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Highlights

AVIATION SECURITY

Actions Needed to Address Challenges and Potential Vulnerabilities Related to Securing Inbound Air Cargo

Why GAO Did This Study

In 2010, passenger flights transported about 3.6 billion pounds of cargo into the United States from foreign locations. According to TSA, the introduction of explosive devices in air cargo shipments is a significant threat, and DHS was mandated to establish a system to screen 100 percent of cargo transported on all passenger aircraft traveling to, from, or within the United States by August 2010. Individuals identified as matches to the No Fly List are generally prohibited from boarding commercial aircraft because it has been determined they pose a threat to civil aviation or national security. GAO was asked to examine (1) TSA actions taken since October 2010 to enhance the security of inbound air cargo transported on both passenger aircraft and all-cargo carriers; and (2) any associated challenges TSA faces. GAO reviewed relevant requirements and documents, interviewed federal officials, and visited three airports based on cargo volume. The visits provided insights, but were not generalizable to the entire industry. This is a public version of a sensitive security report GAO issued in March 2012, which also addressed U.S. Customs and Border Protection's and TSA's use of the No Fly List to secure inbound air cargo.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends, among other things, that DHS assess the costs and benefits of requiring all-cargo carriers to report inbound air cargo screening data. DHS concurred with GAO's recommendation and is taking actions to address it.

What GAO Found

The Transportation Security Administration (TSA) has taken three primary actions since October 2010 to enhance security of inbound cargo on passenger and all-cargo aircraft. First, from October 2010 through May 2011, TSA issued new risk-based security requirements to focus more detailed screening measures on high-risk shipments, including prohibiting the transport of air cargo on passenger aircraft from Yemen and Somalia due to threats stemming from those areas and enhancing screening procedures for all cargo carriers. Second, the Secretary of Homeland Security established an Air Cargo Security Working Group—which included passenger and all-cargo representatives—to help identify ways to enhance the security of the air cargo system. In April 2011, the group recommended actions to enhance security such as developing mutually recognized standards for cargo screening technology, but the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) has not yet determined whether to implement them. Finally, in December 2010, DHS initiated an Air Cargo Advance Screening pilot, which is ongoing, to more readily identify high-risk cargo for additional screening prior to departing from foreign airports to the United States.

TSA has not yet met the 100 percent screening mandate as it applies to inbound air cargo due to several persistent challenges. For example, about one-third of air carriers that commented on TSA's proposal to screen all inbound cargo by the end of calendar year 2011 expressed concerns about being able to meet this date without causing significant disruptions in the air cargo supply chain. In response to these concerns, TSA proposed a new date of December 2012. TSA officials also said that it is difficult to verify the accuracy of the self-reported screening data provided by passenger air carriers used to determine the extent to which screening has been conducted in foreign countries. Further, there is no requirement for all-cargo carriers to report data comparable to passenger air carrier screening data, even though most inbound cargo is shipped into the United States by all-cargo carriers. TSA has not yet weighed the costs and benefits of requiring all-cargo carriers to submit screening data, and by doing so, TSA could determine whether this additional data could enhance its efforts to identify potential risks for inbound air cargo, develop cost effective strategies and measures to manage these risks, and provide additional assurance that all-cargo carriers are complying with TSA's enhanced screening requirements.

United States Government Accountability Office