



Highlights of GAO-06-583T, a report to the Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations, Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, United States Senate

Why GAO Did This Study

Given today's unprecedented terrorism threat environment and the resulting widespread congressional and public interest in the security of our nation's borders, the subcommittee asked GAO to conduct an investigation testing whether radioactive sources could be smuggled across U.S. borders.

Most travelers enter the United States through the nation's 154 land border ports of entry. Department of Homeland Security U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) inspectors at ports of entry are responsible for the primary inspection of travelers to determine their admissibility into the United States and to enforce laws related to preventing the entry of contraband, such as drugs and weapons of mass destruction.

GAO's testimony provides the results of undercover tests made by its investigators to determine whether monitors at U.S. ports of entry detect radioactive sources in vehicles attempting to enter the United States. GAO also provides observations regarding the procedures that CBP inspectors followed during its investigation.

GAO is also issuing a report today on the results of this investigation (GAO-06-545).

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-06-583T.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Gregory D. Kutz at (202) 512-7455 or kutzg@gao.gov.

BORDER SECURITY

Investigators Transported Radioactive Sources Across Our Nation's Borders at Two Locations

What GAO Found

For the purposes of this undercover investigation, GAO purchased a small amount of radioactive sources and one secure container used to safely store and transport the material from a commercial source over the telephone. One of GAO's investigators, posing as an employee of a fictitious company located in Washington, D.C., stated that the purpose of his purchase was to use the radioactive sources to calibrate personal radiation detection pagers. The purchase was not challenged because suppliers are not required to determine whether prospective buyers have legitimate uses for radioactive sources, nor are suppliers required to ask a buyer to produce an NRC document when purchasing in small quantities. The amount of radioactive sources GAO's investigator sought to purchase did not require an NRC document. Subsequently, the company mailed the radioactive sources to an address in Washington, D.C.

The radiation portal monitors properly signaled the presence of radioactive material when our two teams of investigators conducted simultaneous border crossings. Our investigators' vehicles were inspected in accordance with most of the CBP policy at both the northern and southern borders. However, GAO's investigators were able to enter the United States with enough radioactive sources in the trunks of their vehicles to make two dirty bombs using counterfeit documents. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, a dirty bomb is a mix of explosives, such as dynamite, with radioactive powder or pellets. When the dynamite or other explosives are set off, the blast carries radioactive material into the surrounding area. The direct costs of cleanup and the indirect losses in trade and business in the contaminated areas could be large. Hence, dirty bombs are generally considered to be weapons of mass disruption instead of weapons of mass destruction. GAO investigators were able to successfully represent themselves as employees of a fictitious company and present a counterfeit bill of lading and a counterfeit NRC document during the secondary inspections at both locations. The CBP inspectors never questioned the authenticity of the investigators' counterfeit bill of lading or the counterfeit NRC document authorizing them to receive, acquire, possess, and transfer radioactive sources.