

SANS PAPIERS INTRODUCTION TO THE EXHIBIT

First I would like to thank Behrooz, Aiski, Babak, Ahmad and Catalin for the opportunity to open this important event, Sans Papier. It is one of the most innovative exhibits I have ever seen. It is one thing to hear an intellectual lecture about the suffering of people but experiencing it gives one a visceral understanding.

I should say at the outset that I do not bring any expertise to this issue. In fact I had no idea that people were being subjected to this dangerous technology. However, as I began to read about the issue I realize that to some degree we all have the potential to be exposed to this technology. Allow me to set the context.

At the end of the cold war—which was a hot war in the third world—many people in the world had hopes for a new era of peace. The recent celebration of the fall of the Berlin wall reminded me of the excitement of 25 years ago. However, this was not to be and since the tragic attacks on the World Trade Center in NYC it seems that the world has been in a state of constant war. With the United States led NATO attacks in the Middle East, Balkan wars, ethnic conflicts in Africa, many people in the world are finding it impossible to remain in their countries of birth and are seeking new opportunities in the more economically developed countries.

As this flow of people attempts to migrate to the economically developed countries, these countries are developing policies and methods to limit this immigration. Since much of this immigration involves people from the third world coming into Europe and the United States, xenophobia has been used as a weapon to pass draconian laws and to use inhumane methods of restricting this immigration. Even in Europe with an unofficial two-tier ethnic pecking order xenophobic rhetoric has been used against migrants from the Balkan region as well.

At the outset I should acknowledge that smuggling of goods is a serious problem for nation states. The illegal trade in drugs—which should be legalized—counterfeit goods, arms, even wildlife, constitute a multi-billion euro annually. To address this problem governments have been using old technology in a new way to minimize and mitigate this trafficking.

Faced with the challenge of intensifying inspection rates of containers and trucks customs and other enforcement agencies have turned to X-ray and gamma scanners to screen import and export consignments. This 20-year approach uses three formats:

Fixed system—the most expensive form and are usually used at seaports.
Mobile scanners—built on truck chassis and can be moved from one scanning location to another according to risk and traffic requirements.
Relocatable—incorporate many of the advantages of the fixed systems including good reliability and the capability of using dual format.

To avoid being caught the contraband goods will have a “cover” load of expendable goods next to the container doors. This is the easiest for the scanners to detect. Therefore the smugglers have started using dense materials such as lead, steel, marble, etc. As one company as formulated:

“the use of ionizing radiation for cargo scanning purposes can be justified on the grounds that any radiological risk is trivial and is far outweighed by the societal benefits that scanning can bring.....”

However, when people are subjected to even small doses of radiation, it can damage the genetic information and sometimes turn a cell cancerous. Radiation causes burns much like sunburn in large doses over short period of time. An official US government document says the scanners must be based on X-ray or gamma technology which use potentially ionizing radiation at high energies and shall be capable of scanning cars, motorcycles and buses.

Moreover, ionizing radiation is dangerous because it can damage living tissue, rearrange chromosomes and raise cancer risks. Pregnant women are especially sensitive to high doses of ionizing radiation.

Now if you think that this issue only impacts desperate people seeking a better life, think again. Increasingly this technology is being used at legal boarder crossings and in airports. Similar to the term “collateral damage” the US has come up with terms like “low energy drive through portal non intrusive inspection systems. But radiation emitted by scanners goes right through the person sitting in a vehicle. In Europe and the US independent testing has yet to be done on scanners that would measure the actual dose of radiation emitted.

Given the frequency of air travel and boarder crossings as the world becomes a neighborhood virtually anyone who travels is potentially subject to these scans and we all need to educate ourselves to challenge governments to include the human factor when determining the use of radiation as a policy of deterrence.

I thank you for your attention.

Michael Simmons
14 November, 2014