

Proposed passports not secure

Contributed by Paul Mutter
Thursday, 10 August 2006

A German security expert has 'thrown a spanner in the works' over the new e-passports being introduced progressively by European countries.

The new passports are supposed to be more secure than current ones and include so-called biometric information in them, contained on a chip. Lukas Grunwald claimed it took him only two weeks to figure out how to copy and transfer information from one device to another by studying information on the standards employed posted on a website for the International Aviation Authority who developed the standard. He then tested his theory on a new German passport and believes it would be equally effective on other European countries that will be employing the same standards. However he does not think it is possible to change the basic information contained on the new chips because it is encrypted. EU member states are obliged to issue passports with two fingerprints by 2009.

Spain battles Brussels

Spain is certainly not giving in without a fight over its stance with respect to the proposed takeover of Spanish energy company Endesa by a German rival EON. Brussels is demanding quick answers as to why Spain has imposed 19 conditions on the takeover including requirements for the German company to sell assets in Spanish territories. Brussels believes such conditions are against the free market enterprise and protectionist. Spain however is invoking Article 21 of the EU merger regulation that allows member states to block takeovers or impose conditions on grounds of public security. Some member states are concerned about energy control slipping out of national control into the hands of pan European or global companies. The European Commission has instructed Spain to reply to its letter by the 13th August.

No Scottish Scotch in India

The EU has protested to India over the level of tax it imposes on European spirits and wines.

Having conducted an exhaustive investigation Brussels believes India's import taxes amounts to a complete violation of World Trading Organisation rules and wants to report them to the WTO if it persists in current practices.

Rates as high as 550 percent are applied to Scottish Whisky and this effectively closes the market to imports.

Perhaps surprisingly the Indian market for Spirits is estimated to be 87 million 9-litre cases and according to reports it is the world's largest market for whisky.

More bad news for smokers

It is illegal to discriminate against all kinds of people and conditions nowadays in job advertisements, but not apparently if you are a smoker. A test case was recently bought before the European Commission for Employment by Scottish MEP Catherine Stihler as a result of an advertisement placed by an Irish Call Centre company who stated in their advert that smokers need not apply. The company argued that workers who smoked in their breaks would bring the smell of smoke into the workplace that would be offensive to fellow workers. The European Commissioner for Employment and Equal Opportunities Vladimir Spidla confirmed the ruling stating in a written reply that, "A job advertisement saying that 'smokers need not apply' would not seem to fall under any of the prohibited grounds."

No agreement on cheap shoes

There is still no agreement about new duties for shoe imports coming from the Far East into Europe. Manufacturing countries, particularly in southern Europe such as Spain and Italy, complained of dumping and unfair competition threatening their own national industries. Temporary duties have been imposed but these arrangements run out early in October. One of the main stumbling blocks to an agreement between the member states is the division that exists between those countries like Spain who still have their own shoe manufacturing factories and those countries that have already moved their supply chains to Vietnam and China.

EU border protection starts

A rapid reaction team has started work on protecting some of southern Europe's borders against the tide of immigrants seeking entry. The first group is working in Southern Italy co-ordinating patrols for illegal immigrants coming from North Africa.

A UN report has estimated that criminal groups are making more than 300 million dollars per year from charging illegal immigrants to give them passage into Europe. However there have been delays on a similar operation planned for the Canaries because of budget authorisation. It is hoped the administration issues will be resolved and work can begin soon.