

Sunday,  
December 4, 2016

Winston-Salem Journal Home

- [AUTOS](#)
- [BUSINESS FINDER](#)
- [JOBS](#)
- [MYCOMMUNITY](#)
- [PERSONALS](#)
- [SEARCH](#)
- [360° TOURS](#)

JournalNow

- NORTH CAROLINA
- [Davidson](#)
- [Davie/Yadkin](#)
- [Federal Government](#)
- [State Government](#)
- [Surry/Stokes](#)
- [Watauga/Ashe](#)
- [Wilkes](#)

INSIDE LOCAL NEWS

- [Ask SAM](#)
- [AP Wire](#)
- [Elections](#)
- [Forsyth County](#)
- [Lottery](#)
- [North Carolina](#)
- [Phoebe Zerwick](#)
- [Religion](#)
- [Week In Photos](#)

SECTIONS

- [AP Wire](#)
- [Business](#)
- [Classifieds](#)
- [Corrections](#)
- [Entertainment](#)
- [Front Page](#)
- [Living](#)
- [Local News](#)
- [Obituaries](#)
- [Opinion](#)
- [Special Reports](#)
- [Sports](#)
- [Weather](#)

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- [Contact Us](#)
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- [Search Our Site](#)

SPECIAL COVERAGE

LOCAL NEWS

Fri, Jan 18, 2002

Customs authorities fear 'nuke-in-a-box'  
Cargo inspection at foreign ports urged

By Gil Klein  
MEDIA GENERAL NEWS SERVICE

WASHINGTON

Trying to thwart what authorities call a "nuke-in-a-box" terrorist attack, the head of the U.S. Customs Service said yesterday that authorities want to inspect cargo containers bound for the United States before the containers leave foreign ports.

"One of the most lethal terrorist scenarios is the use of ocean-going containers to smuggle terrorists or weapons of mass destruction into the country," said Customs Commissioner Robert C. Bonner. "It's almost unthinkable the kind of carnage it could cause. And the risks are so great to the international global trading system that we can't afford not to do something."

Osama bin Laden makes no secret of his desire to get nuclear weapons and cripple the U.S. and world economy, Bonner said. One nuclear explosion from a bomb hidden in a shipping container would not only destroy the surrounding city but also stop world trade for months, he said.

Almost half of all of the containers coming to the United States by sea come from 10 foreign ports in Asia and Europe, Bonner said. The U.S. government needs to work with foreign governments that control these megaports to build a container security system.

"The ideal thing would be to form small multinational teams" at each of these ports, he said. If the top 10 ports go along with the plan, he said, others most likely would follow.

About 5.7 million containers, each the size of a truck trailer, arrive at U.S. ports each year. Another 11.2 million come across the U.S. border by truck and train from Canada and Mexico. Transporting cargo by container has become so common worldwide that disrupting the system would devastate the world economy, said Bonner, who presented his plan at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, a Washington research group.

An explosion in one port would force shippers around the world to stop container shipments, bringing commerce and manufacturing to a standstill, he said.

Even before Sept. 11, terrorism experts warned that containers could be used by terrorists to hide an explosive, even a nuclear bomb, that could be detonated by remote control when the ship arrived in a U.S. port.

The containers could even be used to transport the terrorists themselves past immigration and customs agents.

Last October, Italian authorities found a suspected al-Qaida operative locked inside a shipping container bound for Halifax, Nova Scotia, Bonner said. A bed and a toilet were inside the container, along with airport maps, airport security passes and an airplane mechanic's certificate.

Bonner said that it is not necessary to inspect all of the containers. Customs agents are confident that they know what is in 98 percent of U.S.-bound containers through a tracking system. But the other 2 percent are considered high-risk containers that need to be checked. Already it is possible to screen the containers quickly with X-ray and gamma-ray scanners, he said. That equipment is in place, but more is needed.

Electronic seals can be put on the containers to alert customs agents of unauthorized entry.

About half of the nation's customs agents are carrying hand-held radiation detectors that resemble cell phones. Bonner demonstrated one that began beeping when it came close to a small amount of radioactive material.

"I feel very good that these are out there," Bonner said of the device attached to his belt. "They are very good at finding a nuke-in-the-box here. But it might be a day late and a dollar short."

Once the nuclear device had arrived at its destination, it could be exploded, he said.

The defense perimeter needs to be pushed back to the ports of origin so that suspicious containers are X-rayed and checked for radioactive material before they are shipped to the United States. "We should know all about what is in the containers before they leave Rotterdam, not when they arrive in Newark," Bonner said.

Customs agents are trained to worry about incoming cargo, not outgoing shipments, he said. He called for customs agents worldwide to work together to protect against

terrorism.

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[Setting It Straight](#) | [SpeakOut](#)

[BACK TO TOP](#)

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[Obituaries](#) | [Opinion](#) | [Search](#) | [Site Map](#) | [Special Reports](#) | [Sports](#) | [Weather](#)

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