all of you for being here with us.

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