US rolls out less revealing airport scanners

February 1 2011

The US Transportation Security Administration began rolling out new airport scanner software Tuesday that produces less revealing images of travelers.

The new software "enhances privacy by eliminating passenger-specific images and instead auto-detects potential threat items and indicates their location on a generic outline of a person," the TSA said.

McCarran International Airport in Las Vegas was the first to test the new software, with Atlanta's Hartsfield-Jackson hub and Ronald Reagan Washington National Airport in the US capital due to have the new program installed in the coming days.

Advanced imaging technology X-ray scanners currently in use at airports around the United States sparked an uproar among travelers because they produce a graphic image of a person's naked body, genitalia and all.

TSA administrator John Pistole said the new software has been found in tests to "provide the same high level of security as current advanced imaging technology units while further enhancing the privacy protections already in place."

The new software reportedly detects potential threat items and indicates their location on a generic outline that is the same for all passengers.

If no potential threat items are detected, no outline will appear on the TSA agent's monitor -- only the word "OK."

But "areas containing potential threats will require additional screening," the TSA said.

US travelers have complained that the graphic image scanners now in use at 78 US airports showed too many details of the body of the person being scanned and were an invasion of privacy.

Others have worried the scans were unsafe because they expose travelers to low doses of X-rays.

Nearly 500 scanners are currently deployed at US airports, with additional units planned this year.