

Press interest in Jakarta post

By Terry Friel
AAP Asia correspondent

INTERNATIONAL drug traffickers are increasingly using Indonesia as a transit point to smuggle drugs into Australia, according to the Australian Federal Police.

The AFP and Indonesian police are involved in joint investigations to stem the growth and have made several arrests recently.

The jump in trafficking through Indonesia to Australia prompted the AFP to re-open its bureau here after a four-year absence.

"There are a number of organised groups using Indonesia as a base to ship drugs to Australia, the AFP's officer here Detective Superintendent Steve Polden, told AAP today.

"We'd observed intelligence trends whereby criminals of diverse nationalities were starting to use Indonesia as a transit point for drugs going to Australia.

"The amount of criminal activity that we've seen over the last eight or nine months has been a significant increase in relation to Australia."

Close work between the two police forces has paid off in recent months, with several arrests in both Australia and Indonesia.

"There have been a number of foreign nationals arrested both in Indonesia and in Australia in recent times that have been targeting Australia from a drug trafficking point of view," Detective Superintendent Polden said.

He could not give more details because cases are still before the courts.

"The Indonesians have been extremely co-operative," he said.

"From the day that I arrived here the Indonesian police have been outstanding; they've assisted us in numerous major operations.

"Some of the cases that the Jakarta metropolitan police have been pursuing have had a direct impact on Australian importation, and information that they have got has led back to groups targeting

Australia for cannabis shipments out of (the northern province of) Aceh."

Indonesia has seen increasing quantities of heroin from the Golden Triangle, South American cocaine and locally produced marijuana which are then smuggled into Australia, often through the remote and isolated northern coast.

In addition to growing domestic demand, particularly for heroin and marijuana, Indonesia is an attractive staging point because of its closeness to Australia, the difficulty in monitoring both coastlines and the growing tourist industry here.

"There's also the fact that it doesn't have the harsh drug laws that Singapore and Malaysia have, for instance," Detective Superintendent Polden said.

"Indonesia has become a very popular tourist destination, particularly Bali and there is a market for some cocaine and illicit drugs in Bali for the expats that either come here on a seasonal basis or that reside there.

"Also, people then go on to Australia and they use the drug importations to facilitate their holidays."

The 48-year-old officer, who's spent 10 of his 26 years in federal law enforcement in Asia, was awarded the Australian Police Medal in the Queen's Birthday honours.

The medal, the highest award for police duties, was given for his work in Asia.

Detective Superintendent Polden is confident the AFP and Indonesian police can contain the growth in smuggling through Indonesia into Australia.

"It's a concern not only to us, because we've got the market it's also a concern to the Indonesians because they are seeing an increasing number of their young people being involved in the drug trade," he said.

"If we continue to get the sort of



AFP's liaison officer in Jakarta, Superintendent Steve Polden.

co-operation from the Indonesian police that we have at the moment... you are never going to be able to stop it [the drug trade], but... at least we'll be able to keep the lid on it.

"The Indonesian authorities recognise that and I think that probably accounts for the type of co-operation that they've given to me.

"I don't think Indonesia wants a reputation as a drug source country or a problem country in respect of drugs."

Detective Superintendent Polden, who re-opened the AFP's Jakarta bureau in December said Jakarta had been seen as 'a strategic listening post' to monitor activity in the region.

"But activity of criminal groups has really changed that," he said.

Australia is the only foreign country with a full-time police officer stationed in Indonesia.

Despite attempts to peg back the drug problem throughout South-East Asia, Detective Superintendent Polden says it's a growing problem.

"It's definitely more of a problem because there's big money in it and where there is big money you'll always have people getting involved," he said.