

Postcard from Bangkok

By Federal Agent Paul Osborne
Senior Liaison Officer, Bangkok

As the regional coordination centre of the AFP's presence in South East Asia, those AFP members and staff at the Bangkok post have found themselves part of the 'front line' of the AFP's law enforcement efforts in that region.

Senior Liaison Officer, **Federal Agent Paul Osborne** provides an insight into the recent activities undertaken at the post and elsewhere in Thailand.



The Liaison Officers and locally engaged staff at the Bangkok office (including the spouses of two of the LOs). SLO Paul Osborne is third from the left (at rear).

The AFP Bangkok liaison office is in the Australian Embassy in the heart of the Bangkok's central business district and is currently staffed by a senior liaison officer (SLO) and two liaison officers (LOs).

The LOs are supported by three locally-engaged Thai staff who provide invaluable administrative assistance and investigations support to the LOs. The post also acts as the regional coordination centre for Islamabad, Yangon, Phnom Penh and Hanoi. In addition, the Bangkok post has the country responsibility for liaison with the Lao Peoples' Democratic Republic.

Bangkok is a huge sprawling metropolis with a population of approximately 16 million people, which is almost the population of Australia. Bangkok is a very safe city and politically very stable. I cannot recall an

instance in recent times where an AFP member has been the victim of any street crime or intimidation. The Thais are a friendly people with a long, rich and diverse culture, they readily accept and welcome foreigners in their midst. While pollution and traffic are an ongoing cause for concern, the living conditions for the AFP officers are far from Spartan.

The post

To match its increased workload, the Bangkok post has recently increased the number and variety of short-term secondments and extra AFP staff who work in Thailand. Along with this demand, a long-term LECP project is running in Thailand with Federal Agent Robert Thomas working with a team of Royal Thai Police from the Immigration Bureau on a Joint People Smuggling Investigation Team.

Another current long-term LECP project in Bangkok is the seconded training position

(Currently Federal Agent Janine Ennis) to the International Law Enforcement Academy (ILEA), which is a US Department of Justice training institution, designed to train local law enforcement officers from the South East Asia region.

In addition to these projects, Federal Agent Scott Girling is serving as an Interpol liaison officer at the regional Interpol office in Bangkok. Recently, Federal Agent Michael Hawley returned to Australia after having served a short-term mission also in Bangkok attached to the Royal Thai Police Bangkok Intelligence Centre. Federal Agent Hawley provided intelligence and analytical support for a series of joint AFP-RTP narcotics investigations. When the variety of AFP missions in Bangkok and the number of staff including the families supporting these



Commissioner Keelty observing a drug destruction in Thailand during his visit last year.

members on assignment is taken into account, it is easy to see why Bangkok is the largest and one of the busiest posts in the AFP's overseas network.

In the past 12 months staffing has increased to make the AFP post one of the larger sections within the Australian Embassy. The Bangkok Embassy is the fourth-largest Australian overseas mission with approximately 50 Australian-based and Australian personnel working there. Australian agencies represented in Bangkok include: the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT); AusAID; Education; Australian Customs Service (Customs); AUSTRADE; the Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs (DIMIA) and the AFP.

Because of the size of the mission and the importance of the bilateral Australian-Thai relationship, AFP officers serving in Bangkok undertake a number of important diplomatic responsibilities along with their routine police liaison role and often they find themselves involved in all manner of formal and informal diplomatic events. Consequently, the LOs often work long and demanding hours attending meetings, briefings and social functions, with these activities placing added pressure and demands not only on the LOs but also on their families and friends as well. The stereotype impression of an LO kicking up his or her heels on the cocktail circuit no longer applies.

Clientele

The AFP's major law enforcement clients in Thailand are the Royal Thai Police, the Office of the Narcotics Control Board of Thailand (ONCB) and Royal Thai Customs. The cooperation extended to the AFP in Thailand is outstanding, I cannot recall an occasion when the AFP has been refused an operational request, many of which are by necessity made at short notice. With sometimes as little as two hours notice, Thai authorities have provided surveillance support to AFP operations without a word of complaint. The level of assistance and regard in which the AFP is currently held by the Thai authorities was most recently demonstrated during the March 2001 visit of Commissioner Mick Keelty. During a pre-visit briefing with the Royal Thai Police, I was informed that the visit of an AFP Commissioner was considered to be as important as a regional ASEAN police commissioner and would be accorded the same level of protocol and support. Certainly by the end of Commissioner Keelty's visit, the Thais had lived up to their word. The visit included high level briefings, full escorts and Special Branch bodyguards as well as helicopter transport and a meeting with the Prime Minister of Thailand at their annual drug destruction burn off.

The Thai community

Liaison officers from 21 countries are represented in Bangkok. Most of these officers undertake a drug liaison role (DLO). The foreign DLOs work together closely and are members of a working group known as the Foreign Anti-Narcotics Community of Thailand (FANC). FANC is currently represented by 24 agencies from every geographic region around the world. FANC offers an excellent networking opportunity to

each and every liaison officer in Thailand. In effect it offers the AFP post another, albeit informal, overseas liaison network. On many occasions the AFP post in Bangkok has been able to cut through diplomatic and bureaucratic red tape to obtain vital information from various countries around the world in support of AFP operations in Australia at very short notice.

Currently there are three Australian members of FANC representing the interests of three separate law enforcement agencies – AFP, Customs and Interpol. In addition, two AFP officers serve on the 2002 committee of FANC as chairman and secretary. It's an onerous task as they not only have to represent their own agencies interests, but also those of every member country of FANC.

Service in Thailand

The Bangkok LOs are often presented with interesting and unique opportunities outside the scope of what might be considered 'normal' policing duties in Australia. LOs frequently travel to the outlying provinces of Thailand and Laos, often visiting border regions – an activity that can carry an element of danger. On a recent visit to Northern Thailand, an LO flew by helicopter to a remote location on the Thai-Myanmar border and trekked through the jungle for an hour to view a large opium poppy field.

The security situation on this stretch of the border is very tense and can be unpredictable. On this occasion the helicopters were escorted



Above: Foreign Anti-Narcotics Community Drug Liaison Officers about to board a flight to Northern Thailand. From left: John Hector, UK Customs; Federal Agent Scott Girling, Interpol; Stefan Erlandsson, Nordic Liaison Officer; Juan Lustres, Spanish Liaison Officer; Federal Agent Paul Osborne, AFP SLO Bangkok; Ross Pinkham, New Zealand Police Liaison Officer; and Chief Superintendent Bill Bishop, New Zealand Police.

by a RTAF gunship and several squads of heavily armed border patrol police and soldiers from the Third Army who patrolled in depth along the route to the opium field site. Later that day the LO was taken to another border area and driven in a heavily-armed military convoy to see first-hand the disposition of military forces from both Thailand and Myanmar along the northern border area adjacent to the Mae Sai–Tachilek border crossing between Thailand and



A Royal Thai Armed Forces helicopter gunship providing protection for a Drug Liaison visit to the Thai-Myanmar border in January 2002.

Myanmar. This area is notorious for its instability due to it being at the centre of one of the world's larger opium and amphetamine type stimulants (ATS) production regions. Shootouts between traffickers and the Royal Thai Police and Armed forces occur regularly.

To complicate matters, local ethnic armies such as the United Wa State Army compete with the Thai and Myanmar armies for strategic toe holds along the border. Ambushes and counter ambushes as well as cross-border artillery salvos are a common occurrence along this stretch of the border. Therefore, it is not surprising that before

approaching the Myanmar military position during this visit, the Thai army escort halted some distance from site, deployed in full battle order and swept through the area establishing contact with the Myanmar soldiers before they would allow the LO forward to meet the representatives from Myanmar.

The value in these liaison trips lies in the ability for the AFP to obtain a first-hand appreciation of the problems that law enforcement authorities in the region face in

trying to interdict and disrupt the flow of opium and methamphetamine trafficking and provide the AFP with invaluable intelligence-gathering opportunities.

Meanwhile, in Bangkok the LOs are busy chasing up operational enquires being sent from AFP teams throughout Australia as well as the NCA and State police forces. A typical day for the LOs involves receiving taskings after which they hit the phones and very often the road, visiting the units that directly support daily operational requests for assistance.

Law Enforcement Cooperation Program (LECP) sponsored training

and equipment provision features heavily at the Bangkok post. Through the LECP, the post has been able to provide a considerable array of equipment to various units within the RTP, ONCB and Royal Thai Customs. In addition to this, the post regularly sends Thai law enforcement officers to training courses abroad both within the region and as far afield as Australia.

Recently, in conjunction with Learning and Development, the post has developed a five-day training module aimed at the junior operational officer level, designed to increase the level of awareness and value in gathering information for intelligence-gathering purposes. These modules have been successfully delivered using the facilities of the Australian Embassy as well as ILEA. In the past eight months the post has been able to train in excess of 1200 law enforcement officers in Thailand.

Thailand's drug problem

Strategically, Thailand and the region face serious law enforcement challenges in the immediate future. While heroin traditionally has been a Western problem with the bulk of that production being exported to Western markets, the rapid spread and growth of methamphetamine trafficking has been nothing short of phenomenal. Methamphetamine or 'Ya Ba', known locally



A Royal Thai Police officer providing a briefing to foreign DLOs on the Thai-Myanmar border prior to setting out on foot to inspect a remote jungle opium field.

Below: a Burmese military outpost on the Thai-Myanmar border.

It is estimated that about 700 million pills will be smuggled into Thailand this year.



as ‘crazy drug’, is causing widespread and serious social disruption and damage to Thai society and culture.

It is little wonder that this is happening when one considers that the Thai population is being targeted by the local ethnic drug producing armies across their northern border with Myanmar. It is estimated that about 700 million pills will be smuggled into Thailand this year. The porous nature of their borders has meant that drug traffickers can transport the drug with relative ease into Thailand. This factor coupled with Thailand’s modern transportation infrastructure has meant that ‘Ya Ba’ has been able to spread throughout Thai society with an alarming speed. Children as young as seven or eight are being deliberately targeted by the ‘Ya Ba’ traffickers. Recent reports have indicated that traffickers, not being content with targeting school areas, have sunk to contaminating water coolers in amusement arcades with the drug in an effort to increase the demand for their product.

The Thais have reacted with a wide-ranging strategy that encompasses demand reduction as well as harm minimisation projects throughout Thailand. Military-style camps have been established to take addicts off the streets in an effort to rehabilitate their youth and reduce the local demand for ‘Ya Ba’. In many respects the Thai strategy is remarkably similar to Australia’s own whole-of-government approach to people smuggling. The Thai Government has activated the country’s collective resources and multi-agency cooperation is in evidence everywhere in Thailand. The law enforcement agencies and the Royal Thai Armed forces are working closely to curb the influx of methamphetamines across their borders. Seizures of the drug have been truly staggering in size and now it is common to read newspapers reporting the seizure of pills in excess of one million. Seizures have been recorded as high as 7.7 million pills and there is no doubt that this figure will be eclipsed at some stage in the not-too-distant future. If that is not bad enough, these types of record hauls are being made in ‘cocktail’ fashion with large block heroin seizures accompanying the interdiction of ATS.

In 2001, Thai law enforcement officers, working closely with the Royal Thai Navy, intercepted fishing vessels in the Andaman Sea and seized 7.7 million



methamphetamine pills and approximately 126kg of heroin.

Organised crime activity connected to people smuggling is also very much in evidence in Thailand. Bangkok is a regional centre for the mass production of fraudulent travel documentation, this trade can be clearly linked with all manner of crime types affecting the region. Bangkok is also a pipeline for many persons attempting to illegally migrate to Australia, Europe, the USA and Canada. One of the future challenges for this post will be to effectively respond and counter the growing threat posed by offshore-organised people smuggling in the region. Like other posts in the region, the AFP Bangkok post has been working in close collaboration with its whole-of-government partners at the Australian Embassy in Bangkok on this issue.

Without doubt, the Bangkok post is now a ‘front line’ unit of the AFP. Like the operations teams at home, it is busy playing its part in attempting to contain the existing threat of heroin trafficking as well as the new and rapidly spreading scourge of ATS production and trafficking and the regional growth of organised crime involvement in people smuggling and irregular migration. Success relies on support of every AFP member in Australia as well as overseas. Our experience in Bangkok has shown that the true measure of the post’s successes can only be measured by AFP successes at home. The positive outcomes in this respect far outweigh the negatives and the excellent relationships that we currently enjoy in Thailand are directly attributable to the efforts of AFP members at home.

Methamphetamine or ‘Ya Ba’, known locally as ‘crazy drug’, is causing widespread and serious social disruption and damage to Thai society and culture.