

Spotlight increases on port security

by UPI

SAN DIEGO - When Mexican President Felipe Calderon launched his sweeping campaign against narco-trafficking late last year, he sent navy ships and thousands of troops to the port of Lazaro Cardenas to clamp down on the reputed hub for smuggling drugs to the United States.

Drugs aren't the only contraband that is troublesome at foreign ports such as Lazaro Cardenas. The ports - growing transit points for boxcar-sized containers bound for the American heartland - are crucial in keeping the United States free from terrorist attack.

With nearly the equivalent of 17.3 million cargo containers arriving by ship at U.S. seaports each year, concerns are heightening that maritime cargo might be used to deliver nuclear, chemical or biological weapons or to carry bands of terrorists into the United States.

More than five years after Sept. 11, a system to safeguard the world's ports is still not up and running. The administration of President Bush and members of Congress are debating how much money to contribute to the effort, and when and where to make container-cargo screenings mandatory.

Just last week, the United States announced it will donate radiation detectors to Mexico and help install and maintain them at that country's four busiest seaports to screen for "dirty bombs" and other radioactive material.

Despite efforts to inspect containers at foreign ports before they reach the United States, only a minuscule amount are examined abroad.

"We rely solely on the intelligence Customs has, and we're not exactly good on intelligence," said Stephen E. Flynn, a security specialist at the Council on Foreign Relations.

Safeguarding foreign ports is increasingly important as more products Americans buy arrive by sea. Almost half of incoming U.S. trade by value comes here in containers aboard ships.

"The challenge we're facing is that we're going to be doubling trade from Asia in the next 10 to 15 years," Flynn said.

Mexico, one of the United States' biggest trading partners, is attracting special attention not only because many goods produced in Mexico are moved through the country's ports but also because some Mexican ports process Asian goods bound for the United States.

Lazaro Cardenas, on Mexico's west coast with a direct rail line to the Texas border, is receiving more Asian cargo from shippers seeking an alternative to the busy U.S. ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach, Calif.

Hector Lopez, a Mexican maritime authority and former federal official, said the drug activity at Lazaro Cardenas does not impact the port's commerce.

"Narcotrafficking affects almost all sectors in Mexico," Lopez said. "The problem of narcotrafficking for us doesn't impact the security measures of foreign trade.

"Mexican port authorities, in a very short period, have met all conditions set by U.S. officials. If we don't do that, Mexican exports won't be accepted in the USA."

Despite Caldero's crackdown on drug trafficking at Lazaro Cardenas, the United States' main security emphasis is weapons of mass destruction.

Four Mexican ports - Altamira, Veracruz, Manzanillo and Lazaro Cardenas - will receive radiation-detection equipment under the plan announced last week. According to Mexican media reports, the value of the equipment, maintenance and training amounts to between \$30 million and \$50 million. A U.S. government representative would not comment on the amount.

Plans are under way to develop a megaport at Punta Colonet, 150 miles south of San Diego. The port is expected to be the size of the Los Angeles and Long Beach ports combined.

Millions of cargo containers from throughout Asia are expected to be off-loaded at this new port each year, transferred to rail cars and shipped across the U.S.-Mexican border, probably at Yuma, Ariz.

Little is known about specific plans for Punta Colonet and even less is known about what security measures would be put in place.

Under the Container Security Initiative implemented shortly after Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, about 50 of the 770 ports that ship goods to the United States have voluntarily allowed U.S. Customs and Border Protection agents to have a presence at their facilities to help identify high-risk, U.S.-bound cargo.

A recent Senate Homeland Security subcommittee investigation judged the system unreliable. The probe found that while the agents oversee paper reviews of 100 percent of maritime containers, only 5 percent of cargoes are physically inspected before leaving foreign ports or upon arriving in the United States.

The Safe Port Act, signed by President Bush in October, mandates that 100 percent of cargoes coming into the United States be scanned. Congress, now under Democratic control, has introduced new language to set a timetable. The House version says scanning must be operating at foreign seaports within five years and at foreign airports within three years. The Senate is working on its version.

"There are concerns about who pays and about slowing down commerce," said John Hensley, Science Applications International Corp.'s vice president specializing in security and transportation technology.

The San Diego company, one of several developers of cargo-scanning equipment, is taking a lead in securing foreign ports. SAIC's equipment is part of a pilot program at seven ports - from Pakistan to Oman to Honduras to South Korea. Its X-ray, gamma ray and newly developed high-energy P7500 X-ray system can probe deep into containers to detect harmful materials.

"If it really is a nuclear weapon we're concerned about, if it gets to the United States, it's too late," Hensley said. "We're trying to screen cargo overseas so this country is better-protected.

"We don't think there's any magic bullet. There's no single system that's going to protect you against (any one thing). But the government is slowly closing one door after another. I look at it like a concentric circle. In three or four or five years, you're going to up that to a 95 percent level."

SAIC has installed equipment at the terminal operations of Hutchison Port Holdings and Modern Terminals at Hong Kong, the world's busiest container port, which processes 16 million container ships annually - 12 million of them headed to the United States.

Hutchison recently bought property at Punta Colonet and reportedly is interested in entering the government's competitive bidding to operate the port facility planned there.

What safeguards will be installed at the port and at the border rail crossing - points along the supply chain at which cargoes could be corrupted?

Will Mexican federal and state governments pay for and be responsible for cargo security, or will it be private companies that develop and operate the cargo terminals and rail operations?

Does the drug trade at the port of Lazaro Cardenas, where 19.5 tons of pseudoephedrine - a methamphetamine ingredient - were seized in December, hold ominous implications for safeguarding Colonet?

Calderon's action at Lazaro Cardenas was meant to make it more secure, said Mexican Subsecretary of Transportation Manuel Rodriguez Arregui.

"With respect to safety and security, you can always do better," Rodriguez said.

Mexico's federal government will be responsible for securing the Colonet port, Rodriguez said.

"Private parties may play a role, but the ultimate responsibility is the government's," he said.

Foreign ports are not the easiest point for terrorists to introduce weapons of mass destruction into container cargo.

Security expert Flynn said the biggest opportunities come at the factory or when the load is being carried miles cross-country to a port. The possibility of tampering also exists whenever the container is shifted to another mode of transport, such as when cargo boxes are transferred from ships to trucks or rail cars at intermodal facilities.

"Goods at rest are goods in peril," Flynn said. "Anytime the system is slowed down, it's an opportunity to put hands in the cookie jar."