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EXCLUSIVE REPORTS

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Weighing port cargo against terror threat

Daniel S. Levine

John Zdanowicz became concerned about some weighty matters while watching the Ben Affleck movie "The Sum of All Fears."

Zdanowicz, a professor of finance at Florida International University, watched the movie in which a nuclear bomb is smuggled into a port inside a soda machine, and he wondered why dockworkers wouldn't notice it was unusually heavy.

That led Zdanowicz, who researches matters relating to money laundering, terrorism financing and tax evasion, to examine U.S. Department of Commerce data about the weights of cargo entering the nation's ports.

What he found in a preliminary review of data was that cargo entering the Bay Area from al Qaeda watch-list countries included briefcases from Malaysia that weighed 217 pounds apiece, coffee from Indonesia that weighed 25 percent more than stated and carpets from Iran that weighed 139 pounds per square meter.

Though there can be several explanations why the weights don't match up -- errors on the manifest or carpets woven from lead thread -- one is that the containers hold something other than what is stated.

Zdanowicz argues that such anomalies should be used to detect illegal and potentially dangerous cargo.

"There's always a trade-off of security and detecting criminal activity or slowing down trade. You can't inspect every container coming into the country. The question becomes, 'How do you select the cargo to inspect,'" said Zdanowicz. "If the cargo container is underweight or overweight, there's some probability that it isn't what they say it is. They ought to look at it."

Currently a small percentage of cargo entering the country is subject to inspection. Customs officials must balance the need for security with pressure to keep commerce flowing.

Charles Bartoldus, director of the National Targeting Center within the U.S. Customs and Border Protection service, said his agency does pay attention to weights of cargo, but it is just one of about 2,000 automated rules that are used in determining what cargo gets inspected. He said a score using these data points is used, but did not discuss the specifics of those rules for

security reasons.

"The system changed dramatically since 9-11. It was developed to look for narcotics shipments. It was repositioned after 9-11 with a new rule set to meet our new anti-terrorism missions," said Bartoldus. "We make sure all cargo is assessed according to risk and all high-risk cargo is always examined no matter what."

At Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory, scientists have been working on means of detecting nuclear weapons or radioactive dispersal bombs hidden in cargo without disrupting the flow of goods across borders. The lab is working on a range of radiation detectors from handheld devices used by inspectors to ones that would be fixed on container cranes that unload ships.

Bill Dunlop, a scientist working on proliferation prevention and arms control at the lab, said while weight anomalies might be useful in detecting illegal shipments such as drugs, it won't likely help detect radioactive materials.

"It may be a really interesting mechanism and highlight something that customs ought to do, but I'm unconvinced it will solve the problem we've been looking at, which is discovering nuclear material," said Dunlop. "You would like to know if a manifest looks wrong that it would raise suspicion and you would take additional measures."

'High-crime neighborhood'

Zdanowicz is working with two other professors to do an extensive study of the weights of cargo prior to the 9-11 terrorist attacks in 2001, in the period after the attacks and before the creation of the Department of Homeland Security, and the period after the creation of the department to see if anything has changed.

"If there was a high-crime neighborhood and you put more police in the neighborhood, you would expect to see a drop," he said. "If nothing has changed -- assuming the weights of the cargo reflect potential contraband coming in -- that raises questions about our ability to monitor incoming cargo."

Daniel S. Levine covers Bay Area economic issues for the San Francisco Business Times.

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