

International cooperation helps thwart computer drug ploy

By Paul Kirkup,
Editor, National Intelligence News, HM Customs & Excise, UK



An Australian Customs Service officer on duty at Melbourne's Swanston Docks.

A recent British Customs seizure of more than 200 kilograms of heroin in January has dramatically highlighted the value of international customs cooperation.

In June last year, the Australian Customs Service notified Her Majesty's Customs and Excise about a method of concealing heroin inside glass computer monitor tubes. Japanese Customs also circulated information about a similar discovery there.

Though the seizures in the three countries were not related, their detection was aided by knowledge shared between customs agencies.

On the weekend of 16 and 17 January 2000, a container carrying a consignment of computer monitors, originating in Turkey, arrived in the UK and was selected for a Customs examination that resulted in the discovery of 207kg of heroin.

The seizure followed a notification from a shipping line suspicious of the importer involved because they did not understand proper importation procedures. The importer had also supplied information using a badly designed and printed letter-head with a mobile telephone number as the only contact and a self-storage company as the delivery address.

The monitors came in two sizes—with 15-inch or 17-inch screens. The larger monitors were found to each be holding 2 kg of heroin secreted inside the glass monitor tube. Both types had complete interior components.

The 17-inch monitors were in 105 boxes at the back of a container that had been shipped from Istanbul in December. They arrived at Felixstowe container port, England, and were investigated by Felixstowe Container Intelligence staff and the National Investigation Service at Ipswich. The boxes bore details of the monitors in Turkish and a graphic of a monitor with the text "17 Renkli Monitor".

The Australian seizure last June was of heroin shipped from Thailand by airfreight. An earlier shipment of monitors had attracted Australian Customs attention but no drugs were found. However, fingerprints were found on the surface of the monitor which, because of the sterile conditions in which they are made, could not occur during manufacture.

Details of the weight of the consignment and especially of the monitors were recorded and the consignment released. Some time later, another consignment fitting the profile arrived and a detailed examination revealed the drugs. The glass monitor tube had been cut open (and then re-sealed with drugs inside) in an area disguised by a wiring loom about one third of the way between the neck of the tube and the screen.