Address by the Secretary General
of the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO),
Mr. Raymond Benjamin,
to the Seventh Symposium and Exhibition on MRTDs, Biometrics
and Security Standards

(Montréal, 12 September 2011)

1.   It is with great pleasure that I welcome so many senior government officials and industry representatives to ICAO's Seventh MRTD Symposium.

2.   This year's Symposium coincides with the tenth anniversary of 9/11. Such timing compels us to both reflect on what has been achieved over the decade and to look ahead at what can be done to further enhance aviation security worldwide.

3.   Our track record since 9/11 in strengthening the global security net is good. We are better at anticipating, detecting, intercepting and protecting against terrorist attacks. And we respond more appropriately when attacks occur or are attempted.

4.   But you and I know that our work is never done. We must continually reinforce and adapt our strategies to provide the highest level of aviation security while ensuring optimum efficiency in the movement of people and goods.

5.   To that end, we must explore all avenues. Together with regulatory, industry and law enforcement partners, we will examine every option that can further contribute to the sustainability of the global air transport system.

6.   In this collective effort, the ICAO MRTD Programme plays a critical role. Over the years, through a remarkable spirit of cooperation which I want to acknowledge here this afternoon, we developed and implemented a robust framework of technical specifications for machine readable travel documents, including ePassports enhanced with biometric identification.   Practically all States now issue Machine Readable Passports and more than 100 issue ePassports.

7.   In today's heightened security environment, however, we must consider how the MRTD Programme can do even more to strengthen aviation security and increase the effectiveness and efficiency of passenger clearance procedures at airports and border crossings.

8.   The way forward is clear.

9.   We first need to sharpen our focus on preventing identity fraud, as we maintain our traditional emphasis on document security. Taking cargo as an example, we have to consider the entire supply-chain in creating a person's official identity, from the initial production of identity documentation, through distribution and disposition – in short, from birth to death.

10.   We must go this route because of the success of our MRTD programme in making passports and other travel documents much harder to counterfeit. Terrorists have had to exploit weaknesses much earlier in the production process of identity documents and that's where we have to hit next.

11.　　This is an enormous challenge and it's an expensive one, as are other elements of effective national security systems.

12.　　We must therefore do a better job of helping States with their capacity-building projects, so as to promote more timely compliance with MRTD requirements and stronger identity management systems.

13.　　I have made this one of my priorities. In revamping the ICAO security programme, I have insisted that it includes a strong assistance component. I want to make sure that we channel assistance capabilities to Member States with the greatest need for support in meeting their obligations, including MRTD activities. I want States to know that they can count on ICAO every step of the way.

14. Having said this, I also want to stress the following.

15. In our efforts to prevent terrorists from moving freely between States, information contained in MRTDs is checked against databases to establish whether a passenger is considered a security threat. While this process must conform to the respective laws of States, the ICAO Assembly has observed the need to ensure the protection of passengers' privacy and civil liberties.

16. I therefore take this opportunity to encourage all States to issue electronic Passports and to join the Public Key Directory – the passport validation service administered by ICAO. These elements are demonstrating their effectiveness in preventing identity fraud and assuring reliable identity management, a cornerstone for intelligence-based aviation security.

17.   Clearly, the MRTD Programme is making great strides in advancing both aviation security and facilitation objectives. More can and will be done to tighten the connexion between security and capacity-building, so that the MRTD programme is even more relevant to stakeholders – States, industry and passengers.

18.   This is what this Symposium is all about.

19.   In this Hall, we have the greatest concentration of experts on travel documents and border security in the world. Your contribution to defining the role for MRTDs in the comprehensive global security framework is critical.

20.   In that spirit of cooperation, I want to express my sincere appreciation for the guidance provided over the years by the Technical Advisory Group on MRTDs. The ongoing involvement of this group has proven essential to the success of the ICAO MRTD Programme. Allow me to highlight, in particular, the TAG/MRTD working group on new technologies, whose dedication to the task ensures that MRTD specifications remain state-of-the-art.

21. At the same time, the working group concerned with promoting the worldwide implementation of MRTD programmes through capacity-building activities has been making real progress in this area. It has become a valuable international intermediary for matching the needs of States with available technical expertise and donor funding.

22. My congratulations also to the Public Key Directory board members. Without their knowledge and managerial skills in the administration of the PKD, ICAO would not be able to realize, to the extent it would like, its goal of helping States enhance ePassport and border control security.

23. To all of our friends and partners, and to all of you in this room, thank you for having taken the time to join us here for what promises to be a very stimulating Symposium.

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