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Editorial

Fake ID's at the Border Crossings

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While federal officials have been scrambling to install enough radiation detectors to screen all cargo for dangerous nuclear materials, they have apparently left a glaring hole in this thin and spotty line of defense. Even when detectors signal the presence of a radioactive substance, border guards may be fooled into waving a shipment through based on fraudulent paperwork and glib talk by the drivers.

That disturbing lesson comes from a report issued this week by the Government Accountability Office, an investigative arm of Congress. Undercover testers put small amounts of cesium-137, a highly radioactive material, in the trunks of two vehicles and drove across the borders from Mexico and Canada at sites that had big stationary detectors.



The good news is that the detectors signaled the presence of radioactivity and that inspectors then questioned the undercover testers and subjected their vehicles to further inspection with hand-held devices. The bad news is that they allowed the shipments through anyway, apparently on the basis of counterfeit Nuclear Regulatory Commission documents, copied from the Internet, and fake shipping documents from a fictitious company.

The G.A.O. says the smuggled cesium was enough to make two "dirty bombs," which could contaminate an area and render it unusable for a long period. The N.R.C., on the other hand, says the amounts were far too small to worry about. Either way, it is disturbing that the guards let the shipments through. It is not clear whether the guards have gotten complacent in the wake of repeated false alarms triggered by natural radiation from bananas, ceramic tiles, fertilizer and other products, or were simply tricked by the phony documents. Red-faced officials insist that they will give border agents new tools to verify such documents shortly. The N.R.C. clearly needs to tighten its rules governing the purchase and security of small quantities of radioactive materials.

A dirty bomb uses ordinary explosives to disperse radioactive materials and contaminate the environment. An even greater, if less likely, threat would be posed by a real nuclear weapon or the fissile material to make one. Unfortunately, bomb-grade uranium is much harder to detect than cesium, and radioactive materials shielded by lead are much harder to detect than containers of cesium in cardboard boxes in vehicle trunks. The nation is far short of its goal to have radiation detectors at every portal. If border guards miss shipments of bombs or fissile material, the result could be catastrophic.

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