

Customs and PSI



'Passengers' are escorted safely from the suspect' plane (New Zealand Air Force 757).

Proliferation Security Initiative countries included:

Argentina, Australia, Canada, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Japan, New Zealand, Philippines, Poland, Singapore, Russia, The Netherlands, Turkey, USA, Britain.

Observer countries:

Brunei Darussalam, Chile, Cambodia, Fiji, India, Laos, Malaysia, Pakistan, Papua New Guinea, Republic of Korea, Qatar, South Africa, Sri Lanka, Thailand, United Arab Emirates

Participating Customs Enforcement Operations officers from the Northern Territory played host to Pacific Protector 06, part of a major Proliferation Security Initiative exercise. Roger Batch reports:

The Proliferation Security Initiative is an informal arrangement designed to disrupt the trafficking of weapons of mass destruction and related materials. The Initiative specifically responds to the urgent need to capture WMD-related transfers between countries or countries not of proliferation concern. Such transfers breach international non-proliferation norms. Since its launch in May 2003, the Initiative has rapidly built up its operational strength and momentum and has the support of more than 70 countries.

The *Statement of Interdiction Principles*, finalised in Paris in September 2003, sets out the core objectives and methods of the Initiative and commits participants to work together, as necessary, and consistent with each nation's domestic law, as well as relevant international law, to act to prevent the illicit trade in WMD and WMD-related material.

Exercise Pacific Protector 06 certainly achieved these objectives. The one-day exercise, which took place at Darwin RAAF base in April, was the culmination of three days of activities which included a tabletop discussion and a series of presentations from member countries and key Australian agencies.

The tabletop discussion was attended by Initiative-partner country delegates. The discussion provided an ideal forum for delegates to discuss some of the key legal and procedural issues surrounding the sort of actions that would be required to prevent the spread of WMD or WMD-related material.

In recent times, Australian Customs has been involved in two key regional exercises. Both were maritime-based and took place in Japan in 2004 (Exercise Team Samurai 04) and Singapore (Exercise Deep Sabre 05). The key difference this time around was that Pacific Protector 06 involved an air interdiction.

The nature of air transport means that reaction time for air situations is far shorter than for maritime scenarios.

Interdicting planes is also far more problematic than for ships. There is a requirement to land the aircraft to complete any search and seizure activities.

Scenario

The scenario for Pacific Protector 06 involved a known front company in the fictitious state of Kamaria acquiring sensitive WMD items from various sources in Europe. Intelligence suggested that the front company was part of an illicit proliferation network and intended to re-export goods from Kamaria to a WMD program in a country of proliferation concern. The network was thought to be exploiting Kamaria as a transshipment point due to a lack of effective export controls at Kamarian ports. The method of exportation was to be by air.

The aircraft involved was identified and, using diplomatic channels, agreement was secured from the aircraft's home country for it to be diverted from its flight route to Darwin Air Base. Two RAAF FA/18s were dispatched to escort the aircraft to ground. Once on the ground, Customs took over the operation, led and coordinated the search and removal of the suspect material with the assistance of a number of Australian and international agencies.

Sequence of events

The exercise was carried out in bright and sunny conditions at the fighter replenishment apron at the RAAF base in Darwin. Observers from more than 17 Initiative member countries and 15 outreach countries were witness to the day's events.

The exercise started in spectacular fashion with an ear-splitting flyover by three FA/18 aircraft. Two of these aircraft formed the escort for the suspect aircraft (which was actually a New Zealand Air Force 757) while the third photographed the mid-air interception.

After the FA/18 landed, the 757 cruised down the runway and within a few minutes was on blocks in front of the apron. A cordon was quickly put around the aircraft. Customs was called into action and a combined Australian Customs/Japan Customs-Police/Quarantine team entered the aircraft cabin to conduct initial screening of passengers.

While the cabin was being secured and the passengers screened, two further teams of Australian Customs and Japanese officers secured the starboard cargo holds. These were then opened and made ready for initial screening by these teams. As the passengers disembarked, they were screened with radiological

detection equipment, escorted to a bus and removed from the area. A thumbs-up from the cabin clearance group commander indicated that all was clear and that there was no radiological source detectable in the cabin area.

Action in the cargo hold resulted in the detection of two sources which were deemed to be above our safe operating limits. The groups immediately withdrew and joined the cordon around the aircraft.

At this point, members of the Australian Army Incident Response Regiment and the Singapore Chemical, Biological, Radiological and Explosive Task Force landed in a C-130 Hercules and disembarked in front of the observers. The Army's tank-tracked robot was deployed to the front of the apron as both groups unloaded the rest of their kit and made preparations to assist.



Customs officer Phil Watt, Manager, Enforcement Operations Coordination, discusses the progress of Exercise Pacific Protector 06 with Captain Tong Yi Chuen and 3rd Sergeant Teo Pho Ping Maximilian of the Singapore Army.

Manager Enforcement Operations in the Northern Territory Brennan Fraser-Bell was the operation commander for the ground phase of the exercise and, at this point, he tasked the Army and the Singapore force to find and render safe the material located by the Australian Customs/Japan groups.

Both groups then deployed to the cargo holds fully kitted in their radiological suits and found and removed the sources from each of the cargo holds. These were then brought to the front of the apron where a safety cordon was established. A robot removed the sources and placed them in a shielded container, allowing access for further analysis.

This stage of the operation was carried out by a US Customs Border Protection Unit and the Australian Radiological Protection and Nuclear Safety Authority. Finally, a Royal Air Force team completed the final sweep of the cargo hold.



An officer of Singapore's Defence Force Chemical Biological Radiological and Explosive Unit carefully removes the 'suspect' material from the plane.

National Manager Enforcement Operations Brian Hurrell, in conjunction with a number of Defence Force personnel, provided a running commentary of the day's events, ensuring that our overseas visitors, could easily follow the activities.

A number of displays rounded out a very full morning. The Customs Detector Dog Unit and mobile x-ray capabilities were on show and were enthusiastically received by all observers.

The wash-up

An after-exercise debrief was held on the air base. As well as providing a chance for observers to ask questions about legislative and procedural issues faced during the exercise, it allowed Customs and other agencies to explain what occurred during the cargo search.

In Customs case, this meant explaining what would have happened with the processing of the passengers on board the aircraft. To do this, a video showing the search of a passenger's bags was produced. For this scenario, the video highlighted some of the key indicators which would lead to further examination. In this case, Customs identified a passenger of concern. The video clearly shows the passenger carrying material of concern, mainly in the form of intellectual property. She was referred to the Australian Federal Police for further investigation.

Customs commitment

Customs resource commitment to this exercise was significant. At a senior level, Customs was represented by DCEO John Jeffery, Head of Customs Legal Unit Kirstin Whitehouse, National Manager Enforcement Operations Brian Hurrell and Regional Director NT Andrew Hudson. The exercise planning team comprised three officers from Central Office: Roger Batch, Dan Bland and Julie Turner. The exercise required nearly 20 personnel from Darwin office, three from Victoria, including its forward command post and search truck as well as a range of support staff who fulfilled important roles such as hosting members from outreach countries. Having that many staff 'out of action' meant that the rest of the NT team had to cover extra workloads, so the entire region contributed in a very positive way to the successful outcome of this exercise.

Impressions

From a planning perspective, it is difficult to convey how much work is involved in an exercise such as this. The interaction between agencies that was part and parcel of the process was extremely positive and each agency now has a greater understanding of the difficulties others face.

A significant benefit from an operational readiness perspective came out of the transport move by RAAF C-130 Hercules of the Victorian Region's search truck and forward command post. This was a first for both Defence and Customs and, hopefully, will pave the way for future movements when required at short notice.

It is often the case that you feel a sense of deflation after a big event, particularly one that has been some months in the planning. This time, however, this feeling was offset by the upbeat, enthusiastic and professional approach displayed by the local Customs staff involved.

Perhaps the single most impressive act of the day occurred at the after-exercise function where one of our local officers assured our Japanese colleagues that he could whistle up a crocodile. After getting himself in position on the beach and commencing 'the call', a sizable goanna crept out of the bushes behind him. Needless to say, this man is now a legend among our international guests.

If you need something done and you want it done well, you could do a lot worse than getting it done in Darwin.