



Flying High

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Genre: Crime

[Newspaper headlines] 21 January 2009

- Flight SA 234 from Joburg to London
- 15 SAA crew members are arrested and detained
- In three unidentified bags 50kg of dagga and 4kg of cocaine are seized.
- A SAA crew member and security guard are arrested

[Newspaper headlines] 16 February 2009

- Flight SA 234 from Joburg to London
 - 15 SAA crew members are arrested and detained
 - In a hand luggage bag 2 kg of cocaine is seized
- Bongani Bingwa (Carte Blanche presenter): "It's been a miserable start to the year for SAA. Last Sunday we brought you fresh allegations against CEO Khaya Ngqula. He is now on special leave pending investigations into his conduct. To top it off nearly 30 crew members were arrested and released at London's Heathrow airport following sensational drug busts."

But just how easy is it to smuggle contraband through Johannesburg's main airport, OR Tambo?

Aviation security expert: "It would be very easy. You just need to know who to bribe and how to bribe them. And they will facilitate it for you. You name it, it's been transported: drugs, money, counterfeit goods, diamonds, gold... you name it, it's going out there, and it's going through."

An aviation security expert says OR Tambo is one of the largest drug trafficking locations in the country. From here drugs are smuggled worldwide. The recent drugs busts are apparently small fry compared to what's really going on.

Bongani: "What's going on at Johannesburg airport?"

Aviation security expert: "Well, you've got endemic corruption. The corruption goes from the top right down to the bottom. In the areas of who gets awarded security tenders, who gets awarded ground handling tenders... Contraband is smuggled by not only cabin crew, but also by police, security, cleaners, customs, airline management and SAA technical staff."

Bongani: "It should be one of the most well protected places in South Africa, but it's been proved time and again security at OR Tambo International Airport can be breached. From armed robberies, airplane heists and drug smuggling, there are on-going reports of criminal activity taking place here."

Surely SAA has to answer to this.

Bongani: "After several attempts to get an interview with SAA's acting CEO Mr Chris Smythe, we have failed. They will only respond to our written questions, despite the fact that they have given broadcast interviews to other members of the media. To us it's only e-mails they will answer."

On Tuesday acting CEO Chris Smythe went live on radio.

[Radio 702] John Robbie (702 presenter): "Was there a look at security, was there an upgrade, did something change since the last bust?"

[Radio 702] Chris Smythe (Acting CEO: SAA): "Absolutely, absolutely, we have a number of different measures we've put into play, and I don't want to talk in too much detail..."

Despite what the acting CEO said about the new security measures, the very next day we walked into the crew centre unchallenged.

SAA says crew and their luggage are screened in the same way as passengers. Last week, at the Crew Centre, security systems were said to have been upgraded. All crew would be physically searched, sniffer dogs would be used and nobody would be able enter the crew area without proper identification. But on two separate days this week, Carte Blanche entered the centre without a valid SAA employee card and found that a security door was out of order. In and outside the centre, luggage was left unattended. But SAA says unscreened baggage can be left unattended in specific holding areas, as long as baggage is screened before departure. But is it?

Since the drugs busts, it's been decided that the airports company will now oversee security at SAA's crew centre, says ACSA spokesperson Solomon Makgale.

Solomon Makgale (ACSA spokesperson): "Clearly there is a problem. There is a problem with people coming in, and those people are being arrested, and there's a problem with obviously now we know, with drugs leaving the country."

Jacques du Toit (Former SAA employee): "In my 19 years of flying, in 19-and-a-half years, I was never searched once leaving South African Airways from Airways Park building."

Former employee Jacques du Toit left SAA in 2007. He says security equipment only ever worked sporadically.

Jacques: "I still got a lot of friends in the airline that still fly, and they are all shocked by this. Most of them, what they are complaining about is that there is a definite security problem, you know, there's no security as far as cabin crew leave, to search them, their bags are not safe, anybody can put anything into anybody's bag at any stage during the flight."

Source: "For the large part, most flight attendants when we hear about people being bust, we are all horrified and we say that there's just no way that we trade 25 years of our lives for a million pounds or you know, whatever... for most of us it's just a great big no-no."

An SAA flight attendant, who wants to remain anonymous, says on average, he is searched once every ten trips. He says there's not much to stop a terrorist boarding a plane with a bomb.

Source: "It may not be 50kg of marijuana, but 50kg of dynamite. I'm sure when you're checking this in for these kinds of people, it goes in sight unseen, its way into the aircraft, it's been paid for, various people are smuggling it in. Maybe you won't even arrive in London, you won't see the million pounds, but get halfway there and be blown up. I think anybody considering this type of action, whatever pressure is being applied, should think twice, you're actually playing with people's lives out there."

Aviation security expert: "You get a situation, for example, where people fly to London from Johannesburg to arrange for bombings in London, or to arrange for an aircraft to be blown up in London. And when you hear that these people flew from Johannesburg to London, it makes you realise that the terrorist organisation in the world have in fact infiltrated the trans-national organised crime. That has taken a solid grip of Johannesburg airport."

Bongani: "According to experts, trade in drugs is even larger than the global trade in oil at an estimated annual value of more than 500-billion US dollars, it yields profits higher than the GDP of some developing countries. OR Tambo is said to be the ideal transit point for drugs from South America, West Africa and South East Asia to Europe and North America."

Bongani: "So, obviously in the headlines we've seen cabin crew members being arrested or suspected, is this the tip of the iceberg?"

Aviation security expert: "Absolutely, it's just the tip of the iceberg!"

And while cabin crew may be caught occasionally smuggling drugs on passenger flights, apparently the real problem lies within SAA's technical department. An insider told Carte Blanche that while only about ten percent of contraband is smuggled through by the cabin crew, the technical department is the core of the drug smuggling network. And it's not only cocaine and dagga.

Insider: "Anything that you need, you can get on SAA premises. Any drugs - from steroids to your hard drugs - it's available at SAA technical's premises."

Security measures are said to be hopelessly inadequate. When gaining access to SAA technical, personnel are only scanned by metal detectors, installed to prevent the theft of metal parts and consumables. Apparently drug searches haven't happened in six years.

Bongani: "So, you're saying that unless you set off the metal detector, you can walk straight through?"

Insider: "You can walk straight through. They are not looking for drugs. When you work a night shift, say when you start at ten o'clock in the evening, those guys are normally asleep or about to go to sleep. The effort from them is not there. If the metal detector doesn't go off, they won't search you."

Smuggling goods through SAA technical is said to be simple.

Insider: "I've seen drug abuse in the airline; I've seen the smuggling of drugs on aircrafts. It's fairly easy because a technician knows the aircraft. He's got access to the whole aircraft, so he can easily hide contraband and organise with his friends stationed at another base just to take it off because a technician knows exactly which aircraft is going where, which aircraft is coming back for whatever cargo. So it's fairly easy hiding stuff in the aircraft.

SAA says they have a zero tolerance approach to the airline being used for drug smuggling, but clearly this means very little. ACSA says airports may have the best equipment and policies, but the real problem is the collusion between airport staff and criminals.

Solomon: "I wouldn't say the criminals have won over what the police, what customs and what the likes of ACSA and SAA are doing. Certainly there's a lot of work that needs to be done, but the work that customs especially, the police especially are doing is commendable."

One wonders whether ACSA or SAA realise exactly how pervasive the trafficking of illegal substances is throughout OR Tambo. Our aviation security expert believes there are about 15 syndicates operating from the airport.

Aviation security expert: "If you're prepared to pay you can get anything onto an aircraft, anything at all. You must remember that the systems that they use are operated by human beings, and as long as you can get to that human being, and get him in your pocket, you achieve what you want... you can take anything or anybody onto an aircraft."

Bongani: "It's been reported in the news that they found 2kg of this and 4kg of that, how much more is still hidden in the aircraft?"

Insider: "There's a lot more. You get drug mules that do transporting too. There's inside information going on. They tip off the police that there are drugs on the aircraft. That takes the attention off the aircraft and puts it onto the drug mule. So, as soon as that guy is caught, you're free to roam around the aircraft. They don't know what is stashed in your cargo bay, stashed in the nose of the aircraft, in the tail of the aircraft, in the crew rests there's no security measures when an aircraft comes in. No one searches the technical personnel going onto the aircraft, coming off and we've got technicians based all around the world."

He says it's all about money - lots of it.

Insider: "I'm talking about millions a month." Nobody knows the structure, nobody knows what's going on in SAA technical. It's only the technicians who know what's going on."

Bongani: "So, we obviously haven't seen the last of it?"

Insider: "No, you haven't seen the last of it, not with the security measures that's in place at SAA technical."

Bongani: "Can this battle be won?"

Aviation security expert: "Yes, it can. But it requires a rethink of the way they do things at the moment. It requires ethics to be injected at high levels, it's no good having people at high level saying, 'let's do it the right way', when they themselves have got their own interest which conflict completely with doing it the right way."

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