

UK 'fails to check immigrants on Interpol's list of suspects'

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and BEN LEAPMAN**

BRITAIN IS failing to check would-be immigrants against a global database of suspected terrorists, the head of Interpol has revealed.

Ronald K Noble, the secretary general of the policing organisation, accused the Government of "putting UK citizens at risk" through the lapse.

At the same time, the Foreign Office came under fire from travel industry insiders for contracting-out vital security checks on immigrants to a private company based in India.

Criticism from such a senior figure as the head of Interpol will embarrass the Home Office. Mr Noble is a former official in President Clinton's administration whose responsibilities included overseeing the US secret service.

Mr Noble pointed out that most of the men arrested in connection with the failed London and Glasgow bombings had only recently arrived in Britain. He claimed that such attacks could potentially be prevented if the authorities compared immigrants' details against the Interpol database.

While not disclosing whether any of the men in custody are on the list, he said: "We have the passport numbers, fingerprints and photos of more than 11,000 suspected terrorists on our database. But the UK does not check it against immigrants coming into the country or foreign nationals it has arrested.

"The guys detained last week could be wanted, arrested or convicted anywhere in the world and the UK would not know." He said

that "the UK Government really needs to catch up and realise that unless it consults global databases for passports, names and photographs then it risks letting dangerous people roam free".

Mr Noble, in charge of the US secret service from 1993 to 1996, cited the recent case of Mohan Singh, an Indian national, who applied for a US visa in New Delhi last year. American authorities checked Mr Singh's fingerprints with Interpol and found that he was wanted for murder in Germany in 1995. The visa was refused and he was taken into custody.

Mr Noble also cast doubt on Gordon Brown's pledge last week to share a "watchlist" of potential terrorists with other countries. The Interpol chief said: "British citizens might be surprised to find that this watchlist announced by your Prime Minister last week has not been sent to Interpol.

"Why is it that some countries make sure passengers do not carry a bottle of spring water on to a plane, yet those same countries aren't careful to ensure that convicted felons aren't entering their borders with stolen passports?"

In a little-noticed move this year, the Foreign Office transferred responsibility for security checks on immigrants from countries including India and Pakistan to VFS Global, a company based in India.

The business, which employs local staff, even carries out the critical task of taking applicants' fingerprints and storing them electronically. Liam Clifford, of globalvisas.com, a migration advice company, said: "Once you put this work in the hands

of private companies overseas, you no longer have the same protection."

In February, the Foreign Office announced a £300 million, five-year detail to out-

revealed last week that within hours of the failed West End car bombings, the names of potential suspects were circulated to ports and airports using a new, high-tech system.

Julie Gillis, of the Home Office "e-Borders" programme, told a counter-terrorism conference that suspects' names were placed on Project Semaphore, an electronic system that compares passenger details against law enforcement databases on travel routes which are considered high-risk.

Had any of the suspects tried to leave the country via these routes, officials would have been alerted.

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source the checks to VFS and an American company, Computer Sciences Corporation. Whitehall officials insist the firms operate to high levels of security. A government official