



Melbourne container examination facility

Boosting border protection



The first of Customs new multi-million dollar container examination facilities has been opened in Melbourne.

The high-tech facility makes it even tougher for smugglers or potential terrorists to circumvent Australia's border controls.

Located in the heart of the Melbourne Docklands, the two hectare,

\$10 million facility was commissioned on 26 November 2002 by the Prime Minister, John Howard, and the Minister for Justice and Customs, Senator Chris Ellison.

It significantly boosts Customs ability to detect attempts to smuggle illegal drugs, guns, explosives and other contraband into the country, or evade the payment of duty on legitimate cargo.

Prime Minister John Howard joins the Customs team at the new Melbourne container examination facility. The facility will operate for 16 hours a day, targeting high-risk shipments through the Port of Melbourne.

The centrepiece of the facility is a \$5.5 million state-of-the-art container x-ray machine supplied by Chinese manufacturer Nuctech Co. Ltd.

It will allow Customs to scan up to 100 shipping containers a day, or around five percent of the incoming container traffic at the port of Melbourne.

Customs is installing a further three container examination facilities at the ports of Brisbane, Fremantle and Sydney.

Once operational, the additional facilities will give Customs container scanning capability at ports representing over 90 per cent of the total container volume into and out of Australia.

When combined with other border protection activities carried out by Customs, the new scanners allow the organisation to make a major contribution to national security in the current world environment.

Customs is now better placed than ever before to detect threats to the country from the unauthorised importation of materials which could be used by terrorists.

The Melbourne commissioning provided an opportunity to showcase Customs technology and the role of the organisation at the border to a national and international audience.

In recognition of the Chinese origin of the scanning technology, key guests included the Chinese Ambassador, Wu Tao, and Consul-General, Mr Junting Tian.

They were joined by representatives from a range of agencies with which Customs works closely, including the Australian Federal Police and the Australian Quarantine and Inspection Service.

Representatives from major shipping companies, freight forwarders and the trading community were also on hand to see how the new technology will speed the clearance of legitimate cargo.

Prime Minister Howard took a strong personal interest in the scanning technology during a tour of the facility before the commissioning ceremony.

He inspected the drive-through scanning hall, with its capacity to handle up to three TEU (twenty-foot equivalent units) containers at once - or a fully-laden B-double semi-trailer.

The scanning unit takes as little as 90 seconds to pass along the containers and generate a high-definition image for analysis.

State-of-the-art imaging technology is then used to identify hidden goods, inconsistencies with the cargo manifest or other anomalies requiring further investigation. Legitimate cargo is cleared immediately.

Customs officers illustrated the effectiveness of the technology by scanning a container in which a range of contraband had been secreted for the demonstration.

The Prime Minister was shown how this detailed visual inspection can be carried out in as little as 15 minutes, compared to a physical search of a container's contents which could previously take eight hours or more.

During the demonstration the mock drugs were successfully detected beneath the floor of the container.

A handgun and long-arm rifle located inside a vehicle stowed in the container were clearly visible in the x-ray imagery.

Anomalies in a shipment of fibreglass baths were also detected in a replication of a real-life attempt to smuggle cigarettes into the country (an attempt successfully thwarted by alert Customs officers).

Mr Howard was shown the ability of the scanning system to detect a metal wire as thin as 1.5mm inside a steel shipping container with walls up to 260mm thick.

The technology can clearly pick up attempts to evade detection by concealing items inside shielded containers within a larger shipment - a key security concern.

The Prime Minister said Australians should be reassured the new technology was on duty at the border.

"This is world-class, high-tech, state-of-the-art equipment that will add enormously to the sense of security that Australians have and ... to our attempts to prevent the importation of illegal drugs, weapons and any other material that would seek to be used by people to do harm to this country, or to do harm to the citizens of this country," he said.

"It's also noteworthy that as well as providing superior protection, it's also going to reduce the waiting time for people who are legitimately wanting their containers and their cargo processed as quickly as possible."

Following the scanning demonstration Mr Howard took the opportunity to meet and speak with many of the Customs personnel who will work in the new facility.

Around 40 officers will be involved in each of two shifts per day, examining images from scanned containers and managing the inspection of the contents of shipments found to have anomalies.

PM praises Customs officers

The Prime Minister made special mention of Customs officers at the commissioning of the Melbourne container examination facility.

During his speech the Prime Minister expressed his "gratitude to all of the men and women of the Australian Customs Service for the magnificent job they do in making our borders and therefore our country safer and more secure".

He also recognised the commitment of officers to a challenging task.

"It's meticulous, painstaking work. It requires a great deal of individual responsibility and initiative and I'm delighted that, with the acquisition of equipment such as this, the personal intuition and initiative of the individual men and women of the service is going to be augmented by the most sophisticated equipment that is available anywhere in the world," Mr Howard said.

Officers have access to the full suite of technology available to Customs, including detector dogs, pallet and parcel x-ray units, and ionscan equipment.

A selection of this equipment was demonstrated in the examination hall for guests at the commissioning ceremony.

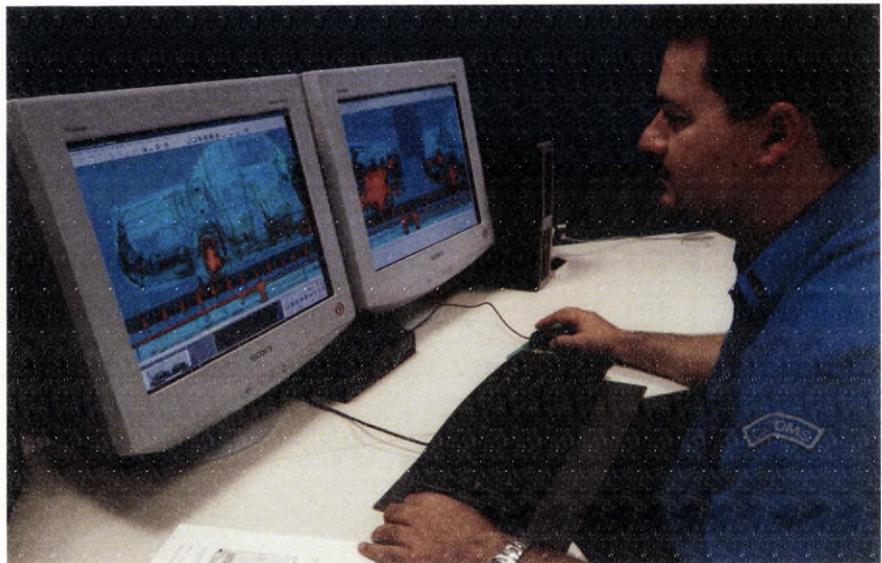
Echoing comments from the Prime Minister, the Minister for Customs and Justice, Senator Chris Ellison, spoke of the importance of increased intervention at the border.

"Today is an exciting day for Customs and a great day for border control in Australia," Senator Ellison said.

"This is just one of a suite of measures that we've employed in relation to keeping Australia's borders safe from the threat of illegal importation of drugs, guns, threats to our national security, and also, importantly, any threat to quarantine by way of disease which could destroy our country," he said.

Senator Ellison said the current level of border control and security was "unprecedented in this country's history", with Customs playing a major role in those activities.

A similar container examination facility is now operating in Sydney and another in Brisbane will be fully operational by April. A fourth facility in Fremantle will come online in late 2003.



top: The scanning hall can accommodate a fully laden B-double semi-trailer carrying one 40-foot and one 20-foot shipping container for a single scan.

middle: Customs officer Jack Agapiou examines high-resolution x-ray image of container. Images can be examined in as little as 15 minutes to detect anomalies and illegal imports.

bottom: Digital imaging technology allows Customs officers to closely examine all areas of suspect consignments without the need to physically open and inspect the contents of a container.

