

## **Airport staff `smuggling drugs' - Secret Customs report exposes criminal links**

[Martin Chulov, Jonathan Porter](#). [The Australian](#) [Canberra, A.C.T] 31 May 2005: 1.

WORKERS at the nation's largest airport, including baggage handlers with high-level security clearances, have been involved in drug-smuggling and stealing from passengers, according to a classified Customs report that also suggests staff pose a terrorism threat.

A probe by investigators into airport workers from toilet cleaners to pilots has found evidence of alleged criminal conspiracies between groups of employees with access to the most secure areas of Sydney airport.

The report, obtained by The Australian, details serious security breaches and illegal activity by baggage handlers, air crew, ramp and trolley workers, security screeners and cleaners.

It says baggage handlers have diverted bags containing large amounts of narcotics from incoming international flights to domestic baggage carousels, sometimes changing baggage tags, to avoid Customs examination.

"Baggage handlers are suspected of large-scale pillage and may use the roof area to gain illegal entry to passenger baggage," the report says.

The roster system makes it easy for baggage handlers to get their "mates" working in the same gang, it says.

But the report, completed in September last year, provides no direct evidence to support convicted narcotics smuggler Schapelle Corby's defence that drugs were planted in her luggage by corrupt baggage handlers between Brisbane and Sydney.

The Customs investigation found no evidence of domestic drug- smuggling between Australian airports.

It found Customs checks on aircrew were relatively rare despite evidence showing that they were "an extremely high risk". "Intelligence from other law enforcement agencies suggests that some Asian-recruited Qantas crew may be involved in the importation of narcotics and are current subjects of alerts," it says.

The report says 39 security screeners out of 500 employed at the airport have a serious criminal conviction, with a further 39 having been convicted of minor matters. It says 14

had questionable immigration status and two were referred to the Department of Immigration as illegal immigrants.

A well-placed **Customs** source told The Australian yesterday that investigators continue to uncover numerous "black spots" in the maze of baggage tunnels beneath the **airport**, which cannot be captured by surveillance cameras.

The black spots were allegedly known to baggage handlers and other employees and used as dropping-off points for drug importations.

The two **Customs** operations, dubbed Tempest and Berlap, targeted two groups of baggage handlers, each working in a gang of six. Investigators dubbed one the "Anglo Saxons" and the other the "Swarthies" -- a reference to their mediterranean appearance.

The **Customs** source said executives had been sent a copy of the report last September, but did not appear to have acted on it.

The source claimed senior **Customs** staff were furious about the report's findings and suggested that commercial considerations within the **airport** may be a reason for a delayed response.

"We have people that don't want to rock the boat and nothing upsets the running of an **airport** more than the outing of staff who have very strong unions behind them. If we took one person out there is

no way that could happen without disrupting the travel of 30,000 people."

One of the gangs is alleged by investigators to have been involved in the importation late last year of 10kg of cocaine, which was removed from the baggage processing system before it could be x- rayed.

The report claims that ramp workers and baggage handlers were linked to Eastern Suburbs drug smuggling syndicates.

Officials monitoring the gang became aware of the pending importation, which was due to arrive on Lan-Chile flight 801, on October 7. Only several of the alleged gang were rostered on. The remainder, according to officials appeared noticeably excited.

However, the importation was delayed for 24 hours and eventually arrived on Aerolinas Argentinas flight 1881 on October 8, the same day Corby's baggage passed through Sydney **airport** en route to Bali.

One official said the scenario used during numerous earlier importations had been for the smuggler to check in last, meaning their bag was left outside the baggage crate stored in the plane's cargo hold.

The loose bag is typically removed first from the plane in Sydney and placed on a luggage trolley in between the secured crates carrying passenger luggage. It then begins a 600 metre journey through the **airport** basement corridors that lead to the baggage dispensing area.

The official, speaking on condition of anonymity, claimed the drugs are removed from the bag, in a process known as ratting, at one of three blind-spots along the way. They are hidden there before later being removed from the **airport**.

The official said hours of footage had been recorded by surveillance cameras of lower-level criminality within secure areas of the **airport**, ranging from stealing valuables from suitcases, to using passenger bags to smuggle goods stolen abroad.

Since 1995 The Australian Federal Police has also run its own probe, known as Operation Bareena, into alleged criminality at the **airport**.

**Customs** said it could not comment on its operations. A spokeswoman for Sydney **Airport** Corporation said it cooperated closely with **Customs** and law enforcement agencies, but had not heard of operations Tempest or Berlap.

The report notes the difficulties experienced by **Customs** offers in tracking much of the activity in the **airport** or identifying staff on duty.

It says baggage handlers rosters allow shift swapping and the use of **airport** personnel to perform overtime away from their usual work station.

"The work practice of some **airport** employees to organise their own replacements has to be regarded as very dubious when seen under the guise of internal conspiracies," the report says.

"The rostering system, which groups work gangs together, facilitates the possibility of organised crime or internal conspiracies being operated."

Union activity often makes surveillance difficult, the report says.

"Very strong union presence on the tarmac area and the ever threatening intervention of union delegates ... is always fraught with controversy," it says.

## **AIRPORT SECURITY RISKS**

\* International baggage diverted to domestic carousels

- \* Security screeners with criminal records
- \* Aircrews rarely checked by Customs
- \* Theft from baggage and aircraft duty-free trolleys
- \* Engineers with duplicate keys
- \* 'Black holes' not under surveillance

Word count: **1014**

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