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TRANS-ATLANTIC CARGO SCREENING:

EU & US compromise

by Philip Baum

Good news stories in the world of aviation security are hard to come by. Whenever one state, or industry trade organisation, puts forward a suggestion as to how security can be enhanced, another state or entity erects hurdles that results in progress being limited or prevented outright. Despite all the banter about the need for harmonisation, bold progressive moves that engender worldwide support tend only to happen in the aftermath of an atrocity. So, whilst regulators continue to wrangle with issues such as passenger data transmission, liquid explosives screening and unruly passenger prosecution, it is certainly pleasing to see the European Union (along with Switzerland) and the United States agree, as of 1st June 2012, to respect each other's cargo screening regimes.

In reality it was probably economic factors that forced the compromise. After all, the duplication of security controls is an expensive task and serves little, or no, security benefit. With shippers having to repeat processes in order to tick boxes on both sides of The Pond, the entire process of transporting goods by air cargo was slowed down. Worrying when one considers that the very intent of shipping goods by air, rather than by sea, is in order to facilitate their delivery in the quickest possible time. Some carriers encountered so many problems in satisfying different regimes that they were forced to stop transporting certain consignments. Given the importance of air cargo to an airline's commercial viability, such a negative approach was certainly not going to be sustainable.

In the trans-Atlantic market, more than 27% of the total value of goods exported from the EU by air was, in 2011, heading towards American shores and both the EU and U.S. are each other's single most important destination for air cargo. With this in mind, compromise was not only desirable but essential.

The primary stumbling block was the issue of one-stop security. From an EU perspective, if cargo had undergone screening in say, Athens, then it would not have to undergo screening again if it were transferred onto another flight in say, Luxembourg. The measures that had been in place at the first point of departure would suffice for the entire journey. The American view differed inasmuch as the EU one-stop security rules were not acceptable; they required that air cargo bound for the USA be screened at the last point of departure. So, using the same example for a shipment going from Athens to New York, via Luxembourg City, the cargo would have to undergo screening twice – both in Athens and again in Luxembourg.

It has been estimated that security costs can be equal to 4% of an air cargo carrier's total turnover. For those carriers operating flights into the USA, around 20% of these security costs were spent on re-screening cargo that had already been inspected. Often consignments had to be broken up and transported to different warehouses; all for no security gain.

"...the European Union and the United States agree, as of 1st June 2012, to respect each other's cargo screening regimes..."

The air cargo industry has good reason to celebrate the decision to mutually respect each other's regimes. However, as encouraging as this might be, the industry must now take steps to ensure that similar agreements are reached when it comes to passenger screening.

Given that the detection of explosives in air cargo, by the use of explosives detection technology, is a far greater challenge (due to the size and density of the shipments) than in cabin- and checked-baggage, and given that cargo security has often been branded the industry's 'Achilles Heel', it does seem ironic that we have managed to achieve compromise and harmonisation in this area whilst struggling to do so when it comes to people.

One-stop security for passengers has, regrettably, often been declared 'dead and buried' as a concept, and it is certainly a challenge for the architects of the Checkpoint of the Future, where the concept of a 'trusted traveller' may be determined by a given state but not necessarily be a 'classification' that can be transferred across international borders. However, common sense dictates that subjecting passengers to repetitious security checks is of no benefit and serves only to aggravate the general public – our customers.

Back in the cargo arena, whilst agreeing to respect the regimes of others is a major step forward, the challenge as to how to effectively screen air cargo remains. The 3rd December 2012 deadline that the US has set for the 100% screening of all cargo on inbound flights may seem a worthy goal but, given that the improvised explosive devices sent from Yemen in October 2010 could not be detected using technology (even when the packages were set aside for detailed inspection on the basis of specific intelligence received), it does beg the question whether such endeavours are simply another huge expense for no security gain? ■

