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Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-05-170](#), a report to congressional requesters

Why GAO Did This Study

Seaports are a critical vulnerability in the nation's defense against terrorism. They are potential entry points for bombs or other devices smuggled into cargo ships and ports' often-sprawling nature present many potential targets for attack. To assess the response procedures that would be implemented in an attack or security incident, officials conduct port-specific exercises. Many federal, state, and local agencies may potentially be involved. The Coast Guard has primary responsibility for coordinating these exercises and analyzing the results.

GAO examined (1) the emerging framework for coordinating entities involved in security responses, (2) legal and operational issues emerging from exercises conducted to date, and (3) Coast Guard management of reports analyzing exercises. GAO reviewed reports on 82 exercises from fiscal year 2004 and observed 4 exercises as they were being conducted.

What GAO Recommends

To help ensure reports on terrorism-related exercises are submitted in a timely manner that complies with all Coast Guard requirements, the Commandant of the Coast Guard should review the Coast Guard's actions for ensuring timeliness and determine if further actions are needed. The Coast Guard generally concurred with GAO's findings and this recommendation.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-05-170.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Margaret Wrightson at (415) 904-2200 or WrightsonM@gao.gov.

HOMELAND SECURITY

Process for Reporting Lessons Learned from Seaport Exercises Needs Further Attention

What GAO Found

The framework under which federal agencies would manage a port-terrorism incident is still evolving. The primary guidance for response, the National Response Plan, was just issued in January 2005, and the National Incident Management System, the structure for multiagency coordination, is still being put in place. As a result, it is too early to determine how well the complete framework will function in an actual incident.

GAO's review of fiscal year 2004 terrorism-related reports and exercises identified relatively few legal issues, and none of these issues produced recommendations for statutory changes. Most issues have instead been operational in nature and have surfaced in nearly every exercise. They are of four main types: difficulties in sharing or accessing information, inadequate coordination of resources, difficulties in coordinating effectively in a command and control environment, and lack of knowledge about who has jurisdictional or decision-making authority.

Reports on the exercises often do not meet the Coast Guard's standards for timeliness or completeness. Sixty-one percent of the reports were not submitted within 60 days of completing the exercise—the Coast Guard standard. The Coast Guard has implemented a new system for tracking the reports, but after a year of use, timeliness remains a concern. The Coast Guard has requirements for what the reports should contain, but 18 percent of the reports did not meet the requirement to assess each objective of the exercise. The Coast Guard has cited several planned actions that may allow for improving completeness. These actions are still in development, and it is too early to determine how much they will help.

Port Terrorism Exercise Conducted at the Port of Los Angeles/Long Beach



Source: GAO.