

**Statement of Ranking Member
Senator Susan M. Collins**

“Closing the Gaps in Air Cargo Security”

November 16, 2010

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Terrorism knows no borders or boundaries, and the threat continues to adapt and morph before our eyes. Al Qaeda and its affiliates remain unflagging in their determination to exploit vulnerabilities in the security systems developed since September 11, 2001.

In the past 12 months, the United States has narrowly avoided two terrorist plots directed against aviation. The first was averted by sheer luck and the quick action of the passengers and crew in the skies above Detroit on Christmas Day. The second was disrupted due to intelligence shared by our allies and the hard work of federal law enforcement, intelligence, and homeland security officials and several international partners.

In these two failed attacks, we see the fanaticism and patience of our enemies. Though thwarted, these plots should prompt us to reexamine whether our priorities and resources are properly deployed.

Today, the Committee examines the most recent attempted attack. Last month, terrorists exploited weaknesses in air cargo security and succeeded in putting explosives inside printer cartridges bound for the United States. These bombs ultimately found their way into the cargo bays of airplanes, including a passenger plane. If detonated, the results could have been catastrophic.

This is the nature of the terrorist threat that we face: it is dynamic and ever-changing. As we strengthen our security systems, the terrorists counter with a different kind of threat, aimed at a different target.

The potential to plant an explosive somewhere in the millions of pieces of air cargo shipped around the world daily is a vulnerability.

The Department of Homeland Security must use this near miss to redouble its work with other countries, airline carriers, and shippers to tighten the security network.

We must move quickly to shore up our defenses in this area, without interfering with the legitimate flow of commerce. Al Qaeda is, after all, seeking to destroy our economy and way of life, as well as to kill our people. We must not allow either goal to be accomplished.

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DHS should analyze how the government can best focus its limited screening resources on the highest risk cargo. The successes in the risk-based screening of maritime cargo could provide a road map for risk-based screening of air cargo.

Currently, maritime cargo manifest information must be submitted to DHS at least 24 hours before a cargo container headed to the United States is loaded on a ship overseas. Using this information and other intelligence, DHS targets high-risk cargo for inspection prior to the ship's departure to our country.

In sharp contrast, air cargo manifest information is required to be submitted only four hours before that cargo *arrives* in the United States. That means the information is often transmitted to DHS while the aircraft is in the air - providing no opportunity to conduct further inspections of flagged cargo before departure.

Indeed, Customs and Border Protection has acknowledged that based on the shipping information about the two packages from Yemen, the agency would have flagged them as high risk upon arrival in the United States. We need a system that would have ensured that additional inspection abroad.

Certainly, the tempo of the air cargo supply chain is different from maritime cargo. But regardless of the mode, we have an obligation to examine vulnerabilities in our supply chains and manage risks to those systems. DHS should make it a priority to ensure that the highest risk cargo gets the attention that it deserves, while keeping in mind the adage in the security field that if you attempt to secure everything, you secure nothing.

There are also opportunities to make better use of the private sector in securing air cargo overseas, where screening efforts are now more limited. Instead of attempting to screen almost all cargo at the airport, it could be screened at a warehouse where the package is sealed, long before it reaches an airport, and kept securely until it is delivered to the air carrier.

This would help avoid potential delays that could be created if a substantial amount of screening takes place immediately prior to loading packages on an aircraft. Indeed, this is already being done to secure domestic air cargo shipments.

Leveraging private sector resources and information to screen international air cargo is worth the Department's consideration and could help target its security resources more effectively.

I mentioned that DHS must constantly re-evaluate the allocation of its security resources and priorities. In that vein, I remain concerned about the

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intrusiveness of Advanced Imaging Technology and its potential negative health effects.

As I have said in multiple letters to the Administration, the Department should independently evaluate the health effects of that technology and should consider software that respects travelers' privacy by automatically identifying objects that may be threats using featureless images of travelers, rather than having a TSA officer review detailed images of passengers. To date, the Department's responses to my inquiries have been inadequate.

Obviously, our government's first priority is to protect against terrorism, and the public will accept a certain level of intrusion and inconvenience. But DHS should use technology and techniques that are safe and effective and that minimize privacy concerns whenever possible.

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