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DoD Readies Biometric ID System for U.S. Bases in Iraq

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American Forces Press Service

WASHINGTON, May 17, 2005 – The Defense Department is fine-tuning a $75 million biometric identification system designed to improve force protection at U.S. military bases in Iraq, according to officials involved with the project.

A technician scans in a person's iris for input into DoD's biometric ID computer database during a recent demonstration of the system. Photo by Gerry J. Gilmore (Click photo for screen-resolution image);high-resolution image available.

At a recent system demonstration, DoD officials said the state-of-the-art system will use biographical data, facial photographs, fingerprints and iris scans collected from Iraqis and other non-U.S. citizens who want to work on U.S. bases in Iraq to develop ID cards that can't be counterfeited.

Biometrics is defined as measurable physical or behavioral characteristics that can be used to identify people. Work on the new biometrics-based system began in late January, when then-Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz pushed for an improved base-access system to provide better protection for U.S. troops in Iraq.

The need for a better way to screen people coming onto U.S. bases in Iraq was illustrated by the Dec. 21, 2004, bombing of a military dining facility in Mosul. That blast killed 22 people, including 14 U.S. soldiers, and wounded at least 50. It was first thought the dining hall had been hit by a rocket attack.

Further investigation of the Mosul bombing pointed to the likelihood that a suicide bomber had infiltrated the base -- one non-U.S. person killed couldn't be identified -- and set off the explosion.

"This is a force-protection initiative," a DoD official noted at the system demonstration. He pointed out that the new ID cards contain embedded information that can't be altered. "This badge will be able to uniquely identify that person as the right person. You can't counterfeit it; you can't tamper with it," he said.

Base employees who are issued new biometric ID cards will be required to pass through security-control points where the badges will be electronically checked, he explained.

During the demonstration project, managers showed how fingerprints and iris scans are gathered and the data put into computers, how ID cards are printed, and how new ID cards are checked and verified by stationary and mobile scanners.

Employee information gathered at enrollment points will be forwarded to self-contained control stations. The control stations feature independent power, heating and air-conditioning systems, all a necessity in an austere, forward-deployed environment like Iraq. The control stations will process the enrollment data to produce the biometrically enabled ID card.

Steve Hooks, a former FBI special agent and biometric project consultant, said at the demonstration that "DoD is trying to develop an identification capability so that we can identify unknowns (and) terrorists. These individuals applying for an ID card will have background checks based on those conducted for U.S. military personnel and DoD civil servants."

The biometric ID system has been developed to protect troops and save lives, said Army Maj. Gen. Conrad Ponder, the chief integration officer for the Army's chief information office, who attended the recent demonstration. "That's what we're all about," he added.

Ponder said he was impressed with the demonstration. "We're developing a significant new capability for force protection. This prototype is a solid first step, and we'll continue improving the systems as we get closer to fielding (the system)."

Project managers are now working closely with U.S. Central Command officials who attended the briefing to resolve any remaining issues. The new system will be implemented in Iraq as soon as possible, officials said.

A sample biometric ID card is checked at a stationary verification station during the demonstration. At the right is a fingerprint checker. Photo by Gerry J. Gilmore
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Army Maj. Gen. Conrad Ponder observes as a technician demonstrates how biometric data is input into the system's database. Photo by Gerry J. Gilmore
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A person's fingerprint is collected for DoD's biometric ID database. Photo by Gerry J. Gilmore
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