

Great expectations?

Margaret Giugliano ponders on what lies ahead for air cargo and ground handling businesses as the new year unfolds.

Government and regulatory agencies responsible for safety and security in the skies and at airports are struggling with the issue of how to strengthen air cargo and ground handling operations without paralysing a business that is essential to world trade. Each new security threat on passenger airlines has resulted in a corresponding heightening of passenger screening and security measures. Since the discovery of explosives hidden in ink cartridges on cargo aircraft last year, the cargo and freight handling industry has not been subjected to increased security measures. Increasing the scrutiny of air cargo shipments will become a priority in 2011, though. Governments and aviation associations around the world are pledging to look more closely at the whole topic of air cargo security.

The security screening measures that have been implemented on the passenger side present great obstacles if applied to the air cargo and freight handling industry. To begin with, most airports do not have the space to screen all cargo. The products shipped by air originate from countless sources, and vary from chestnuts grown in Italy to works of art from the Louvre; laptops assembled in Malaysia to mundane and routine parts and supplies for office equipment. Shipment packages also vary in size and weight. Moreover, foodstuffs, urgent medical and other shipments could perish in the intervening wait

for screening. The industry is itself made up of various operators: door-to-door shippers like DHL or Federal Express, all-cargo airlines and freight forwarders that block space on air carriers. But the question has always been that of how to make the industry safe without putting it out of business.

To date, governments have relied on the industry to develop its own screening and security measures; however, new laws and regulations are coming. Since August 2010, all cargo on passenger aircraft departing the US has had to be screened. This does not affect the majority of freight shipments which are loaded and shipped on to cargo air carriers. In the wake of the ink cartridge incident last autumn, the US Congress is looking into legislation that will require the screening of all cargo aircraft. In the interim, all shipments from Yemen and Somalia are banned from entering the US. The world aviation organisation, ICAO, has also said it will work on new rules for air cargo screening this coming year.

Obviously, trying to screen every shipment on every aircraft entering and leaving every country is a daunting task that may not necessarily

eliminate the threat of terrorism actions. Cargo experts and airfreight forwarder associations have been active in advising governments of far more effective measures. Such measures include focussing on shipments from certain countries or

from unknown shippers and receiving and reviewing copies of freight manifests prior to an aircraft landing.

Express cargo carriers are busy developing their own safety measures, utilising procedures that move the screening process up the supply chain and that will allow the carriers to continue to deliver prompt and reliable services. The programme in the US allows certain freight forwarding and cargo companies to establish screening sites outside the airports to inspect packages

and manifest documents and certify that the packages have met certain criteria.

Ultimately, the industry needs to keep open and clear lines of communication with those who enact the rules and regulations and those who oversee its compliance. Let's not forget that those who work in the cargo and freight industry are the eyes and the ears of this security system.



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