

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE****Statement of Chairman Bennie G. Thompson****“The SAFE Port Act: A Six Month Review”**

April 26, 2007 (Washington) – Today, Committee on Homeland Security Chairman Bennie G. Thompson (D-MS) delivered the following prepared remarks for the Transportation Security and Infrastructure Protection Subcommittee hearing entitled “The SAFE Port Act: A Six Month Review”:

“Maritime security is critically important to our nation. Over 95 percent of the goods coming into our country arrive at our nation’s seaports.

Last year, I voted for the SAFE Port Act, a crucial first step in improving the security our nation’s ports. The bill contains several key mandates – including the Secure Freight Initiative, the Empty Container Pilot requirement, and the Transportation Worker Identification Credential. Unfortunately, as in the past, the Department has failed to meet Congressional mandates.

This comes as no surprise to me. We did not receive the Department’s testimony for this hearing until yesterday – a clear violation of the Committee’s rules. If the Department can not meet this simple mandate then it should not come as a surprise to anyone that they have failed to meet the mandates in the SAFE Port Act.

One requirement, the Transportation Worker Identification Credential (TWIC), was mandated over four years ago in the Maritime Transportation Security Act of 2002. Due to the Department’s inability to move forward in a timely manner, Congress had to step in and specifically mandate a specific date for the issuance of the final rule. The rule was supposed to be completed on January 1, 2007. The Department did not publish the final rule in the Federal Register until January 25th. Similarly, Congress established the deadline of July 1st for the TWIC rollout. We know that they are not going to meet this deadline. Instead, this roll-out won’t begin at the earliest until late summer or early fall.

The SAFE Port Act also included several mandates that lacked deadlines such as the Empty Container Pilot. In hindsight, I wish we had included a deadline. Empty containers pose a danger as they can be used to transport people illegally. On March 14, 2004, ten dock workers were killed in the Israeli Port of Ashdod by suicide bombers, who were able to enter the port facilities undetected by hiding inside a cargo container. Despite this known risk, the Department has yet to begin working on this critical pilot.

Finally, I’m concerned about the Department’s implementation of the Secure Freight Initiative. Earlier this month, my colleagues and I visited the Port of Cortes in Honduras. I had hoped to see a more robust rollout of this program.

Instead, my colleagues and I were greeted with paint fumes. The paint was literally still drying when we arrived at the port. The SAFE Port Act mandated that the Secure Freight Initiative ports be fully operational by October 1, 2007. I am now concerned that the Department will not meet this deadline.

For too long, the Department of Homeland Security has operated without clear oversight. This will not occur under my watch as Chairman of the Homeland Security Committee. We will hold the Department accountable. The American people deserve no less.”

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