

# Operation Inca lifts the lid on 4.4 tonnes of ecstasy



Tomato tins containing ecstasy tablets

**The date 8/8/08 is considered a good omen by some, but for one alleged international drug syndicate it was a very unlucky day.**

On 8 August, 400 AFP personnel launched simultaneous raids across four states following the world's largest single seizure of MDMA ('ecstasy'). For the AFP, one single day marked the resolution of an exhaustive 12-month investigation—45 search warrants had been executed, 20 people were in custody and multiple charges had been laid.

The world's largest single seizure of ecstasy began in December 2006 as a result of intelligence received from the AFP liaison office in The Hague. The intelligence was developed by the AFP and Customs over



Ecstasy seized during Operation Inca

the following six months. A convergence between a Victoria Police, Australian Crime Commission and Customs operation was identified in June 2007. Intelligence from this operation assisted in identifying a container due to arrive in Melbourne. A subsequent X-ray of the container revealed a staggering 3025 sealed tomato tins, each containing 1.5 kg of ecstasy tablets. The massive shipment with an estimated street value of \$440 million sparked *Operation Inca*, coordinated from AFP Melbourne Office.

Initially, federal agents substituted the MDMA with an inert substance and the container was released by Customs. However, the syndicate was alerted to AFP involvement and abandoned the drugs when 'innocent agents' collected the shipment.

"If you think it through," Commissioner Keelty said at a recent press conference in Melbourne, "there are not many boardrooms in Australia where you would write-off half-a-billion dollars worth of a commodity or a product and continue your business."

AFP Melbourne Office identified the syndicate and key suspects in the importation of 15 million ecstasy pills, but kept their findings under wraps. This gave them the opportunity to gather substantial evidence and ensure a strong case would be brought to court. Agents also had the opportunity to examine the intricate workings of the well-established syndicate, offering valuable insights for future drug investigations.

One of the key elements of *Operation Inca* was the cooperation with other European law enforcement agencies which conducted complementary investigations

into European-based members of the syndicate. These investigations also led to arrests in Belgium and the Netherlands.

The extraordinary shipment was also linked to another seizure on 24 July 2008 of 150 kg of cocaine imported from Colombia. With an estimated street value of \$37.5 million, Melbourne Office was ready to shift to the resolution phase of this seizure as well as the initial 4.4 tonnes.

*Operation Inca* is one of the largest operations undertaken by the AFP—it resulted in 10,000 hours of surveillance, an astonishing 185,215 telephone intercepts and 100,000 hours of work by federal agents and support staff. The operation is estimated to have saved the Australian public more than \$1.3 billion in associated health and social costs.

The investigation also identified a money laundering operation worth more than \$9 million that the syndicate allegedly used to pay for the illegal drugs.

In a press release on 8 August 2008, Commissioner Keelty said a seizure of this magnitude was a major victory in the fight to stop drug syndicates supplying Australia's youth with extremely harmful substances.

"Investigations, like this one, that target the illegal financing of organised criminal syndicates involved in the global trade in illicit drugs, are proving highly successful and ensure an economic as well as social return for the community.

"This is an extraordinary outcome for law enforcement as it continues to work together to detect illicit drugs before they reach Australia. International intelligence, combined with the cooperation of local law enforcement agencies, played a big role in the success of the operation," he said.