



FLYING HIGH

TERRORIST groups are known to use criminal activities such as human trafficking, kidnapping for ransom, extortion and drug smuggling – the latter of which is by far the most profitable and fastest growing method – to fund their operations. The term adopted by counter terrorism agencies to describe this practice is known as narco-terrorism. Ties between terrorist organisations, drug lords and cartels have been long established in this lucrative business. With global revenue for the fiscal year 2000 estimated at \$400 billion, they are a direct threat to the national security of the United States and other Western countries. There is a growing concern that terrorist organisations will use the established smuggling networks of cartels and drug lords to deliver equipment and people into the West or allow the documentation and paperwork of local members of the smuggling network to be used by their cell members.

The aviation industry sits squarely in between the issues of terrorism and narcotics smuggling due to the pervasiveness and importance of air transport in travel and shipping. Cartels and small-time smugglers alike have used air travel as a means to move their product throughout the Western world since at least the 1940s if not since the dawn of aviation. The November 2005 arrest of Guatemala's special police anti-drug unit chief and two of his deputies by US Drug Enforcement Administration agents (DEA) on charges of conspiring to import and distribute cocaine in the United States, and the February 2006 arrest of two US air marshals in Houston, Texas, who allegedly smuggled cocaine on the flights they were protecting, have once more raised questions about how deeply drug lords and cartels have penetrated sensitive services and the threat they pose to the aviation industry.

Aviation interests are considered

high-threat targets for terrorism due to the industry's role as a critical part of modern society and the numerous hijackings, bombings and attacks on aircraft and airports around the world. The 9/11 attacks are nothing new to those who wage war. From the September 1970 quadruple hijacking and bombing of American and Western aircraft in Amman, Jordan, to the bombing of Pan Am flight 103 over Lockerbie, Scotland to the day the World Trade Center was reduced to rubble, terrorists and warmongers have always set their sights on lucrative transportation targets. It is only with increased technology that we have today that retaliatory and preventive measures have been investigated and implemented. Security measures for airports and aircraft have been dramatically upgraded following the 9/11 attacks in the United States and as one of the most important pillars of air travel. New counter terrorism procedures

In the fight against terrorism, one tactic has been to annihilate the threat at its source – the difficulty is finding the source.

Amir Lechner discusses the threat facing the aviation industry by drug smuggling and terrorism and how it is being countered

and technology that detect and prevent terror attacks and narcotics smuggling have been introduced.

Airport and Customs administrations around the globe are now using several explosive detection systems (EDS) models. These include trace chemical detectors (TCD) capable of tracing drug residue, as smugglers are still attempting to hide drugs in their checked baggage and carry-on luggage hoping that security screeners are more interested in finding explosives and weapons rather than drugs. As the use of these machines is likely to expand in the coming years, we are likely to see an increase in the number of couriers delivering smaller shipments inside their bodies. Machines that are capable of screening (either using X-rays or millimetric wave imaging) passenger's bodies are currently in limited use. The use of these machines is likely to grow but will face opposition from members of the public who claim that they violate their privacy. Unlike couriers who deliver shipments of narcotics in their baggage, the use of couriers who smuggle narcotics inside their bodies lowers the threat to a flight, as they have seen the narcotics and placed the drugs inside themselves, eliminating the possibility that they are delivering a bomb. Searching every air traveller and their luggage for narcotics is impossible, so less technological methods are being developed in the fight against narco-terrorism. One of the major tools in fighting drug smugglers and terrorists is profiling. But smugglers are adapting to the rapid changes in security at airports and are using people who do not fit the drug smuggler profile, such as children and the elderly. Another "non-tech" method being explored is partnering government and business interests as a united front against narco-terrorism. The US government has initiated a voluntary government-business programme called Customs-Trade Partnership Against Terrorism (C-TPAT) as a direct result of the 9/11 attacks and improve and secure cargo shipments entering US airports, seaports and land borders. This joint programme evaluates a broad range of security topics to minimise the participating companies' vulnerability to terrorism, including narcotics smuggling.

The prospect of drug cartels and terrorists infiltrating air transport begs the questions who is practising this new

Major Narco-Smuggling Incidents Involving Commercial Airlines

Southern Winds Airlines (Argentina) In February 2005 Argentinean President Nestor Kirchner ordered the Ministry of Defense to take over security at Ministro Jorge Pistarini Ezeiza International Airport in Buenos Aires from the air force police after a drug scandal involving high-ranking security officers and the now-defunct Southern Winds Airlines. The incident, in which four suitcases containing 400kg of cocaine were discovered at Madrid Airport, led to the implication and arrest of several Southern Winds employees on charges of drug smuggling.

Air Holland (The Netherlands) In December 2004 two directors of the now-defunct Dutch carrier Air Holland were arrested on charges they financed the airline for years with illegal drug money. The suspects are accused of money laundering and smuggling more than 600kg of cocaine. Authorities suspect that the estimated \$25 million profits of the drug smuggling were invested back into Air Holland and other businesses.

Avianca (Colombia) In October 2004 in order to maintain lucrative US routes, Avianca Airlines, Colombia's national airline, was forced by the New York attorney general to allow a consultant firm to conduct an assessment of its anti-drug smuggling procedures and implement the firm's findings and solutions. Should the carrier fail to comply, it would be subjected to a \$3 million penalty. **Nuevo Continente (Peru)** In June 2004 the US Department of State issued a regulation forbidding US citizens from flying Peruvian Nuevo Continente (formerly Aero Continente) and forbidding US corporations from having dealings with the airline. This action stemmed from the carrier's alleged ties to drug trafficking.

Air Jamaica (Jamaica) In August 1997 more than 300kgs of marijuana, hidden among spices packed in cardboard boxes, was found on an Air Jamaica aircraft (frequently targeted by drug smugglers) at Heathrow Airport. The same year, US authorities detained an Air Jamaica aircraft in Miami after 20lbs of marijuana were found in a panel of the aircraft's cabin, suggesting that employees of the carrier were involved in the smuggling. In December 1986 inspectors found 162lbs of marijuana in fake Postal Service bags aboard an Air Jamaica Boeing 727 that arrived from Montego Bay, Jamaica. Customs officials seized the aircraft and levied a fine of nearly \$1.3 million against the carrier.

Kenya Airways (Kenya) In April 2002 Kenya Airways reportedly dismissed 32 employees following an internal investigation into drug smuggling by crewmembers and other company staff.

American Airlines (US) In 1999 following a two-and-a-half-year sting operation, federal agents arrested 58 people, mostly American Airlines and Lufthansa Sky Chefs employees, in Miami, Florida, on charges of drug and weapons smuggling.

brand of terror funded by the illicit drug trade and what are the actual threats presented by these groups? The most notable terrorist groups using narco-terrorism are operating in Colombia and include the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), the National Liberation Army (ELN) (currently engaged in peace talks with the Colombian government) and the United Self Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC) (currently demilitarising). While the use of drugs is forbidden in the Muslim world, Muslim extremist groups such as

the former Taliban in Afghanistan, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) and the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) in the Philippines are also known to use narco-terrorism. These groups generally use profits from smuggling drugs to finance their terrorist activities. While the presence of drugs hidden on an aircraft or in the belongings of a passenger (as long as they are not consumed during the flight) does not have an immediate effect on the security or safety of a flight, there are major long term implications for air carriers

► Several narco-trafficking groups are using insiders to infiltrate commercial aircraft security precautions. These insiders are often employees of airports, carriers and different airline service providers who are familiar with security procedures and can bypass security controls. In June 2005 Colombian authorities arrested a Lebanese man who was a member of an international drug trafficking gang that used part of its profits to fund the Hizballah terrorist organisation. Six members of the same criminal organisation were arrested in Ecuador. The organisation reportedly exported cocaine from several countries in South America to the United States, Europe and Asia. The drugs were sent on commercial flights departing from Ecuador, Colombia, Peru, Venezuela, Chile, Argentina and Brazil inside pieces of luggage that were not searched because the gang had connections with corrupt airport officials. While this incident did not pose a definite threat to passengers and/or crewmembers, there is a growing concern that insiders might help narco-terrorist organisations (knowingly or unknowingly) to deliver more than just narcotics on board an aircraft. In November 1989 a bomb exploded onboard a Colombian Avianca Airlines' Boeing 727 minutes after take-

off, killing all 107 passengers and crewmembers. An anonymous caller claimed that a group called The Extraditables, composed of drug traffickers liable for extradition to the US and led by the drug lord Pablo Escobar, was behind the bombing.

The presence of drugs on a flight (as long as they are not consumed during the flight) does not have an immediate effect on the security or safety of that flight. But as revenues from the successful delivery of this contraband might fund terrorist activity, narco-trafficking should continue to be fought against. Smugglers should receive sentences similar in severity to those given to terrorists as a deterrent.

While the US and several other Western governments are actively involved in fighting narco-traffickers and narco-terrorists on their own soil and abroad, federal security agencies and customs administrations should all press for more funds and the introduction of passenger "screening machines" to try to seal the end points of such shipments at our airports.

Training of airport ticketing agents and other security personnel in profiling techniques and indicators might also help to detect traffickers. Random checks of passengers and their luggage on

arriving and departing flights should also be conducted frequently to deter drug smugglers. In addition, periodic checks of airport and airline employees and their lockers should be conducted, and an employee communication system should be established through which suspicious behaviour of other employees can be monitored and reported.

General aviation corporations operating in countries where narco-smuggling/narco-terrorism are identified problems should contract a security guard or use their employees to watch the aircraft while on the ground, and local service providers should be used only after an onsite assessment is conducted and the reputation of the vendors has been established. The C-TPAT programme should be mandatory rather than voluntary for all companies that are involved in the importation of goods to the United States and other countries that strive to combat narco-smuggling/narco-terrorism.

It is obvious that the fight against narco-terrorism is far from over, but it is not a fight that can be lost. It will require changes not only in the aviation industry but also in government initiatives and the forging of partnerships between commerce and government agencies if the fight will be won. **1**



Manual searches for narcotics are a first line of defence ©Rex Features