

Allied agency co-operation in fighting organised crime and drug trafficking

A strengthened alliance with the NCA and improved co-operative arrangements with other agencies has resulted in the increased targeting of identified organised criminal networks by the AFP.

Successful investigations into organised crime often involve close co-operation between a number of law-enforcement agencies. A good example of the effectiveness of inter-agency co-operation being the joint task force between the AFP, NCA, State Police and ATO in connection with South East Asian organised crime groups and activities. Of significance is the recent targeting of organised importation of Asian prostitutes into Australia using false passports. To date, 75 people have been deported and 25 charged with various offences, 19 of whom have been imprisoned. Submissions have been made to the Attorney-General's Department regarding changes to the slavery laws.

Task forces are also targeting the activities of:

- Italian organised crime groups allegedly operating in Australia;
- organised paedophile networks;

- ethnic criminal groups involved in the importation and distribution of heroin; and
- Chinese triad societies involved in the importation of narcotics.

Often the trail of organised crime leads to the international drug trade as shown by Operation Caribou, the protracted national operation conducted on a major criminal drug syndicate based in the eastern states. The two-and-a-half-year operation culminated in August 1994 with the seizure of 15 tonnes of cannabis resin, 5 tonnes at Hervey Bay, Qld, and 10 tonnes by French authorities in the waters off Chesterfield Reef half way between Cairns and Noumea.

A total of 26 people were arrested in Queensland, New South Wales and Papua New Guinea and charged with serious narcotic offences against the *Customs Act*. Investigations into money laundering and a range of other offences allegedly having been systematically committed by the group are continuing. A significant feature of this operation was the seizure of the "mother ship". It is the first time in Australian narcotic law enforcement experience that this has occurred.

DETECTION OF DRUG TRAFFICKING

In recent times AFP investigations led to major criminal syndicates being dismantled and large seizures of narcotics and assets. Consistent seizures of cocaine and ecstasy were made during 1994-95, although the larger seizures were in heroin and cannabis.

Case examples, which again illustrate the significant and complex nature of AFP drug investigations and the high level of liaison with other agencies, are listed below.



Operation Caribou culminated in August 1994 with the seizure of 15 tonnes of cannabis resin, 5 tonnes at Hervey Bay, Qld, and 10 tonnes by French authorities in the waters off Chesterfield Reef half way between Cairns and Noumea.



The Thai fishing vessel, Bahari 314, used to transport the largest heroin haul in Australia's criminal history into Darwin in July 1994.

Cocaine and ecstasy

In April 1995, a joint operation involving the AFP's Northern and Eastern Regions, Queensland Police, NSW Police and the NCA culminated in the arrest of 10 members of an alleged cocaine trafficking ring operating from the northern NSW/Gold Coast area. The arrests, in Sydney and northern NSW, resulted in the seizure of 3.5kg of cocaine and two sophisticated hydroponic cannabis plantations.

Also in April 1995, a German woman arrived at Perth International Airport from Germany via Singapore. An examination of her baggage by Customs officers resulted in the location of 10,970 tablets, weighing 3.1kg, being a mixture of amphetamines and ecstasy, which were concealed inside the body of a soft toy bear.

A controlled delivery of the tablets culminated in the arrest of five people. It is believed seizure has seriously interfered with the movement of ecstasy and amphetamines in Western Australia.

In the same month, Customs officers intercepted a postal parcel containing 9.9kg of cocaine. A controlled delivery was conducted which resulted in one arrest.

Two Colombian nationals, were sentenced to 10 and 14 years imprisonment for their involvement

in the importation of 60kg of cocaine in March 1994.

Heroin

In July 1994 an investigation commenced into a Thai fishing vessel being located by Australian Customs Service off Bathurst Island, NT. The following day the vessel was ordered to Darwin harbour where it was moored to a quarantine buoy. Shortly after, a hessian bag was seen floating in the water next to the vessel. The bag was recovered and found to contain 29 plastic bags each containing two blocks of heroin. Police divers located a further two hessian bags containing more heroin. A total of 123kg of heroin was seized and resulted in eight crew members of the vessel being arrested and charged over the importation. This is the largest single heroin seizure in Australia's history. International co-operation was highlighted by the travel of a senior Thai officer to Darwin to assist in the investigation.

During January 1993 two people were arrested following the seizure of 5kg of heroin imported into Australia by a Russian merchant seaman acting as a courier on board a Russian merchant ship docked in Melbourne. The principals pleaded guilty to the importation and were sentenced to seven and 16 years imprisonment.

In late June 1994, four Singaporean nationals arrived at Brisbane Airport as part of a tour group. A Customs inspection located a total of 9.45kg of heroin found in a false bottomed suitcase. Three of the accused have been sentenced to between 14 and 16 years imprisonment. The fourth is currently before the court.

In November 1994, a shipping container from Malaysia arrived in Melbourne and was examined by Customs officers who located approximately 16.7kg of heroin secreted in ceramic pots. The heroin was collected and driven towards Sydney on the Hume Highway and was intercepted shortly after. Five

Asian men were arrested in connection with this importation. Court proceedings are still pending.

In January 1995 a consignment of four crates containing picture frames arrived at Sydney Airport from Thailand. A search of the consignment revealed 29 pictures with a total of 55.8kg of heroin concealed in plastic bags in the lining of the pictures. A controlled delivery was conducted which resulted in the arrest of one Chinese and four Canadians.

In February 1995, Southern Region officers seized a consignment of three boxes containing 7kg of heroin concealed in 10 marble lamps which had arrived at Melbourne Airport from Bangkok. Following a substitution of the heroin a controlled delivery of the consignment was conducted. Five people were arrested with offences relating to the importation. A further two were arrested on their return to Australia from Thailand.

In March 1995 on arrival at Sydney Airport a Singapore Airlines crew member was subjected to a Customs search which located 8kg of heroin in his possession. The crew member had been the subject of AFP scrutiny for his alleged involvement in a well entrenched syndicate using air crew in the importation of narcotics into Australia.

In April 1995 a consignment of car parts arrived at Sydney from Singapore and was believed to conceal narcotics. A search of the container revealed approximately 15kg of heroin concealed in the ceiling lining. A controlled delivery was conducted with resulted in the arrest of five Singaporean nationals who are connected to the Singma Syndicate.

An inhibiting factor encountered by the AFP in relation to the investigation of narcotic offences included the April High Court decision ruling that evidence obtained as a result of heroin imported by police as part of a controlled delivery operation was illegally obtained evidence and inadmissible against the accused

(R v Ridgeway). This has caused an Australia-wide review of the way the AFP conducts controlled delivery operations and has affected the strategies in narcotic investigations.

In the past year or so there has been a marked increase in the number of Vietnamese nationals being arrested for importing heroin into Australia. The primary method has involved heroin secreted within the soles of shoes however body pack concealments have also been identified.

Cannabis

Apart from the seizure of 15 tonnes of cannabis resin during Operation Caribou other significant seizures were made.

In August 1994, two brothers were arrested near Mackay, Qld, in possession of approximately 1.4 tonnes of compressed cannabis. The cannabis had been taken off a vessel and then transported by the men in a refrigerated truck. Both have been sentenced to a maximum term of 10 years imprisonment.

In August 1994, a former NSW police officer was sentenced in Brisbane Supreme Court to a maximum of 15 years imprisonment for his part in a conspiracy to import almost 4 tonnes of cannabis from Thailand.



Close co-operation between the AFP and the Australian Customs Service has often led to the detection of significant drug importations at international entry points.