

# Media Watch

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NEWS

## Surveillance of North's airstrips to be boosted

By staff reporter  
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AN estimated 1500 airstrips on private and other property throughout the northern parts of the continent will receive special attention as part of a stepped-up coastal surveillance thrust to stop the flow of illegal drugs into Australia.

The vast and widely dispersed extent of available airstrips which could be used to import drugs, and illegally export fauna, was outlined to a national coastal surveillance conference held yesterday at Palm Cove, 25 km north of Cairns.

Meeting at the Ramada Reef Resort for their annual conference were local, regional, state and federal representatives of the Intergovernmental Standing Advisory Committee on Coastal Protection and Surveillance.

Chaired by the Queensland Deputy Police Commissioner, Mr Ron Redmond, the conference discussions touched on a broad range of matters, including an outline of the treaty which has been entered into by the Commonwealth Government and the Papua New Guinea Government over the Torres Strait boundary demarcation lines.

Speaking after the closed

conference, Mr Redmond said drug importation took up a substantial part of the morning's debate, and the most vulnerable points of the nation were identified.

"We are aware of all of these small airstrips and will be watching them," he said.

He said all the most northern points of Australia were locations through which drugs were likely to be flown in, or dropped by ship or other means.

"As these areas become identified as problem spots, added flights and surveillance will be given to them," he said.

Mr Redmond said high surveillance already was in operation between Fremantle in Western Australia and Exmouth, then round to Darwin and the Northern Territory coastline, and more particularly along the entire coast of Queensland from the tip of Cape York south.

"This (latter) area has been identified as a very high risk area. All of the others are risky, but Queensland's coastline needs particular attention given to it," he said.

Similar attention would be paid to patrolling the North's marine parks and the Great Barrier Reef to protect these areas from incursions by illegal fishing vessels and smuggling of fauna, said Mr Redmond.

"A great fear expressed by customs and quarantine officers is of the danger posed by the introduction of exotic diseases such as foot and mouth," he said.

The conference — the fourth since the committee was established — was attended by assistant police commissioners from Queensland, Tasmania, Western Australia and the Northern Territory, senior Federal police representatives from each state, Federal departments, and statutory authorities, and is held on a rotation basis in either Cairns, Darwin or Broome, WA.

The Deputy Federal Police Commissioner, Mr Roy Farmer, said in the past recommendations from the conference had met with favorable consideration from the Federal Government.

He said while the conference was not a policy-making body, it was in a position to influence government decision making.

Mr Farmer said Commonwealth Department of Transport officials yesterday assured the conference delegates a decision by the Federal Government to let a large coastal air-watch contract was soundly based.

He said the \$17 million contract, let to Amman Aviation, was for surveillance between



• Pictured — from left — Queensland Deputy Police Commissioner, Mr Ron Redmond, and the Deputy Federal Police Commissioner, Mr Roy Farmer. — Marshall photo.

Cairns and across to Broome in Western Australia.

The contract starts in late May, and the decision to let the contract was made by a government-appointed tender board.

Mr Farmer said the conference had been told by departmental officers the air-watch service would be of a high standard.

He said while there had been criticism of the Government's decision, this was a matter for ministerial comment, and not for this forum.

The Cairns Post has been told by informed aviation sources that Amman Aviation is a company controlled by a southern building project manager, Mr Robert Amman.

The sources said his company had no aircraft in Australia, and 14 aircraft and about 60 skilled employees would be required to carry out the terms of the contract.

An executive officer with the Australian Federation of Air Pilots, Mr Terry O'Connell, said yesterday the airline had never been heard of in the

aviation industry.

He said it was unbelievable the tender system should result in the awarding of a strategically important tender to a company without an aviation licence and no aircraft in Australia.

Meanwhile, in Brisbane yesterday, the Queensland Police Minister, Mr Bill Gunn, said increased effectiveness of coastal surveillance was an added benefit to people living in the State's isolated areas who were in desperate need of emergency services.

### 'Satisfied' on surveillance

Both the Government and the Australian Federal Police were satisfied that the new tenderer for aerial coastal surveillance of Australia's northern coastline would ably perform its tasks, the Senate was told yesterday.

The Special Minister of State, Senator Tate, said the company, Amman Aviation Pty Ltd had undergone "correct and usual tendering processes" during the inquiry by various departments and the AFP.

He said advice from the AFP, with whom Amman would cooperate in is

duties, was that the AFP "was satisfied security would be maintained" by the new company.

Senator Tate was replying to a question from Senator Archer (Lib, Tas) on the fact that Amman still did not have a maintenance infrastructure or any skilled personnel to operate its new craft despite the deadline for its takeover being only six weeks away.

Senator Tate said he had been informed that Amman was in the process of negotiating with the current operator for the gradual takeover of the facilities at centres such as Broome, Gove, Weipa and Cairns.

Readers who may have seen press items about the change of contractors to Coastwatch for aerial surveillance, such as the item in The Cairns Post of 20 March 1987, may not have been aware that at least one of the questions asked was answered in the Senate on 30 March 1987. The Canberra Times report of the answer (31 March) is printed here.