

WASHINGTON (25 March) – During a House Homeland Security Committee hearing Thursday, U.S. Rep. Gus Bilirakis (R-Fla.) questioned Assistant Secretary of Homeland Security for U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) John Morton about deficiencies in the current system for screening and tracking foreign students.

Recently, ICE disrupted visa fraud schemes in Florida and California, where fraud participants were accused of helping foreigners obtain or retain student visas by having other people take their proficiency exams and classes for them. This exposed clear vulnerabilities in the nation's security tracking system for foreigners who attend schools in the United States.

During Thursday's hearing, Bilirakis asked Homeland Security officials about inadequate oversight of student visa issuance and compliance.

“There have been numerous examples of individuals violating the terms of their student visas, including terrorists involved in both the 1993 and 2001 World Trade Center attacks,” said Bilirakis. “What is the Department doing to ensure these students are properly vetted prior to obtaining these visas, and do ICE Visa Security Unit personnel review student visa applications?”

Assistant Secretary Morton emphasized that there must be integrity in our student exchange programs and that the Department of Homeland Security has spent significant time investigating and uncovering schools that are essentially visa fraud mills. Morton also stated that while the Department has come a long way in its efforts, more needs to be done to ensure adequate oversight of the student visa system, noting that student visa fraud is a national security risk.

“There is little doubt that we must remain vigilant both domestically and abroad to ensure that terrorists do not use our student visa process as a back door into our country,” Bilirakis added after the hearing. “My hope is that ICE will continue to work closely with the academic community to develop a student-specific system of monitoring and enforcement.”

Last Congress, Bilirakis who currently serves as the lead Republican on the Homeland Security Committee's Subcommittee on Management, Investigations, and Oversight, introduced the Student Visa Security Improvement Act. This Act would improve the background checks conducted on student visa applicants and enhance America's ability to ensure that, once in the country, foreign students are abiding by the terms of their visas.