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Uneasy Neighbor

Mexico grapples with homeland security

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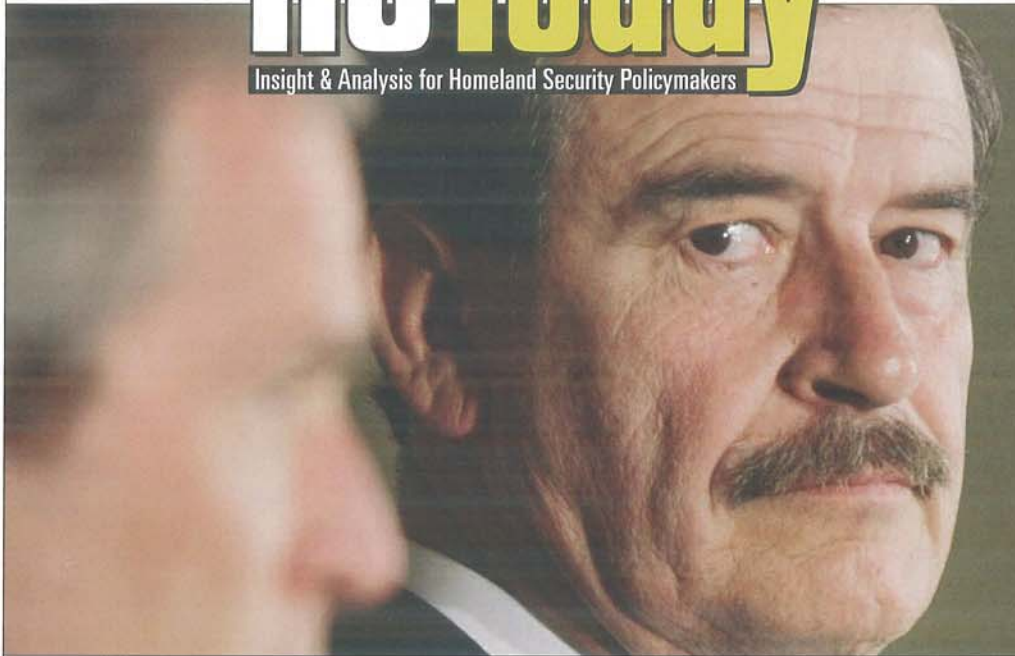


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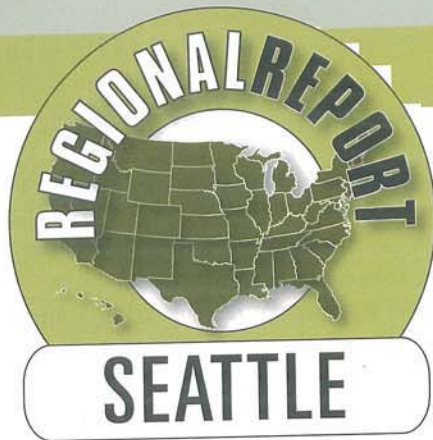
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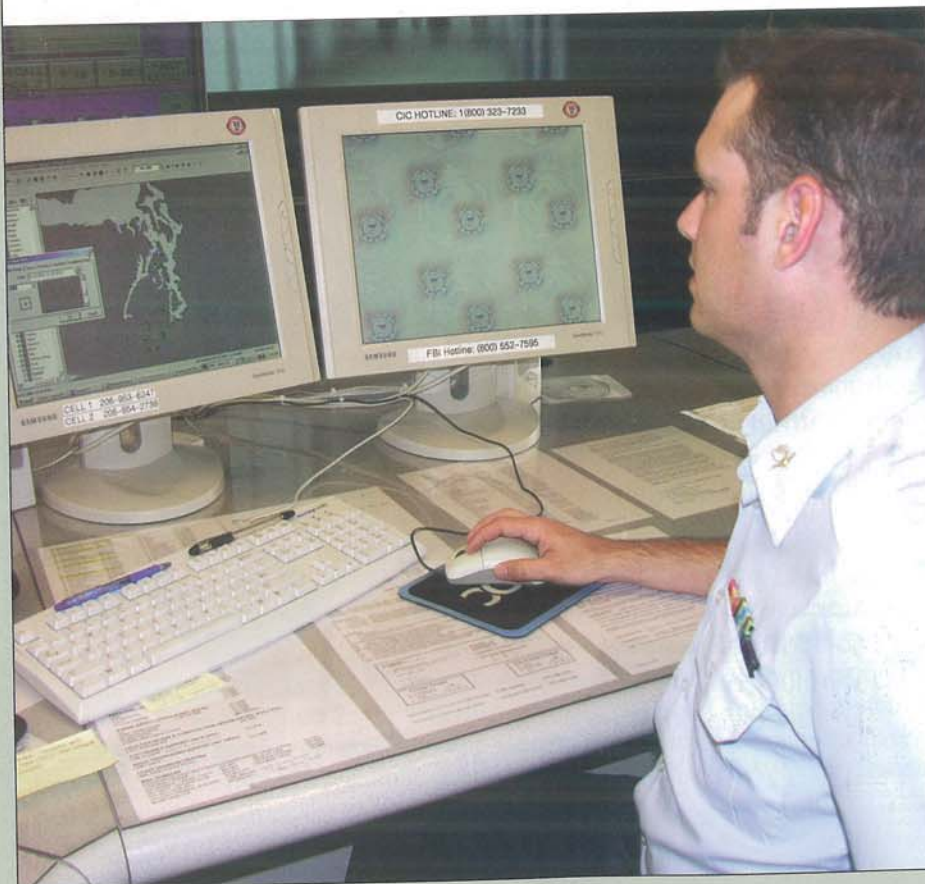


Fortifying the Fourth Corner

By DANA E. BLOZIS

THE THREAT OF TERRORISM CAME EARLY TO SEATTLE AUTHORITIES—ON DEC. 14, 1999, TO BE EXACT, WHEN BENNI ANTOINE NORIS DROVE ONTO THE FERRY FROM VANCOUVER TO PORT ANGELES, WASH., AND TOLD A US IMMIGRATION INSPECTOR THAT HE WAS HEADED TO “SATTAL.” Questioned by US Customs agents once the ferry arrived, Noris became agitated and fidgety. Suspecting that they had a drug smuggler on their hands, Customs agents conducted a search of his car. Under a spare-tire compartment, they found several green bags full of black-and-white powder, pill bottles and two jars filled with a brown liquid. Discovered, Noris broke free and tried to flee, but was captured and the material was turned over to a laboratory.

US COAST GUARD



The results were chilling: The brown liquid was a very unstable relative of nitroglycerin and could have destroyed the ferry.

Noris' real name was Ahmed Ressam; he was an Al Qaeda operative and his actual target was Los Angeles, where he planned to set off an explosion at the airport to coincide with the millennium celebrations.

Since that time, Seattle and northwest authorities have been especially active—and so, apparently, has their quarry. Since Sept. 11, 2001, 157 incidents of suspicious activity on or near the state's ferries have been reported. Most of the incidents involved passengers, believed to be from the Middle East, who were photographing and videotaping the ferries and their operations using digital cameras and camera phones.

The FBI determined that of these incidents 19 were highly or extremely likely to have involved terrorist surveillance. In these incidents, the suspected passengers asked detailed questions about ferry operations, in addition to photographing stairwells, car decks and ferry workers. Three of the incidents involved a man who was the subject of an FBI terrorism investigation.

As a direct result of the perceived risk, authorities immediately implemented new procedures, including an increase in the number of explosive-sniffing dogs and handlers at ferry terminals throughout the Puget Sound. This was in addition to an increase in the screening of large vehicles and the increased use of armed “sea marshals,” aircraft surveillance and Coast Guard escorts.

But what could terrorists want with ferries? The answer came from half a world away on Feb. 27, 2004. An explosion of eight pounds of dynamite aboard a Philippine ferry and a subsequent fire killed over a hundred people.

Responsibility for that attack was claimed by Abu Sayaf—a militant

Adam Eggers, a Coast Guard public affairs specialist, examines data from the Northwest Watch at the command center of Seattle's 13th Coast Guard District.

group with close ties to Al Qaeda.

BEEFING UP THE FORCE

As a major metropolitan area with multiple borders, Seattle and the surrounding area is vulnerable to terrorist threats and weapons, perhaps more so than other areas of the country. The city is a major transportation hub with a very active seaport. It's also home to international corporations like Boeing Co. and Microsoft, which are potential targets.

"This is a strategic corner of the country where we have air, land and sea borders," Mike Milne, the local public affairs officer for the US Customs and Border Protection (CBP) directorate of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) told *HSToday*. "We treat all borders as a threat to the United States."

With the Pacific Northwest nicknamed the "fourth corner" of the United States, Seattle is located about 110 miles south of the British Columbia, Canada border. With border towns like Blaine and Sumas among the 50 busiest land border crossings, the Seattle area's vulnerability remains considerable, particularly in remote areas in the nearby Cascade and Olympic Mountain ranges.

Nonetheless, Milne believes that close cooperation among law enforcement and border agencies has increased the Seattle region's security. "In a post-9/11 world, law enforcement agencies are working closely together to prevent another 9/11," Milne said. "We're better prepared to fight terrorism and the traditional narcotics, immigration and agricultural threats to our nation's borders."

Last August, CBP added an air and marine operation to its existing force at the Canadian border. Based out of Bellingham International Airport 90 miles north of Seattle, CBP works in conjunction with the Border Patrol and Coast Guard to stop air, marine and drug smuggling; to keep illegal intruders out of the United States; and to patrol the San Juan Islands. So

far, the new team has a number of successful air and marine seizures under its belt.

Another change was implementation of the Container Security Initiative (CSI) at the ports of Seattle and Tacoma, which together make up the third-largest container port in the country. Cargo containers considered risky are flagged and inspected at the port or, if they're of especially high risk, are first inspected overseas before shipment.

SEA-TAC STEPS UP

Last year, 28.8 million passengers traveled through Seattle-Tacoma International Airport (Sea-Tac), a 7.5 percent increase over 2003. With those numbers expected to increase in 2005, the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) is trying to keep up by installing new equipment and implementing new procedures.

According to TSA spokesperson Jennifer Peppin, the biggest change has been the reconfiguration of Sea-Tac's security checkpoints. Implemented last summer, passengers are directed to a central security checkpoint. Previously, travelers had to go to a security checkpoint outside their concourse. This change has streamlined the security screening process, decreasing wait times to less than 11 minutes per passenger.

"I wish every airport was doing it this way," Peppin said of the successful change.

In recent months, staffing levels have remained fairly constant, but TSA has been using part-time screeners to better handle higher demand during peak times, according to Peppin. Implemented for the last two major holidays, the execution of the new system was "absolutely flawless," in Peppin's words, with wait times

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during peak periods averaging from 10 to 15 minutes.

In addition, TSA hopes to install trace portal equipment by the end of this summer. This equipment, which uses puffs of air to detect traces of explosives, will be used in the secondary screening process. "It has been tested around the country and is now making its way to the Pacific Northwest," Peppin said of the trace portal. "I'm glad to see we'll be getting some of that technology."

But not all the measures are technological. Some of the security measures at Sea-Tac involve educating airline passengers in what to expect upon arrival and how to comply with security procedures.

WATERWAY WISDOM

On the waterways, the Coast Guard's 13th District, based in Seattle, patrols the 3,000 miles of Washington state coastline, which includes Puget Sound, and has implemented a number of new procedures and programs.

In keeping with the concern over the region's ferries, the Coast Guard maintains random ferry escorts throughout the Sound, Lt. Cmdr. André Billeaudeau told *HSToday*. The randomness keeps potential terrorists off-guard and guessing.

In addition to increased patrolling, the Coast Guard launched an innovative Northwest Watch program in January. This pilot program, currently active along the Oregon and Washington coastline from Puget Sound to the Columbia River, draws on strategically located civilian volunteers. The volunteers help monitor the area's waterways and coastlines, providing information and assistance to the Coast Guard when called upon. By providing an important real-

time link, the Coast Guard can better monitor cases, validate false alarms and more efficiently allocate and deploy resources when and where they're needed. Moreover, the Coast Guard estimates that it saves the service about \$5,000 per month in saved manpower.

To date, about 160 volunteers have come forward. Each one's location is pinpointed on electronic charts, and the Coast Guard keeps a database that lists their contact information and resources—for example, whether they have binoculars or a telescope.

"We call them when we need them," Billeaudeau explained. "It's like having a citizen corps on the water."

Proud of the program's success, Billeaudeau hopes the concept will spread within the Northwest region, as well as to Coast Guard districts around the country.

In May, the Coast Guard merged three separate commands—Coast Guard Group Seattle, Vessel Traffic Service Puget Sound and Marine Safety Office Puget Sound—into one, dubbed Sector Seattle. Headed by Sector Commander Capt. Steve Metruck, the organization's mission is to streamline communications and management, serve as the lead federal organization for maritime homeland security and be responsible for all Coast Guard missions within Puget Sound.

In general, at the borders, the airport and at sea, Seattle authorities believe they've increased security and reduced the city's vulnerability. They acknowledge that more remains to be done, but they're doing it.

"DHS is doing everything within its power," Milne said. "We're constantly moving toward a more secure and safer America." **HST**

DANA E. BLOZIS is the president of Virtually Yourz, a freelance writing and editing company based in Washington State. She writes regularly for local, regional and national publications.



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