DEFENSE LOGISTICS

Greater Awareness of Recommendations and Improvements in Data Quality Needed to Resolve Container-Management Challenges

What GAO Found

Since the early years of operations in Afghanistan and Iraq, Department of Defense (DOD) efforts to improve container management in the U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) area of responsibility have included either updating existing or developing new container-management policy and guidance. However, the department cannot provide reasonable assurance that all recommendations addressing container management in the CENTCOM area of responsibility have been incorporated in DOD’s policy or guidance, as appropriate. DOD officials incorporated some recommendations made by DOD audit agencies and other organizations aimed at improving container management into policy and guidance. For example, in August 2012 the commanders of CENTCOM and U.S. Transportation Command issued a joint memorandum outlining leadership’s responsibility for container management in the CENTCOM area of responsibility that was a direct result of a 2012 Joint Logistics Board report that recommended corrective actions to enhance senior leaders’ understanding of container management. However, DOD does not have a comprehensive list of the corrective actions that have been recommended over time. Without such a list, DOD cannot reasonably ensure that all of the recommendations have been incorporated into policy and guidance as appropriate. For example, of the 95 corrective actions that GAO identified from reports by DOD audit agencies and other organizations issued from 2003 through 2013, DOD officials could not provide information on steps taken to address 40 of the corrective actions.

Since 2012, DOD has taken steps to manage and reduce shipping container detention fees incurred due to the untimely return of commercial carrier-owned shipping containers in Afghanistan, but its ability to manage and reduce these fees is limited by inaccurate and incomplete data. In August 2012, DOD established the requirement that within 15 days of a shipping container’s arrival: (1) receipt of the container was to be recorded by the unit in-theater, (2) the container was to be unloaded, and (3) the responsible carrier was to be notified that its container was available for pickup. DOD also developed a set of tracking metrics to monitor progress in meeting this requirement. However, incomplete and inaccurate data about the location and number of containers accruing detention fees hindered DOD’s ability to manage and reduce detention fees for containers in Afghanistan. For example, GAO analysis of DOD’s container-management system data and carrier delivery data for each month in 2013 showed that DOD had not recorded in the container-management system about 16 percent of the carrier-owned containers delivered and received in Afghanistan. DOD has identified factors, or procedural weaknesses, that may contribute to incomplete and inaccurate data; however, it has not assessed the extent to which these weaknesses have contributed to data inaccuracies, determined the root causes of these weaknesses, or developed a corrective-action plan for correcting them. Without an assessment of the root causes and a corrective-action plan, it will be difficult for DOD to have complete and accurate data, which could limit its ability to manage and reduce detention fees for containers in Afghanistan and in future contingency operations.