‘PRESS RELEASE

**OR Tambo is emerging as the continent’s ‘narco’ airport**

**29 January: Johannesburg and Hong Kong**

Nearly 20% of all people arrested in Hong Kong airport in 2018 and 2019 for the possession of illegal substances brought drugs from Johannesburg via South Africa’s OR Tambo airport, according to Hong Kong prison chaplain John Wotherspoon, who is in South Africa currently raising awareness around the recent surge in air-trafficking via Africa’s biggest and busiest airport.

Wotherspoon is calling for improved airport security, the investigation of drug syndicates, and for the South African Government to negotiate a Prisoner Transfer Agreement with willing Hong Kong authorities.

According to Hong Kong Customs and Excise department data, 2 people who had boarded in OR Tambo were arrested in Hong Kong Airport in 2016, whereas in 2018 the total had risen to 9, and last year 11 individuals from OR Tambo were arrested in Hong Kong, including two South African Airways flight attendants.

‘All of those arrested boarded in Johannesburg brought quantities of cocaine ranging from around 500g to as much 12 kilograms, and all who admit guilt report that the drugs were given to them by members of Nigerian syndicates operating with a presence in Johannesburg and Hong Kong,’ Wotherspoon says.

Similar patterns are identifiable in other air corridors. According to Patricia Gerber of the NGO South Africans Locked Up in Foreign Countries, 100% of the 100 male foreigners arrested in Mauritius airport since 2017 and incarcerated or remanded in custody on the island of Mauritius brought drugs via OR Tambo airports. ‘That’s just the men, at least 15 of the women arrested in Mauritius flew from OR Tambo,’ Gerber says, adding that almost all were arrested for being in possession of heroin, having largely been recruited by Nigerian syndicates.

Wotherspoon says there is a security problem at OR Tambo.

‘The prisoners say that getting through OR Tambo was easy, but Hong Kong airport by contrast has the most sophisticated detection systems in the world,’ he says.

Between 2010 and 2015, the highest number of air-mules into Hong Kong came via Tanzania’s Julius Nyerere Airport and Kenya’s Jomo Kenyatta Airport, but these airports have tightened their security and in the last two years almost all of the Kenyan and Tanzanian air-mules arrested in Hong Kong brought drugs through Ethiopia’s Addis Ababa Bole airport. Wotherspoon, who met with security role players in Ethiopian, Kenya and Tanzania before flying to South Africa, says that, ‘Addis Ababa Bole is the OR Tambo of the north, but where Addis lacks scanning technology, is understaffed and has no sniffer dogs, OR Tambo has no excuse for its poor security performance.’

According to South Africa’s Department of International Relations and Cooperation (DIRCO), 790 South Africans were incarcerated abroad as of 30 November 2019, up from 696 in June 2017. 71% of those incarcerated are serving sentences for drug-related offences. However, of the 46 South Africans locked up in Hong Kong, 44 are for drug-related offences, and all of the 31 South Africans locked up in Mainland China prisons are in for drug-related offences.

‘Air-trafficking has been a major South African problem for well over a decade, with Nigerian syndicates boldly recruiting both South African and non-South African mules in various parts of the country,’ says Dr Marcel van der Watt, a former investigator with South Africa’s Directorate for Priority Crime Investigation, who now teaches and conducts research in the Department of Police Practice at the University of South Africa.

‘The authorities have consistently failed to respond whenever this issue is raised, and it is a massive indictment of this failure that a prison chaplain from Hong Kong has travelled here on his holiday to urge action,’ van der Watt says, adding that if South Africa’s authorities paid attention, the individuals apprehended abroad and the cases built against them by foreign authorities could provide vital information about the criminal networks operating within South Africa, the recruitment strategies these networks are using and the routes that are commonly used to transport illegal goods.

Glory Matipile, founder of the NGO Baagi Ba South Africa, says that Nigerian syndicates operating in the West Rand area of Gauteng Province target the vulnerable. ‘Increasingly, the strategy of the syndicates is to post job advertisements on social media platforms. It is a tragedy that many of those arrested and convicted are mothers or elderly individuals, who spend years disconnected from their children and families,’ she says.

The typical sentence handed down by Hong Kong courts for air-trafficking offences is 24 years, with time off for good behavior, and a further discount for sincerely assisting the authorities with their investigations. ‘However, in China and other Asian contexts, drug mules face the death penalty,’ says Wotherspoon.

Gerber says that many South Africans locked up in foreign countries, ‘would gladly return to serve out their sentences at home in order to see their children and families, but that this opportunity is not available to them because South Africa has established no prisoner transfer agreements (PTA) with other countries.'

In recent years, the South African government, through the Southern African Development Community (SADC), has developed and advocated the Draft Protocol on Interstate Transfer of Foreign Prisoners. The protocol is an umbrella agreement that encourages bilateral agreements between member states for the repatriation of citizens held in prisons overseas. According to Brigadier Logan Maistry, deputy commissioner in the Department of Correctional Services’ intergovernmental relations unit, action on PTAs has stalled because only Angola, Madagascar, Namibia, Lesotho and South Africa submitted inputs to the draft protocol.

Baagi Ba and South Africans Locked Up in Foreign Countries believe this is no excuse.

‘Hong Kong has PTAs with many other governments, the blockage is on the side of the South Africa. This is an area where the South African Government has an opportunity to do something really humane for their citizens locked up abroad, many of who are victims of abusive syndicates,’ says Wotherspoon.

Van der Watt insists that, from conversations with students doing research and active police investigators, to drug dealers and sentenced human traffickers, the message is clear: ‘The drug trade is a lucrative one, and everyone demands their piece of the cake, including public servants. Largely naïve and vulnerable individuals are both the vectors and the casualties.’

**ENDS**

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