



DHS Scans Incoming Cargo At Airports

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The Homeland Security Department will put all incoming air cargo through radiation detectors at the nation's airports to try to prevent terrorists from smuggling radioactive bombs into the United States. The new initiative aims to close what the 9/11 Commission's final report called a major security vulnerability -- cargo on airplanes as a potential avenue for terrorism. Any cargo shipped on passenger planes will also be scanned, USA Today reports. Detectors will begin checking packages this week at Dulles International Airport outside Washington, D.C. Arriving cargo -- whether from Pakistan or Peoria -- will be driven through giant detectors called Radiation Portal Monitors. Although every piece of cargo will be scanned, "our focus is on the international cargo," says Jayson Ahern of Homeland Security's Customs and Border Protection division.

There is no specific threat information indicating terrorists are trying to smuggle radiological material into the country on commercial or cargo planes. But Homeland Secretary Michael Chertoff says he is concerned about weapons of mass destruction getting into the country by air or by boat. "The detonation of a weapon of mass destruction or dirty bomb inside our country would be a devastating blow, and we must make every effort to thwart such an attack," Rep. Edward Markey, D-Mass, told USA Today. "Given the severity of the security threat, screening all incoming cargo for the presence of radiation is a welcome and important development." Ahern says four more major airports will be outfitted with radiation detectors before the end of the year, although he did not identify them. The plan calls eventually for the nation's 30 largest airports to have detectors. Each machine costs \$450,000 to install, he says. At Dulles, only one monitor will be needed. But at some airports, dozens could be used. Critics say the government should focus on stopping terrorists from acquiring radiological and nuclear material, rather than spend time and money on extra security measures at airports. They also worry that the scans could slow the flow of goods. "This is a gross waste of money," says Randall Larsen, a terrorism expert and a former National War College professor. "They're asking the wrong question. It's not how to prevent a nuke from entering the United States, it's how do we prevent al-Qaeda from becoming a nuclear power?" Brandon Fried of the **Airforwarders Association**, which represents companies that move freight between airports and manufacturing plants, said he's concerned about "bottlenecks created by false positives" or false alarms by the monitors. Government auditors have criticized the detectors Homeland Security uses, hundreds of which are set up along land borders and at seaports, because they can be set off by naturally occurring radiation in products such as kitty litter.