

Customs help dismantle major international methamphetamines, heroin syndicates



Customs and AFP officers with part of the seizure of more than one tonne of methamphetamines

Joint operations by Australian Customs and Federal Police have, during the past six months, prevented almost two tonnes of 'ecstasy' (MDMA) and 115 kilograms of heroin from reaching Australia's streets.

A total of 15 people were arrested in Australia and overseas in connection with four separate seizures, which included the world's single biggest detection of five million ecstasy tablets hidden inside a shipping container loaded with ceramic tiles.

The Chief Executive Officer of Customs, Lionel Woodward, said the four detections highlighted the value of advanced screening technology and highly skilled officers, supported by excellent cooperation with other Australian and overseas law enforcement agencies.

In November 2004, two Australians were arrested following the detection of 820 kilograms of MDMA tablets and powder inside a bakery oven airfreighted from Germany to Sydney.

In Melbourne in mid-April this year, four men were arrested following the discovery of more than one tonne of street-ready ecstasy tablets with an approximate street value of AUD\$250 million hidden inside a shipping container from Italy.

Also in April, in a separate operation, four people were arrested in Melbourne after another 91 kilograms of ecstasy were seized. The drugs were concealed inside barbecues imported in a shipping container from China.

In each of these three operations, Australian Customs specialised container examination facilities (CEFs) and staff played a crucial role in helping to identify the suspect shipments.

The fourth major Customs-Federal Police operation concluded in mid-May when five men were arrested in Australia and Hong Kong over the alleged importation of heroin inside the frame of two shipping containers sent to Melbourne from China.

These containers were listed as containing plastic chairs. In total, 115 kilograms of heroin was seized with an estimated street value of AUD\$60 million. This detection was the result of a 12-month investigation involving cooperation with law enforcement authorities in Belgium, the Netherlands, China and Hong Kong.

Mr Woodward said five container examination facilities were now operating in key Australian ports, x-raying more than 100,000 containers each year.

Mr Woodward said the CEFs had helped to prevent illegal drugs with an estimated street value of more than AUD\$1 billion from reaching Australian streets since the first facility began operating in late 2002.

He said each of the four importations represented extremely sophisticated but ultimately, unsuccessful attempts to defeat Customs border surveillance.



top left: Customs officer inspecting alleged heroin drug hide

top right: Concealment in frame of container

bottom right: Heroin removed from container