

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE****Statement of Chairman Bennie G. Thompson****“Holding the Department of Homeland Security Accountable for Security Gaps”**

September 5, 2007 (Washington) – Today, Committee on Homeland Security Chairman Bennie G. Thompson (D-MS) delivered the following prepared remarks for the full Committee hearing entitled “Holding the Department of Homeland Security Accountable for Security Gaps”:

“It has been 4 years since the Department of Homeland Security was created. Mr. Chertoff, for 2 years now, roughly half of the Department’s operational life, you have been the individual directly and primarily responsible for assuring that the Department can fulfill its important mission.

A few weeks ago, this nation paused to remember the victims of Hurricane Katrina and observe the 2nd anniversary of that devastating storm. In a few days, we will again pause to memorialize the victims of the September 11th attacks and mark the 6th anniversary of that earth-shattering day.

As we in this Congress, and the American people mark these tragic milestones in our nation’s history, we all know—you, me and everyone within the sound of my voice—that these events have strengthened our resolve, increased our vigilance and enhanced our commitment to assuring the preparedness, response and resiliency of this nation.

I am sure that today you will take the opportunity to tell this Committee and indeed the Nation that our country is better prepared than it was on September 11th to respond to a terrorist attack and that we are ready to meet the challenges of a natural disaster like Hurricane Katrina.

I look forward to learning about your plans to implement H.R. 1 which statutorily enacted the recommendations of the 9/11 Commission. And as I look forward to hearing about these new plans, I would be remiss if I did not wonder about whether you will remain at the Department long enough to carry out what you will discuss today.

As you know, during the August recess, the media was abuzz with the news of the resignation of Attorney General Alberto Gonzales. Likewise, there were many talking heads who have suggested that you are a prime candidate to accept the position of Attorney General. And so before you begin your testimony, Mr. Secretary, I would like you to inform us whether you plan to remain Secretary of the Department of Homeland Security for the duration of this Administration.

I ask this question not to put you on the spot but rather to gain some clarity on the future picture of this Department. As you may know, in a July report, Committee staff found that nearly one-quarter of the senior leadership positions located in the Department of Homeland Security are vacant.

In June, the National Journal found that DHS has added political positions to its ranks, giving it more political appointees than much larger departments such as the Department of Veterans Affairs and the Department of Defense.

To make matters worse Mr. Secretary, the Department has failed to provide Congress with programs, plans, and reports that are absolutely critical to securing the homeland.

For instance, where is the revised version of the National Response Plan? Why has DHS missed its deadlines for in-line baggage screening equipment? Where is the Department's strategic plan for deploying explosive detection equipment at airport checkpoints? Why hasn't the National Emergency Family Registry and Locator System been established? And where are the final regulations for TWIC?

So Mr. Secretary, if you are going to leave this Cabinet post to take a different Cabinet seat, the American people and I need to have a clear vision on what remains to be done. If you plan on staying in this Cabinet seat until January 2009, I need to make sure that certain things have been accomplished before you go.

In fact, Mr. Secretary, before you leave here today, I will give you a to-do list that specifies each item which should be accomplished before your tenure is over. When all of these things have been done, I will be able to say that we are safer now than we were before.

We owe the American people security. We owe them accountability. And most importantly, we owe them freedom from fear. And so, as you detail your plan to implement the recommendations of the 9/11 Commission, I will be listening closely to hear how you also plan to fill key vacancies at the Department and your plans for completing all of your outstanding responsibilities.”

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