
Layered security solutions needed for radioactive and other dangerous shipments in Mexico

Last week, a truck carrying a small quantity of radioactive iridium was stolen from a suburb in Mexico City. This is the third theft of radioactive material since December 2013. The potential lethality of radioactive materials pose a major threat to people, the environment and the security of Mexico and other countries. The frequency of the thefts as well as the prolonged time it took to recover the cargo (in two cases) illustrate the apparent failure to increase security standards and improve visibility. A layered security approach combining multiple theft mitigation strategies is needed to defeat cargo gangs, increase security and reduce recovery times.

In December 2013 it was announced that a truck carrying cobalt-60 was hijacked outside Mexico City, which raised concerns about the contaminated cargo finding its way into a bomb. While the material was found with its protective housing intact, it took officials nine days to recover the substance. During the second radioactive theft in June 2014, a device containing cesium-137 was stolen from a government research facility by armed men. Like the first incident, the device was discovered a week later after being abandoned. Although the previous theft occurred at a facility (and was not taken in transit), the lengthy recovery time illustrates the need for layered security approaches for the storage of radioactive substances.

What is particularly troublesome about the radioactive thefts in Mexico is the time it took authorities to recover the material as well as the apparent lack of security for dangerous shipments in this high-theft country. These two vulnerabilities could be detrimental to the security of Mexico and other countries if criminal groups deliberately tried to steal radioactive shipments, buy stolen material or inadvertently disperse the cargo into the surrounding land. Fortunately in the three radioactive theft incidents the criminals abandoned the material when they realized it was worthless (or heard from government and news releases that it was toxic). This may not always be the case.

If gangs got wise they could take the radioactive cargo and sell it to criminal groups and cartels, who in turn could potentially sell it to terror groups in the region. A dirty bomb detonated at a U.S. or Mexican government facility or manufacturing center would have long-lasting effects. Alternatively, gangs with no prior information about the dangers of radioactive cargo could try to open the containment vessel and unknowingly release the contents. This act could be catastrophic for farmland and citizens who are unaware of the material's radioactive qualities and damaging effects.

Given the high incidence of cargo thefts in Mexico and the threat posed by stolen radioactive and hazardous goods, a layered security approach combining multiple mitigation strategies is needed. The first layer should include predetermined routes and backup routes complemented with covert tracking devices. Utilizing covert devices will give real-time locations of shipments and could also assist authorities in the recovery process, while predetermined routes control how the shipment gets from origin to destination. The second layer should involve status updates from the driver of the truck's location. This information can be corroborated by the tracking device and federal police familiar with the shipment. The third and final layer should include security escorts for the duration of the shipment. These escorts could shadow shipments or relay the location of a stolen shipment to federal authorities. No single strategy is a standalone solution for preventing the theft of radioactive and hazardous materials. Implementing a layered solution for these shipments will provide complete coverage and visibility and will increase the chance of a timely recovery in the event of a theft.

Sources

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