

Faults Seen at Agency That Patrols U.S. Borders

THE NEW YORK TIMES

November 6, 2007

By RALPH BLUMENTHAL

Thousands of travelers who should have been barred from entering the country last year were allowed in by lax procedures of United States Customs and Border Protection officers, the Government Accountability Office reported yesterday.

“When C.B.P. does not apprehend a potentially dangerous person, this increases the potential that national security may be compromised,” said the office, an investigative arm of Congress.

Persistent weaknesses reported in the inspection program included failures to stop vehicles or question pedestrians crossing the border, even after heightened alerts and stepped-up training.

Mike Friel, a spokesman for Customs and Border Protection in Washington, responded by saying, “In the post-9/11 environment there continue to be challenges to our overall border security efforts.”

But Mr. Friel added that there had been “significant progress in certain areas, and we need to continue implementing some of the initiatives currently in place.” He cited the new passport requirements of the Western Hemisphere Travel Initiative as a step toward better border security.

Daily, he said, on average, “we refuse entry to 574 noncitizens and 63 criminal aliens.”

The accountability office said that it had provided a fuller version of the report to the Department of Homeland Security, the parent agency of Customs and Border Protection, and that it had agreed with recommendations to strengthen training and internal controls.

The publicly released version of the report put the number of people improperly admitted in 2006 at “several thousand” and said a more precise estimate was withheld for security reasons.

The report said that in 2006 customs and border officers turned away 200,000 travelers ineligible to enter the country and seized more than 600,000 pounds of illegal drugs and more than 40,000 fraudulent documents.

The National Treasury Employees Union, representing the bulk of the 17,600 customs and border agents, endorsed the findings yesterday as evidence of its longtime assertion that Customs and Border Protection “is understaffed and poorly managed.”

The agency, created in 2003, controls 326 air, sea and land ports of entry.

The accountability office said that in reviewing the agency’s own data and sending investigators to eight entry points, it found persistent weaknesses in procedures that “contribute to failed inspections.”

It cited instances of officers’ waving vehicles and pedestrians into the country without stopping them or even looking up from a computer screen. Officers did not interview passengers in back seats or board recreational vehicles to see who was inside.

Seven of the ports were so short-staffed that managers had to cancel training sessions to keep operations running, the report said. Some officers balked at searching for drugs because they had not been properly trained.

Officers exhausted from double shifts called in sick to avoid overtime duty, the report said, and poor morale had driven officers out of the agency.

Two of the Congressional investigators who tested the inspection system at one land port of entry were simply asked by an officer at a desk if they were American citizens. They said “yes” and were passed through.

The Department of Homeland Security countered that under current regulations a person claiming citizenship does not have to present documents at a land port, only satisfy an officer that he or she is a citizen.

But the accountability office cited the episode as an example of how the agency had not complied with its own standards. “Asking a traveler one question about citizenship while seated at a desk about 10 feet away does not seem to be consistent with the more thorough inspections called for in C.B.P’s management guidance,” the report said.