

**DEPARTMENT OF HOMELAND SECURITY**  
**Office of Inspector General**

**Effectiveness of Customs and Border  
Protection's Procedures to Detect Uranium  
In Two Smuggling Incidents**



**Office of Audits**

**OIG-04-40**

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Homeland  
Security

## Preface

The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) Office of Inspector General (OIG) was established by the Homeland Security Act of 2002 (*Public Law 107-296*) by amendment to the Inspector General Act of 1978. This is one of a series of audit, inspection, investigative, and special reports prepared by the OIG as part of its DHS oversight responsibility to identify and prevent fraud, waste, abuse, and mismanagement.

This report represents an abbreviated version of our classified report assessing the effectiveness of Customs and Border Protection's procedures to detect uranium in two smuggling incidents. It is based on interviews with employees and officials of relevant agencies and institutions, direct observations, and a review of applicable documents.

The recommendations herein, if any, have been developed to the best knowledge available to the OIG, and have been discussed in draft with those responsible for implementation. It is my hope that this report will result in more effective, efficient, and economical operations. I express my appreciation to all of those who contributed to the preparation of this report.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Clark Kent Ervin".

Clark Kent Ervin  
Inspector General



# OIG

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*Department of Homeland Security*  
*Office of Inspector General*

## **Introduction**

Since September 11, 2001, the U.S. Customs and Border Protection's (CBP) priority mission is detecting and preventing terrorists and terrorist weapons from entering the United States (U.S.). A major component of its priority mission is to ensure that oceangoing cargo containers arriving at the seaports of entry are not used to smuggle illegal and dangerous contraband.

On September 11, 2002, ABC News reported that a steel pipe containing a 15 pound cylinder of depleted uranium was shipped from Europe to the U.S. undetected by CBP. On September 11, 2003, ABC News reported that the same cylinder was smuggled to the U.S. from Jakarta, Indonesia, again undetected.

At the request of John Dingell, Ranking Member, House Committee on Energy and Commerce, and Jim Turner, Ranking Member, House Select Committee on Homeland Security, we reviewed CBP's procedures in place at the time of the two smuggling incidents initiated by ABC News.

## **Results in Brief**

Improvements are needed in the inspection process to ensure that weapons of mass destruction or other implements of terror do not gain access to the U.S. through oceangoing cargo containers. Detection equipment and search protocols and procedures are the two areas where improvements would enhance the effectiveness of the inspection process. We made recommendations that address these areas. CBP initiated numerous changes and has plans for additional changes in the future to improve the ability of inspectors to detect threat items in cargo containers.

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## Background

To test controls over importing weapons of mass destruction, ABC News was successful in two attempts at smuggling depleted uranium into the country. Scientists advised ABC News that shielded depleted uranium had the same signature as shielded weapons-grade uranium, and loaned ABC News a 15 pound cylinder of shielded depleted uranium. However, we were informed by CBP that the radiation signatures of shielded depleted uranium and shielded weapons-grade uranium are distinctly different. For educational or research purposes, it is legal for an individual to possess up to 15 pounds of depleted uranium, and import it into the U.S., as long as it is declared.

In the first smuggling event, ABC News reported that a steel pipe containing a 15 pound cylinder of depleted uranium, which was shielded with lead, was placed in a suitcase and accompanied the ABC News reporters by rail from Austria to Turkey. The reporters thought that this route would simulate a journey that a terrorist would most likely take in smuggling radioactive materials from the former Soviet Union. During this 47-hour European rail trip, the suitcase was placed on a rack in the cabin of the train car. The reporters said that they saw no sign of any radiation detection equipment during the trip. In Istanbul, Turkey, the suitcase was placed inside an ornamental chest that was crated and nailed shut. The crate containing the suitcase was then placed alongside crates of huge vases and Turkish horse carts in a large metal shipping container that was ordered from a company that arranges shipments to the U.S. The container was then loaded onto a ship that left Istanbul on July 10, 2002. The crate was targeted as high-risk for screening by the U.S. Customs Service (Customs). ABC News broadcast on September 11, 2002, that Customs failed to detect depleted uranium carried from Europe to the U.S.

During the second smuggling event, ABC News smuggled the same cylinder of depleted uranium in August 2003. ABC News placed the cylinder containing depleted uranium into a suitcase. The suitcase was then placed into a teak trunk. The trunk, along with other furniture, was loaded into a container in Jakarta, Indonesia, and then transshipped to the U.S. from Tanjung Pelepas, Malaysia. The container was shipped in late July 2003 and arrived on August 23, 2003. This shipment was also targeted as high-risk for screening and subsequently inspected by CBP personnel, but was then allowed to proceed from the port by truck on September 2, 2003. As in the earlier incident, ABC News announced on September 11, 2003, that Customs again failed to detect depleted uranium.

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## **Capability of CBP's Deployed Equipment To Detect Radiation Emitted in the Two Smuggling Incidents**

At our request, CBP prepared an analysis that addressed the capabilities of various detection equipment. To perform the analysis, CBP utilized the services of senior scientists on loan to CBP from the Department of Energy's Pacific Northwest National Laboratory. The testing was based on simulated models using actual sources of uranium, which assumed that both depleted uranium and weapons-grade uranium were smuggled into the country in a manner similar to the two smuggling events. The analysis described the distances beyond which the detection equipment would no longer detect the radiation source. The radiation portal monitors installed by CBP have the inherent sensitivity to detect both depleted and highly enriched uranium in cargo. The ability to detect is reduced by certain factors. We made recommendations that will enhance the effectiveness of radiation detection equipment.

## **Search Protocols and Procedures Followed by CBP in Each of the Two Events**

The protocols and procedures that CBP officials followed, at the time of the two smuggling incidents, were not adequate to detect the depleted uranium. CBP has since enhanced its ability to screen targeted containers for radioactive emissions based on deployment of more sensitive technology, better procedures, and training. Along these lines, we made recommendations that would enhance training and search procedures followed by CBP inspectors.

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