

THE INDEPENDENT ON SUNDAY

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'We cannot afford
for the Government
to duck this issue'

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As the Government gets to grips with an urgent review of UK aviation security following the Christmas Day attempt to down Northwest Airlines Flight 253 on approach to Detroit Metro airport, it should be mindful that the travelling public will not take kindly to half measures or no measures at all should an individual armed with one of these explosive devices turn up at a UK airport.

Past reviews of UK airport security, most notably the Wheeler report commissioned after the 11 September attacks in 2001, have been extremely limited in their scope and in some fundamental respects left UK airports wide open to the type of threat exhibited on Christmas Day.

The device Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab planned to detonate during his thwarted attack contained both PETN high explosive and a liquid thought by many to be an accelerant of some sort. The quantity he carried was sufficient to destroy the airliner in flight.

The Prime Minister has talked of a wide-ranging review of airport security. Much focus has been placed upon body scanning at our airports as a panacea. Although this technology remains a potent tool in the arsenal, it cannot be seen as a one-stop solution to the threat we face today.

As the Government embarks on this review it must address all the issues rather than a convenient subset and act, as the Dutch have done, decisively and unilaterally, if guidance from the European Commission is not forthcoming.

Security at UK airports is a multi-layered process encompassing technique and technology. The technique includes the monitoring and profiling of passengers, while the technology is that arrayed before us as we get to the central screening area. While there have been many advances in technique, the same cannot be said in terms of technology.

Over the past decade it has been shown time and again that

use of trace detection is insufficient protection against an ingenious individual carrying an explosive device with no metal content.

To my mind, body scanning (whether it be millimetre-wave or X-ray based and manufactured by any of the companies in this sector) does have a significant role to play in enhancing UK airport security immediately. While there has been much discussion about privacy issues, public acceptance of this technology in those places where it is currently deployed on trial is 80 to 90 per cent.

Body scanning is only half the story, though. The Government cannot ignore the liquid aspect any more. Liquid explosive is clearly implicated in the attempted downing of Northwest Airlines Flight 253. If the Government skirts over this aspect it will be nothing short of a dereliction of duty.

Notwithstanding the EC's recently announced delay in deploying liquid screening solutions at airports to 2011 for transit passengers and 2013 for all passengers, extremely cost-

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effective hardware and software solutions to this aspect of the threat we face are available to deploy within weeks from highly respected vendors, such as UK-based Kromek with its bottle scanner and Canadian firm Optosecurity Inc with its XMS software upgrade product for currently deployed X-ray technology.

The delay in deploying all these state-of-the-art solutions at airports is driven largely by heavy lobbying by the big business interest groups jockeying for position in the market place and a lack of understanding among regulators as to how such advanced solutions fit in the overall security mix.

If only government listened instead to experts in the field, specifically those at point of delivery, UK airport security would regain the position it once held as being the best in the world.