

Authorities Assess Airports for Threat of Missile Attacks

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Federal authorities have begun security assessments of dozens of large U.S. airports to determine how vulnerable airliners might be to shoulder-launched missiles.

Federal Bureau of Investigation and Transportation Security Administration officials began visiting airports within the past week, according to law enforcement authorities and an airport official. By studying the airports and surrounding areas, authorities are trying to figure out where a terrorist might position himself for an attack.

The move is the latest in a series of federal actions since terrorists fired two SA-7 missiles that narrowly missed an Israeli passenger jet, with 271 aboard, moments after takeoff from Mombasa, Kenya, on Nov. 28.

Since that attack, a task force of some 20 federal agencies led by the Department of Homeland Security and the National Security Council has been meeting to study ways to reduce the proliferation of shoulder-fired missiles and their effectiveness, including new technologies that could be installed on aircraft or at airports to disable a missile's guidance system.

Authorities say the FBI-TSA assessments will be done at about 80 airports in coming weeks. "We're looking at the layout of the airport," said one FBI agent familiar with the visits. That includes everything from flight paths to buildings and open areas in the vicinity of the airport.

Security experts say airliners are particularly vulnerable to shoulder-fired missiles during takeoff because takeoff times are often more predictable than landing times and because a plane's engines are operating at greater power during takeoff, giving off more of a "heat signature" that a missile's guidance system could target. One senior-level FBI agent said there are a sizable number of shoulder-launched missiles available on the black market in some countries.

U.S. intelligence officials have no "credible, specific information" pointing to a future attack on U.S. civilian airliners, a Department of Homeland Security official said yesterday. But the Bush administration is under increased pressure to take steps to address the issue.

The question of how vulnerable commercial aircraft are to surface-to-air missiles has been a concern since at least 1996, when TWA Flight 800 exploded over the Atlantic after taking off from JFK International Airport, raising concern that it had been downed by a missile or bomb. Although those possibilities were later discounted, authorities began doing assessments then, one intelligence officer said.

The bottom line is that jets are vulnerable to those kinds of attacks, the officer said. "The question is, what can you do about it? Unfortunately, the reality is terrorists are limited only by their imaginations."

Areas of concern, officials said, include airports with public parks or large bodies of water near runways, such as Reagan National Airport outside Washington, D.C., and Los Angeles International, from which an attack could be launched by boat. Even the placement of parking lots is an issue.

Last month, the TSA's deputy administrator, Stephen McHale, warned Asian officials at a Bangkok meeting that many terrorist groups now have shoulder-launched missiles and that a

successful attack “could wreak havoc on the tourism industry of the entire region and seriously damage commerce.”

Around the world, Mr. McHale said, there have been 35 attempts to shoot down civilian aircraft since 1978, resulting in the loss of 24 planes and 640 deaths, according to a published account of his remarks. Just last month, British authorities sent nearly 2,000 police and troops to provide security at Heathrow Airport outside London because of intelligence that indicated al Qaeda operatives might be preparing to launch a missile there.

Legislation introduced in Congress last month would authorize \$7 billion to \$10 billion for airlines to cover the cost of installing technology that could steer ground-fired missiles away from planes by jamming their guidance systems. Homeland Security Secretary Tom Ridge said during a Senate hearing yesterday that no decisions have been made on what technology could be employed.

Separately, the chairman of the House aviation Subcommittee, Rep. John Mica (R., Fla.), plans to hold a hearing on the vulnerability of aircraft to shoulder-fired missiles later this month, an aide said.

An official with a Washington-based group that represents airports expressed skepticism that terrorists would conduct missile attacks on airport property. The official, Ian Redhead, vice president for airport facilities and services at Airports Council International-North America, noted that the federal government has already vastly increased security at airports and that such missiles could be more easily fired from the areas outside of airport perimeters.

“If there is a specific threat at an airport, we’d hope the TSA would share that information,” said Mr. Redhead. He added that federal authorities haven’t indicated to his group what steps they might recommend airports take to reduce the risk of missile attacks. A spokesman for the Air Transport Association, a Washington-based group that represents airlines, said the industry is “looking to the government to assess the threat ... and tell us what, if anything, we should do.”

FBI spokesman John Iannarelli said similar assessments of airport vulnerability have been done before but authorities thought it was time to revisit the issue.

The assessments will be turned over to the local authorities responsible for providing security at each airport, said an FBI agent familiar with the action. It was unclear yesterday just what airports will be required to do once the assessments are complete, or who would pay for any changes recommended.

News of the assessments came on the same day that the TSA and the Aircraft Owners and Pilots Association unveiled a program asking private pilots at general-aviation airports to report suspicious activity, similar to what neighborhood watch groups do.