homeland security

FIU's Zdanowicz goes looking for mischief in trade statistics

A Florida International University professor is waging his own battle against terrorism by studying and documenting imports to the United States that weigh significantly more than they are supposed to.

Finance professor John Zdanowicz got the idea when he was watching the 2002 movie The Sum of All Fears, starring Ben Affleck and Morgan Freeman.

When he saw that terrorists in the movie hid an atomic bomb in a vending machine, Zdanowicz wondered why that wouldn't have been noticed by Customs inspectors.

"It should have weighed a lot more than a normal vending machine," Zdanowicz said.

Using U.S. Census Bureau data that can be purchased by the public, Zdanowicz and a colleague, professor Donald Chambers of Lafayette College in Pennsylvania, began tracking the weight of products imported to the United States. Zdanowicz and Chambers have found many products entered the country weighing far more than they logically should.

For example, they discovered that a supposed one-kilogram bag of Indonesian coffee weighed 1.26 kilos when it arrived in San Francisco.

They found pens from Malaysia weighing more than 19 pounds when they arrived in Los Angeles.

Something listed as a briefcase went from Malaysia to San Francisco weighing more than 215 pounds.

Zdanowicz and Chambers are focusing on the 25 countries on the State Department's Al Qaeda "watch list" and studying the months before and after Sept. 11, 2001 to see if they notice a difference between before and after the terrorist attacks.

Zdanowicz is working to develop software that will filter out cargo that should be inspected because of its weight.

He is not doing the research in coordination with the Department of Homeland Security or any other government agency and does not know if the agencies are aware of his work.

A movie gave Zdanowicz the inspiration to check on the weight of imports.

"Right now I'm doing this academically. It's another thing I do on weekends," he said.

If Homeland Security is tracking the same information, "they're not stopping (the overweight imports)," he said.

The Department of Homeland Security did not return phone calls from WorldCity requesting comment.

"Right now I'm just looking at imports," Zdanowicz said.

"At some point, I'll be looking at export weight."

He also wants to study countries that are not on the watch list but have many residents sympathetic to Al Qaeda, such as France, Germany and Russia.

"In fact, if you were a terrorist in Yemen, you probably wouldn't ship something (illegal) directly to the U.S. You might ship it to France, then from France to the U.S.," he said.

Zdanowicz cannot identify the owners of the overweight products because that information is not available in the Customs Bureau data.

However, the Department of Homeland Security could track down the people or companies behind the illegal transactions.