

CONTAINER TAMPERING

Since the beginning of the year, Signum has investigated over thirty cases where sealed containers laden with high value cargo have reached their destination in an apparent secure condition, but when opened were found to be short loaded.

Subsequent inspection of the containers showed tampering to the door locking mechanisms. Such interference is not a new phenomenon and has been happening for years. The upsurge in the use of these methods by criminals is primarily due to the security initiatives that are in place for container security. Adoption of these means of entry reduces the chance of detection at the various interchange points.

The very nature of international containerised transport involves various parties having custody of a container during its journey. Despite well-documented container security initiatives, unless a container is weighed and/or its door locking mechanism and seals are checked at every interchange point, a tampered container is able to transverse interchange points undetected.

When encountering these types of incidents it is important that all parts of the removed seal, whether the original or not, are retained. A thorough examination should be made of the container doors and its locking mechanism. Signs of replaced bolts, rivets damage marks or repainted areas should be recorded and, if possible, photographed.

The use of a digital camera or a mobile phone with such a facility is invaluable in these situations as prints can be immediately forwarded to interested parties. This is especially important to Signum when undertaking an enquiry.

Virtually all containers have a small metal plate welded to the right door, which when shut overlaps the left door. This keeps it in a closed position until the right door is opened, hence the general practice of placing a seal, or seals, to the right doors locking mechanism.

To open the right door without harming the seal (or seals) usually involves one of two methods.

1. The removal of the rivet that retains the locking handle in the handle hub attached to each of the upright locking bars, allows the handle to be lowered without damaging the seal. The locking upright bar can then be rotated to open the door. This enables the left door to be freely opened, provided a seal is not attached to it. If in such cases there is a need to open this door, the mentioned method of tampering could be used.

When the cargo is removed, the doors can be closed, the handle placed back into the hub, with a different rivet or bolt securing it into position. Any markings on the hub or on the door section behind it, are often repainted. Only by careful examination will this type of tampering be apparent.

2. The other method of entry focuses on the handle lock sets that are fixed to the doors by two rivets that are secured from its inside. There are two types of handle locking sets. If the design requires a seal only to be placed through the upper swivel bracket and the locking handle, there is only a need to remove the rivet of the upper swivel bracket by means of a cutting implement to enable the bracket to be removed from the door without interfering with the seal. The handle can then be released to open the door with the remaining part of the rivet being removed from the inside.

To re-secure the door, a nut is secured over the rivet hole on the inside by the use of an adhesive or mastic and painted to match the same colour of the inner door. Once the door has been closed, a bolt is passed through the swivel bracket and secured into the nut. Generally it is looser than the other rivets, the bolt head may be of a different shape, with the area around the bracket showing signs of damage or being repainted.

When the seal passes through the swivel bracket handle and catch bracket, then both rivets have to be removed by the mentioned method and then replaced as described.

In either instance, once the door has been opened there is usually a clear indication that a rivet (or rivets) have been removed.

It is unwise to believe that the left hand door cannot be opened without first opening the right one. By bending back the piece of metal from over the left door, opening the locking cams and inserting a large crowbar between the two doors enables the left one to be opened.

Upon removal of the cargo, the door can be closed, with the bent piece of metal straightened to overlap the left door, thereby giving the appearance that everything is in order.

Inspection of this piece of metal will show signs of interference and will often have been repainted. The rubber sealing gasket along the edge of the door may show signs of damage due to the use of a metal instrument.

To overcome this, if the piece of metal was welded to the left door and protruded behind the right door, would make it more difficult for anyone to just open the left door.

Security bar/bracket locks are frequently used to provide additional security by placing them around the inner upright locking bars of each door. It has been found that a number of these security bars can be removed intact if the bracket that extend behind the upright bar is not of a sufficient length to prevent this from happening.

To remove such a bar first requires the two rivets of the locking bar guide of the inner upright locking bar on the left door to be removed by the use of a cutting instrument. The upright bar can then be bent inwards to release the bar bracket, allowing the door to be opened by one of the mentioned methods.

Upon the removal of the cargo, the door can be closed, with the bar bracket being replaced and the upright locking bar straightened. New rivets are inserted into the locking bar guide to disguise evidence of tampering. An inspection will identify this as well as the misalignment of the upright locking bar.

Cable seals are regularly used to undertake the same function as a bar bracket. The ideal seal is one that comprises of preformed metal cable, which if cut will unravel, making it difficult to disguise evidence of tampering.

Non-preformed cable, if cut, will not unravel and can be used to disguise signs of tampering.

A number of operators are now fixing an enhanced seal replacement unit to the container door sill at the bottom of the two inner locking bars. When the locking bar cam is locked, a seal is attached to each door unit preventing it from being opened without first removing the seal.

Various other reliable container locking and sealing systems are available to reduce the risk of a container arriving at its destination in an apparent secure condition, but with a cargo shortage.

Signum is always available to offer its assistance in respect of container security issues.

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