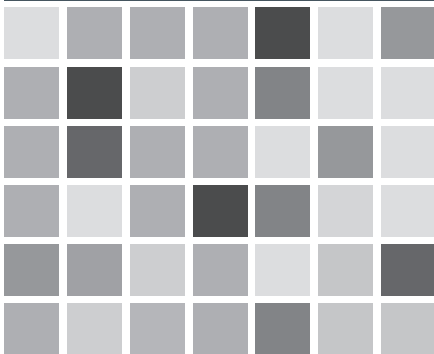


# Fighting drug trafficking with community forums



**The AFP has partnered with allied agencies and Australia's Vietnamese community in an effort to reduce the number of people engaging in the dangerous and potentially deadly practice of smuggling drugs internally.**

AFP statistics show that more heroin couriers come into Australia from Vietnam than any other country. Drug trafficking is an issue that affects all communities, and research has shown that Vietnamese-Australians are both economically and socially vulnerable to approaches by drug syndicates looking for drug couriers.

The joint effort involves reaching out to the Vietnamese community through a series of public meetings with the Vietnamese Community Association. The meetings, held in conjunction with the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), Department of Immigration and Citizenship (DIAC), and the NSW Police Drug Squad, are designed to educate the Vietnamese community on the dangers of smuggling drugs internally while highlighting the types of people who are at risk of becoming couriers.

The initiative addresses both the supply and demand aspects of drug trafficking.

"On the supply side we have set up teams in Vietnam to give training to local and airport police on how to better detect internal couriers exiting Vietnam on their way to Australia," National Manager Border and International Tim Morris said. "The demand side, led by DFAT, uses a combination of local Vietnamese knowledge as well our knowledge from investigating these syndicates, to come up with solutions."

"By increasing awareness among community members, it is envisaged that they will be able to recognise the initial signs and provide the appropriate help or care, thus providing a community solution to a community problem."

Each internal drug seizure can cost the AFP up to \$68,000 in lost resources.

"This cost is a direct result of having federal agents offline and processing the courier from the time they are handed over by Customs, to the time they are ready to leave the hospital and be charged," Assistant Commissioner Morris said.

Since the beginning of January 2006, a third of the 178 drug detections made have been on people travelling to Australia from Vietnam.

There are 25 Vietnamese-Australians currently detained or convicted for drug trafficking in Vietnam. Seventeen are serving sentences and three are awaiting trial. Six of the 25 have been sentenced to be executed.

Being an Australian does not guarantee immunity to the consequences of being arrested for drug supply and possession in Vietnam. Australians arrested in Vietnam are subject to the laws of that country, which are often more severe than Australian laws.

The possibility of facing a long gaol sentence appears to be doing little to stem the tide as members of the Vietnamese community continue to transit through countries with the death penalty, knowing the high risks involved.

Assistant Commissioner Morris said concealing drugs inside the body is both dangerous and hazardous to a person's health; smuggling drugs internally can lead to injuries, haemorrhaging or even death. A Brisbane man died in December 2006 after a condom he had swallowed ruptured.

Above: Members of the discussion panel at the Vietnamese Community Forum.

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“The average purity of the drugs being swallowed and imported is three times more potent than the drugs being used in Australia”, Assistant Commissioner Morris said.

“When a drug parcel leaks or ruptures inside the body, the drugs are rapidly absorbed into the gastrointestinal tract in massive doses. In the early stage this can cause abdominal cramps, nausea, vomiting and disorientation, followed by seizures or convulsions, coma and death.

“One of the most highly toxic substances is cocaine. Just over one gram of ingested cocaine can be fatal.”

The AFP has learned that drug couriers are promised a payment of between \$5,000 and \$32,000 by drug syndicates. In the majority of instances the money is not paid and once a person is arrested they face a lengthy period behind bars, lose their rights and freedom, and are left with legal bills and no means to pay.

According to Border and International statistics, the greatest proportion of drug couriers are over the age of 40 with no known criminal history or association.

These people are often targeted at casinos and may be desperate to repay their amassed debts.

Drug syndicates easily lure them into drug trafficking by the offer to take care of their financial situation and often entice them to travel overseas on an all-expenses paid holiday.

A second particularly vulnerable group are those people who have elderly or sick relatives in Vietnam. They often cannot afford to visit their relatives and are enticed by the offer of money to support a trip back home. They are then forced to smuggle drugs back into Australia on their return.

The last category identified as being susceptible to drug syndicate activity consists of drug users under the age of 30 with prior criminal convictions for drug offences. “Surprisingly this cohort makes up the smallest proportion of the couriers in custody,” Assistant Commissioner Morris said.

“One would think that this group would be more inclined to participate in this type of activity given their association with drugs and criminal activity.”

Through extensive intelligence the AFP has been able to identify a number of links between internal courier importations. AFP data shows that men and women are targeted equally and that offenders targeted by criminal syndicates tend to be from a low socio-economic group, or in a large amount of debt.

“A lack of English has been identified as a major risk factor,” Assistant Commissioner Morris said. “It cuts out a wide range of employment opportunities, thus creating a group of people who are more desperate.”

The major challenge for the AFP and allied law enforcement agencies is how to identify and at the same time look after those at risk of being targeted by drug syndicates.

In February 2007, a cross-agency workshop on the trafficking of narcotics with particular emphasis on internal concealments was carried out in Ho Chi Minh City.

As efforts to reach out to the Vietnamese community to prevent drug trafficking continued over the remainder of the year, a further 33 drug couriers were arrested in Australia and charged with importing a marketable quantity of a border-controlled drug.

In 2008, another 19 Australia-bound drug couriers were intercepted in either Australia or Vietnam between January and July.

“The main challenge for us is to prevent a displacement affect and make sure we just don’t move the drugs to another location. Anecdotal evidence suggests that our strategies are starting to work and that a lot of the drugs are now out of Vietnam,” Assistant Commissioner Morris said.

“In addition we are implementing strategies to educate the Vietnamese community about the wider impact of trafficking on husbands, wives, parents, children and the community.”

By taking the initiative to the Vietnamese community, the AFP is aiming to provide longer-term solutions to the issues surrounding drug trafficking and the triggers that lead to people becoming involved in drug trafficking.