

SECURITY BEAT

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1,505 words

1 April 2004

National Defense

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Volume 88; Issue 605; ISSN: 00921491

English

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Homeland Defense Briefs

U.S. Stepping Up Efforts to Secure Ports

The biggest challenge facing the maritime transportation industry is ensuring that legitimate cargo is not needlessly delayed as new security measures are implemented, said retired Coast Guard Adm. James M. Loy, deputy secretary of homeland security.

According to Loy, every year more than 7,500 ships make port calls, carrying 6.5 million passengers, six million containers and one billion tons of petroleum, all contributing in excess of \$1 trillion to the nation's annual Gross Domestic Product.

"All in all, 95 percent of our commerce is carried through our seaports, and there's no let-up on the horizon," he said.

Ships and ports are more valuable to the global economy than any other form of transportation, said Loy.

"After September 11, it took days to restore movement by aviation; the aftermath of losing several ports would be measured in months, if not years," he said.

Since the terrorists attacks in 2001, the will to improve port security has grown, said Loy. "One would truly have to be brain-dead to fail to recognize the legitimacy of the threat."

The establishment of the Maritime Transportation security Act requiring port officials, ships' captains and facility operators to submit security plans to the Department of Homeland security, will also increase security, said Loy.

Steps are also being taken by DHS to screen nearly 100 percent of cargo before it enters U.S. ports, he said.

Under the Container security Initiative, U.S. Customs and Border Protection inspectors are placed at top seaports around the world to work with their foreign counterparts on screening and labeling cargo as "higher-risk" or "low-risk," said Loy.

A new "24-hour rule" requires electronic transmission of cargo manifests from U.S.-bound cargo ships one day in advance of loading, said Loy. That information is run through the Advanced Targeting System, which compares it against law enforcement data, the latest threat analysis and the ships' history, he added.

High-risk cargo is physically inspected before it is allowed to leave port. Last summer inspectors using the ATS seized a cache of weapons bound for El Salvador, he said.

Additionally, a new DHS requirement mandates that all foreign-flag vessels check in 96 hours before arriving in any U.S. port.

Since 9/11, the U.S. Coast Guard has boarded about 15,000 vessels, said Loy.

Funding Cuts Ahead for State and Local Programs

If Congress approves the Bush administration's 2005 budget, many local governments will see a decrease of almost \$800 million in funding for homeland security efforts.

Some experts predict that the 18 percent cut will be restored once state and local officials voice their displeasure with their representatives.

The Department of Homeland Security's budget also includes \$8 billion for aviation security, radiation detection and biodefense.

The budget shifts \$950 million away from grants, to state and local authorities. The grant stipulated that no state would receive less than .75 percent of total allocations. But that meant that states such as Wyoming would receive \$13 in grants per capita whereas New York would receive \$1.25, according to the report by the Civitas Group, a Washington-based consulting firm.

Of the money diverted away from the grant program, \$725 million will be redirected to the Urban Area security Initiative that provides grants to high-risk cities and assets based on threat assessment, writes **Michael Hershman**, Civitas president and CEO.

"If this shift takes place, it means that small and rural states will be relatively less important as buyers of homeland security products and services in the coming year," according to the study. "By contrast, the 10-20 major cities in the United States are likely to see their funding levels increase as a result of this shift."

Questions remain as to the criteria to be used to decide which cities are considered high terrorist risks, said Hershman. "Who will determine high risk cities?"

Programs that provide grants to state and local governments for homeland security are popular among members of Congress, said Hershman.

"There will likely be a bipartisan push over the summer to maintain funding at the fiscal year 2004 levels," he said. But reinstating those dollars could adversely impact other parts of the DHS budget.

In fiscal year 2004, the Office of Domestic Preparedness received \$4.3 billion for state and local grants. In 2005 the number was cut to \$3.5 billion.

DHS Personnel Reform Gets a Partial Thumbs Up

The Department of Homeland security's plan to reform its personnel system got a qualified endorsement in February from the head of the U.S. General Accounting Office.

The plan is designed to align the DHS personnel system with the department's mission requirements and, at the same time, protect the civil rights of the department's employees.

"Many of the basic principles underlying the DHS [proposed] regulations are consistent with proven approaches by strategic capital management," Comptroller General David M. Walker told a congressional hearing. "However, some parts of the system raise questions that DHS, [the Office of Personnel Management] and Congress should consider."

For example, Walker noted, the proposed regulations do not apply to nearly half of all DHS employees, including nearly 50,000 screeners in the Transportation Security Administration and the uniformed division of the Secret Service. To include them would require additional legislation, he said.

Once the department issues final regulations for the plan, it will face "multiple implementation challenges," Walker said. One challenge will be securing enough funding.

For example, the administration has requested more than \$10 million for fiscal year 2005 for a performance pay fund to recognize those employees who meet or exceed expectations and \$100 million to fund training and the development of the performance management and compensation system.

Deputy DHS Secretary James M. Loy said at the hearing that the changes were necessary. "We need the ability to act swiftly and decisively in response to critical homeland security threats and other mission needs," he said. "To achieve this, it is essential that we continue to attract and retain highly talented and motivated employees ... The current system is too cumbersome to achieve this."

More Training Needed to Handle Car Bombs

Car bombs and thermobaric explosives are expected to become terrorists' weapons of choice, experts said. First responder organizations, however, are not adequately prepared or trained to deal with these threats.

"Look around the world, [car bombs are] what is being used," said Tom Burky, a homeland security expert at Bauteile. "They are easy to make and veiy effective."

Burky stressed that he knew of no specific terrorist threats involving car bombs or thermobaric explosives, but he nevertheless believes these are plausible scenarios.

The materials to make a thermobaric bomb can be obtained without a license. And while an improvised bomb may differ from the military version, it can still have a devastating impact, said Burky.

One area of concern is the lack of adequate training available for first responders in how to spot car bombs and or how to counter thermobaric weapons, he said.

"I don't know any first responders that have a good idea of the output of these weapons," Burky said. He noted that much of the substantive information on these threats is classified.

There are some federal agencies that have begun discussing thermobaric weapons as it relates to terrorists, but again, the sensitive nature of the weapons has slowed the flow of information, said Burky.

Keeping that information from first responders is a "backward way of doing things," he said.

Emergency and law enforcement personnel need to know about safe standoff distances, how buildings might channel a thermobaric blast and how to defuse a bomb, said Burky.

A thermobaric blast could be much more devastating than a conventional bomb. "They are very effective in urban warfare," he said.

Thermobaric weapons suck the oxygen out of an enclosed area and create a large pressure wave that crushes anything in its way, according to Battelle.

The U.S. Defense Department has developed thermobaric weapons. In Afghanistan, during Operation Enduring Freedom, the weapons were used against al-Qaeda and Taliban fighters near Gardez, south of Kabul.

Burky said Battelle had developed course material for first responders and talked with institutions about teaching it, but the company got a "cool response."

He doesn't see that changing anytime soon.

"People still don't appreciate the prevalence of car bombs," he said. "Vehicle bombs are glazed over."

Battelle has developed an inexpensive system to defeat car bombs. And in demonstrations it has shown to be effective against thermobaric threats, said Burky.

The system is called HydroSuppressor, a manually triggered device that uses a high-powered water spray system to decrease the energy output of a bomb. Water lowers the temperature of the bomb to prevent its fuel from burning and converting to mechanical energy. It's that energy that causes the blast.

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