Customs Computer Virus Strands Passengers

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Travelers arriving in the United States from abroad were stuck in long lines at airports nationwide when a virus shut down an U.S. Customs and Border Protection computer system for several hours, officials said.

Homeland Security spokesman Russ Knocke said the virus impacted computer systems at a number of airports Thursday night, including those in New York, San Francisco, Miami, Los Angeles, Houston, Dallas and Laredo, Texas.

Knocke said customs agents immediately switched to manual inspections. He declined to provide details on where the computer virus originated but said Friday the investigation remained open.

The worst delays appeared to be at Miami International Airport, where about 4,000 to 5,000 people waited to clear immigration, airport spokesman Greg Chin said. The passengers were not permitted to leave the area before then, but they all went through by midnight, he said. Everything was back to normal Friday.

Brian Hunt and his wife, who were visiting from Spain, said it took them nearly five hours to be processed.

"The agent was very charming, very nice and greeted us with a smile," he told The Miami Herald. "It was just an unfortunate thing, but these things happen. Who do we blame?"

The computer problem originated in database systems located in Virginia and lasted from around 6 p.m. until about 11:30 p.m., said Zachary Mann, spokesman for U.S. Customs and Border Protection in southern Florida.

At New York's airports, customs officials processed passengers by hand. Officials used backup computer systems to keep passengers moving at Los Angeles International Airport, where computers were down only briefly and delays from six flights lasted up to 2 1/2 hours.

"It was during a light time of travel for international passengers at LAX," said Mike Fleming, customs spokesman in Los Angeles. "All systems have been restored to full capacity."

By LISA ORKIN EMMANUEL
Associated Press

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