

US Homeland Security reportedly set to deploy ultra-sensitive spectrometer

July 12 2012, by Bob Yirka



(Phys.org) -- Online tech magazine, *Gizmodo* has stirred up a hornet's nest of paranoid editorials across the globe by printing an [article](#) written by an unknown PhD student who claims that the US Homeland Security department is planning to deploy a new kind of scanning device that is so sensitive it will make all other security measures at airports moot; and worse will be able to do so at a distance allowing the process to occur without the knowledge of the person being scanned.

In the piece, the author, designated simply as NAC, says that the device has been developed by a private company called [Genia Photonics](#), which is apparently chock full of physicists and engineers. It's described as

being able to pick up on the presence of mere molecules of suspicious substances (using apparently harmless, terahertz radiation) such as chemical weapons, gunpowder residue or even heightened levels of adrenaline in the bloodstream, all from a distance of up to 50 meters. What's more it's really fast, doing its work in picoseconds, and portable, meaning that DHS could set up the scanner at airports, train stations, border crossings or wherever else they believe a possible threat exists.

What appears to worry some though, is the possibility of being mistakenly labeled as a suspect, criminal, terrorist, etc. People encounter many innocuous substances every day that could be construed as dangerous or even illegal. Stepping on a leftover marijuana stub without knowing it, could for example cause such a scanner to go off, as could applying fertilizer to the home garden prior to heading for the airport.

Something else that seems to cause alarm is the fact that the technology behind the device appears to be sound, and in fact has apparently been done before. The difference this time is the speed at which it works; because of that, a single device could conceivably be used to scan every single person passing through an airport's terminals, which means, that if deployed the days of singling out individuals for extra security measures would be over. If a person goes to an airport, they will be scanned, and most won't even know it's happened. The author of the article says an undersecretary at DHS has stated that the scanner will be ready for deployment within one or two years.

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