

# Local solutions in global Customs work

*Regional Director of Customs in Victoria Brian Hurrell presented a paper on Customs issues relating to illegal entry of drugs, people and firearms at an International Policing Conference at Adelaide in March. The conference theme, Global Directions: Local Solutions, lent itself to discussions regarding the work of the World Customs Organisation and how it is reflected in the work done by the Australian Customs Service.*

*The following are excerpts from Mr Hurrell's presentation.*

Customs administrations world-wide are being encouraged to adopt the United Nations Draft Convention against Transnational Organised Crime. For Customs, this work is sponsored by the Compliance/ Enforcement Sub-Committee of the World Customs Organisation. The Sub-Committee has a number of working groups—Australian Customs is a member of a working group looking specifically at transnational crime.

Customs administrations around the world recognise they are a key agency in the fight against transnational organised crime, identifying the movement of illegal drugs, firearms, cigarettes, and people—the same commodities that are stock in trade for transnational crime syndicates.

Recently, international crime syndicates have adopted a range of new trafficking opportunities such as commercial fraud, stolen motor vehicles, nuclear materials and waste, chemical weapons and weapons of mass destruction, human body organs, pornography, works of art and money laundering. This expansion has resulted in Customs broadening its focus in the monitoring of cargo.

To be effective, Customs administrations worldwide must work closely together. The key to success in locating contraband is the development of

cooperative information and intelligence exchanges between all law-enforcement agencies.

Crime is increasingly being organised across national borders where it can exploit new outlets for its capital, taking advantage of the free movement of goods, capital, services and people. In the past, organised crime was seen as a local threat, but now has turned into a highly sophisticated international business.

Modern electronic communication techniques have almost removed the problem of distance, encouraging the shifting of activities to places offering the greatest benefits. Organised crime has shown itself to be capable of turning to its advantage the speed and anonymity offered by modern forms of communication.

Transnational crime syndicates are not afraid of working in countries where legal or administrative weaknesses enable them to exploit the system. Like successful international companies, transnational organised crime groups are fully prepared to cooperate with each other to seize any opportunity on offer. In Australia we see this with drug importations, where one group is responsible for the importation while another has control of the distribution network.

The checking of trade and cross-border traffic provides a wealth of information both quantitative and qualitative and, with legitimate access, Customs can strongly support efforts to identify illegal consignments in cargo. If properly collected, analysed, circulated and exchanged, information on people,



Customs is using state-of-the-art technology in its National Surveillance Centre (above) and in drug detection with Lonscan machines (top).

companies, places of consignment, destinations, routings, means of transport, methods of concealment and detection can form the cornerstone of the fight against organised crime.

The potential for success is closely linked to the availability of intelligence and powers in respect of these activities and they are rarely found together. Customs, Federal police, national and state crime agencies each cover areas of expertise and intelligence which, if collated, can provide key elements for strengthening and facilitating the dismantling and discovery of criminal organisations.

Cooperation is critical. Effective pooling of information, intelligence and resources will ensure a better overall understanding and response to crime.

To date there has been no powerful international instrument to combat all forms of transnational organised crime. This gap will shortly be filled by the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organised Crime and its three draft protocols to combat illicit firearms, prevent illicit trafficking in people and the trafficking and illicit transport of migrants.

It will be important to monitor developments regarding this Convention so that each agency can identify opportunities to get involved in the process, propose changes to national legislation and benefit from any new measures that might be adopted.

Drug trafficking and people smuggling are two issues causing concern for the Australian Government, community and law-enforcement agencies.

Drug trafficking in Australia took a significant turn in October 1998

when a vessel attempted to off-load nearly 400 kg of heroin at a deserted beach on the east coast of Australia. At the time, this was the largest single shipment of heroin imported into Australia. The operation involved officers from the Australian Federal Police, Australian Customs, the New South Wales Police Service, Hong Kong Police and assets from the Royal Australian Navy.

Customs air and maritime assets as well as Navy provided covert surveillance on the vessel for several days before the attempted landing at Grant's Beach in New South Wales. Support from international police agencies significantly contributed to the identification, purpose and location of the vessel and with the successful prosecution of the on-board organisers and crew.

In the past two years, Customs and Federal Police have been involved in a number of major maritime operations that have resulted in the seizure of close to 800 kg of cocaine. In each case, organisers relied on state-of-the-art communications technology to effect the importation and it was evident that the syndicates were well organised, well financed, and had prior experience.

The reasons these operations were so successful was, in part, due to the cooperation between international and domestic law-enforcement agencies and the use of specialist teams of police and customs officers provided by the Government under the National Illicit Drug Strategy.



Cooperation between international and domestic law-enforcement agencies has resulted in major drug seizures.

Australia has moved down a path in drug law-enforcement that is weighted toward collaborative intelligence collection and analysis. Customs analysts are now part of all major drug operations conducted by the Australian Federal Police and this has proved to be very successful. The Federal Police have developed a number of mobile strike teams that again are proving to be very successful because of their ability to rapidly deploy once the analysts identify the potential importation.

Like many other customs administrations, Australian Customs performs the role of gatekeeper, admitting goods and people in and out of the country. Inherent in this role is a contradictory expectation. On the one hand, the unimpeded movement of goods and people—vital to the full participation of Australia in the global economy—and on the other hand, filtering out the small proportion of goods and people that need to be examined. Both are extremely important to the social cohesion and economic wellbeing of Australia.

Australian Customs is currently re-engineering its computer systems to communicate more easily with the importing and exporting community and at the same time is



Customs officer working in one of Customs Waterfront Closed Circuit TV monitoring centres.

intent on receiving electronically all relevant commercial information. The development of sophisticated profile engines will allow Customs to identify high-risk shipments and will not impede the movement of cargo at the border.

In the passenger and cargo environments, new technology such as X-ray, ionscan and national Closed Circuit TV systems are providing Customs with an edge and forcing transnational criminals to use more imaginative and risky methods to import their contraband. Customs and Immigration have collaborated and developed a passenger information system known as Advance Passenger Processing. The system allows Customs, Immigration and police to identify people of interest at time of check-in at a foreign airport.

In June last year, the Customs Services of Australia, New Zealand and the United States of America took a giant step forward by developing a secure Internet-based system known as CAPERS (Customs Asia Pacific Enforcement Reporting System). It will provide secure e-mail communications between all customs administrations. The system will be trialed in the Pacific Basin and a number of South East

Asian countries. CAPERS will provide drug teams at international airports in Australia with opportunities to discuss operational activity on-line with colleagues at airports in Vancouver, Los Angeles, New York, Honolulu, Tahiti, Bangkok and Tokyo.

Similarly, officers working in cargo and maritime targeting areas will be able to instantly exchange information on unusual

incidents that might lead to a detection of illegal cargo. Following a two-year trial, administrators will look at inviting other law enforcement agencies to participate.

A topical issue in Australia and elsewhere is illegal immigration.

In Australia, overall responsibility for illegal migration rests with the Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs. Customs undertakes a number of activities on behalf of Immigration including civil maritime surveillance and response as well as immigration processing at international airports.

The Australian Prime Minister reacted immediately following the undetected arrival in 1999 of two steel-hulled vessels on the east coast of Australia, ordering a major review of coastal surveillance.

The review resulted in the development of much stronger ties between Customs Coastwatch (Australia's coastal surveillance coordinator) and law-enforcement agencies such as Customs, the Australian Federal Police, Immigration, Quarantine and Fisheries. The Government also provided additional funding for new fixed and rotary wing aircraft

as well the establishment of a National Surveillance Centre in Canberra.

The Review also made a number of recommendations in relation to enforcement and intelligence including the formation of a joint Australian Federal Police and Immigration Task Force to investigate people smuggling. This team receives significant assistance from a wide range of Australian and international agencies and has been very successful in targeting, disruption and prosecution of key figures involved in people smuggling.

Customs continues to treat the detection of illegal firearms in cargo, postal items and in air passenger baggage as a high priority.

Last year Customs, along with other detections, found three semi-automatic pistols in the luggage of an air passenger as well as firearm parts concealed in a chocolate block being imported in the international mail.

In Australia, Customs, Federal Police and Immigration have realised that funding for additional resources will continue to be very competitive and therefore pooling of expertise in the areas of intelligence collection and analysis, surveillance, response and apprehension is one way to successfully combat the threat posed by transnational crime groups.