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Terrorist Watch List Hits One Million Names (7/14/2008)

ACLU launches online watch list complaint form

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WASHINGTON, DC - The nation's terrorist watch list has hit one million names, according to a tally maintained by the American Civil Liberties Union based upon the government's own reported numbers for the size of the list.

"Members of Congress, nuns, war heroes and other 'suspicious characters,' with names like Robert Johnson and Gary Smith, have become trapped in the Kafkaesque clutches of this list, with little hope of escape," said Caroline Fredrickson, director of the ACLU Washington Legislative Office. "Congress needs to fix it, the Terrorist Screening Center needs to fix it, or the next president needs to fix it, but it has to be done soon."

Fredrickson and Barry Steinhardt, director of the ACLU's Technology and Liberty Program, spoke today along with two victims of the watch list: Jim Robinson, former assistant attorney general for the Criminal Division who flies frequently and is often delayed for hours despite possessing a governmental security clearance and Akif Rahman, an American citizen who has been detained and interrogated extensively at the U.S.-Canada border when traveling for business.

"America's new million record watch list is a perfect symbol for what's wrong with this administration's approach to security: it's unfair, out-of-control, a waste of resources, treats the rights of the innocent as an afterthought, and is a very real impediment in the lives of millions of travelers in this country," said Barry Steinhardt, director of the ACLU Technology and Liberty Program. "It must be fixed without delay."

"Putting a million names on a watch list is a guarantee that the list will do more harm than good by interfering with the travel of innocent people and wasting huge amounts of our limited security resources on bureaucratic wheel-spinning," said Steinhardt. "I doubt this thing would even be effective at catching a real terrorist."

Controls on the watch lists called for by the ACLU included:

- due process
- a right to access and challenge data upon which listing is based
- tight criteria for adding names to the lists
- rigorous procedures for updating and cleansing names from the lists.

The ACLU also called for the president - if not this one then the next - to issue an executive order requiring the lists to be reviewed and limited to only those for whom there is credible evidence of terrorist ties or activities. The review should be concluded within 3 months.

In February, the ACLU unveiled an online "watch list counter," which has tracked the size of the watch list based on a September 2007 report by the inspector general of the Justice Department, which reported that it was growing by 20,000 names per month.

The ACLU is also announcing today the creation of an online form where victims of the watch list can tell us their stories. We will collect those stories and use them (with permission) in various ways to advance our advocacy. A link to the form is available online at www.aclu.org/watchlist or directly at www.aclu.org/watchlistform.

The watch list counter and other materials are available at: www.aclu.org/watchlist

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