And helping to guide and mo itor this delicate balancing act is ICA O, which aims at the expeditiou and unimpeded passage of pas engers, aircraft and cargo, acr ss national boundaries.

It is doing so through what the Org nization calls its Facilitation Pro ram, which encompasses just abo t every facet of airport operatio as they directly affect passenger .

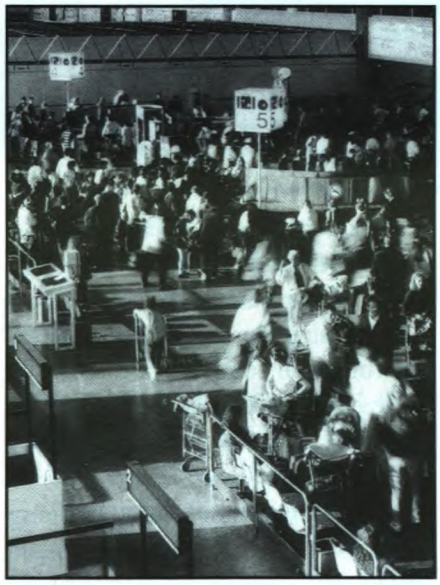
These include, for example, cus oms, immigration, consular, pas port and visa, taxation, public hea th, agriculture, narcotics control and security, as well as airside and gro ndside procedures for air car ers and airports.

The challenge is enormous in ligh of some of the harsh realities of t day's air travel. Terrorism, ille al immigration, drug trafficking and other illegal acts have all cor ributed to the creation of more che ks and controls on travellers.

Equally significant, the rise of the rade in illegal substances such as n rcotics and the use of airlines as e e of the primary carriers have also led to new procedures. In add ion, civil and economic uphea als in many countries have fue ed illegal immigration, causing gov rnments in many countries, par cularly those in the West, to tigh en border controls.

In the battle to strike the right bal nce between security and con enience, automation is increasing y becoming an ally. The use of X-r y scanners, metal detectors, exp osive sniffing and luggage scr eners, automation of baggage sor ng and other gadgets is increasing.

While such high-tech procedures are designed primarily to improve security, they are also otherwise beneficial to the harassed air traveller. For as the dangerous elements are dealt with and airports and airlines become more secure, greater opportunities are created for easing up on the scores of time-wasting procedures and reducing the loss of baggage.



MACHINE READABLE PASSPORT AND VISA

Promising to revolutionize passport control procedures is another major technological advance, the machine readable passport or MRP, developed under the auspices of ICAO and first introduced in the United States in 1981. To date, over 60 million have been issued worldwide.

While Canada, Australia, West Germany and the U.S. were pioneers in this regard, many other countries, including developing nations, are now issuing the document for travel. An added benefit is that the documents themselves offer strong safeguards against alteration, forgery or counterfeiting.

Moreover, some airports now feature special computerized equipment which instantaneously verifies and records personal data and distinguishes between those travellers who are welcome and those considered to be undesirable or potentially dangerous.

A decision on whether to admit a person or not can be made in seconds, thus enabling holders to avoid the long queues associated with traditional passport control.

ICAO has also introduced machine readable visas (MRVs) and its ultimate hope is that States will eliminate the visa requirement altogether. Meanwhile, it is trying to streamline the procedure by such initiatives as visa standardization.

One innovation being studied by the Organization is advanced passenger information systems, known as API, whereby government authorities or airlines can electronically alert authorities at the destination point about passengers on the flight.

These authorities can then determine whom to target or isolate once the plane arrives, allowing the remaining passengers to get faster clearance. Such a system is currently operating in the U.S., Australia and New Zealand.

Studies and discussions are also continuing at ICAO on another even more sophisticated system. Namely, electronic pre-clearance of people. This system allows authorities to check the passenger information on behalf of the receiving country before the flight departs. Unwelcome visitors are thus saved the trouble of boarding the aircraft in the first place! ✈