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Belgium Aims To Take The Lead In Electronic ID

Belgium plans to issue its first biometric-based passports as early as this year and to launch its chip-based national ID card rollout in the fall—putting it ahead of nearly all other European countries on both scores. For high-tech passports, it seeks to seize global leadership.

Belgium could take delivery of as many as 200,000 biometric-based passports by the end of this year, a source from France-based Oberthur Card Systems says.

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Oberthur and its parent, Groupe François-Charles Oberthur, will produce the passports, which will come equipped with a radio-frequency antenna and a 64-kilobyte contactless chip—both embedded in the back cover of the passport booklet. The chip, supplied by Netherlands-based Philips Semiconductors, will store a digital image of the citizen's face and may also store his digitized fingerprints.

The plans for shipment of the first batch of passports by year end lends some credence to the boast of Belgian officials in May that the country would be the first in the world with a general rollout of biometrics-based passports. It plans the rollout in 2005, possibly beating other countries with aggressive deployment schedules, such as Australia and a few in Europe. The countries are generally trying to satisfy mandates from the U.S. government for more secure travel documents.

If Belgium has something to prove, it may be because its passports had, until recently, so often been counterfeited. It only introduced machine-readable passports last year, and its citizens have faced entry restrictions from the U.S. government, which counts Belgium as one of its 27 Visa Waiver countries.

In its other major electronic ID project, Belgium this fall is planning to launch the rollout of its chip-based national ID card and seeks to use it as a major catalyst for Internet commerce. The launch follows an 11-municipality pilot that ended last January.

The e-ID card, containing a 32K contact chip and running Java Card software, will store general data on the citizen that is also printed on the front of the card, such as name and date of birth. But one piece of information, the citizen's address, will only be stored in the chip. This allows the government to avoid issuing a new card each time the cardholder's address changes.

The chip will also store two digital certificates on the cardholder, allowing him to securely log onto government or other Web sites and digitally sign transactions. These transactions could include electronically filing tax forms and sending registered e-mail, says Michel Poullet of Belgian-based ZETES, the prime vendor on the project.

Other countries have tried to encourage citizens to do business with the government over the Internet using a smart card, but have had limited success. The best-known example is Finland with its voluntary electronic-ID card. There, only about 10% of cardholders have paid extra to receive a digital certificate. In Belgium, all cards for citizens 18 and above automatically will come with two digital certificates and the associated private encryption keys. These form part of a public key infrastructure. The certificates can be revoked after issuance, but only at the request of the cardholder.

"In Finland, the card is an optional card; in Belgium, it's a compulsory card," Bart Sijnave, manager of the Belgian e-ID card program, tells Card Technology. "If you, by default, put a chip on the card, sooner or later he (cardholder) will start using it, especially when banks or other enterprises will start offering services where people need strong authentication." This is the model also being followed by the small Baltic state of Estonia for its national ID card.

Sijnave says banks are showing interest in offering home-banking services via the Internet, using the digital credentials stored on the card as security. Other service providers would secure e-commerce in the same way. These service providers, however, would be responsible for distributing readers cardholders would connect to their home computers. The government, while planning to encourage others to deploy home readers, has no plans to do so itself. The lack of a strong reader infrastructure has always posed a major barrier to governments or businesses successfully promoting chip-based authentication.

The government also has no firm numbers for how many terminals will be deployed at municipal offices to physically check the ID of cardholders or how many mobile terminals police officers will carry. Belgian cities and towns, in fact, will have the option of rolling out as many terminals as they like, to read ID cards, for example, at libraries or other public facilities. Later, the central government may decide to combine the national ID card with Belgium's social security card, which now uses only a simple memory chip. The government may also add a driver's license application at some point, says Sijnave.

Overall, plans call for 589 Belgian municipalities to issue 8 million to 9 million national ID smart cards to all citizens and permanent residents 12 and over by the end of 2009. Sijnave rejects claims the card rollout is behind schedule, a rumor he says sprang up after the government backed off of plan to complete the rollout by year-end 2007.

"This plan would have put too much pressure on the municipalities delivering the cards so it was decided to continue the original plan of rolling out over five years," he says.

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