

'Lax security' at OR Tambo airport translates to 'rise in drug busts abroad'

By **ERNEST MABUZA** - 29 January 2020



SAPS officers conducting a search between two baggage conveyor belts at OR Tambo International Airport during the festive season. A Hong Kong prison chaplain says several international airports are seeing an unprecedented rise in drug trafficking cases where product was moved from OR Tambo.

Image: OR Tambo International Airport

Several international airports have seen an unprecedented rise in drug trafficking cases via Johannesburg's OR Tambo International Airport, according to a report on Wednesday by organisations Baagi Ba and Locked Up in A Foreign Country.

Hong Kong prison chaplain John Wotherspoon alleged that 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 OR Tambo.

According to Hong Kong Customs and Excise department data, two people who had boarded in OR Tambo were arrested in Hong Kong Airport in 2016.

The number of people arrested, having flown from OR Tambo, increased to nine in 2018 and 11 last year. Among those arrested last year included two [South African Airways flight attendants](#).

Wotherspoon, who is in SA to raise awareness about the recent surge in air-trafficking via one of Africa's busiest airports, said those arrested boarded in Johannesburg and brought quantities of cocaine ranging from about 500g to as much 12kg.

It was not only Hong Kong which had registered arrests coming from OR Tambo International Airport.

Patricia Gerber, the head of advocacy organisation South Africans Locked Up in Foreign Countries, said all the 100 male foreigners arrested in Mauritius's Sir Seewoosagur Ramgoolam Airport since 2017 and incarcerated or remanded in custody in Mauritius, had brought drugs via OR Tambo airport.

Wotherspoon said all those who admitted guilt reported that the drugs were given to them by members of Nigerian syndicates operating with a presence in Johannesburg and Hong Kong.

He called for improved airport security, the investigation of drug syndicates, and for the SA government to negotiate a prisoner transfer agreement with Hong Kong authorities.

"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," Wotherspoon said.

Between 2010 and 2015, the most drug mules flying into Hong Kong came via Tanzania's Julius Nyerere Airport and Kenya's Jomo Kenyatta Airport. However these airports 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.

"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," Wotherspoon said.

According to SA's department of international relations and co-operation (Dirco), 790 South Africans were incarcerated abroad as of November 30 last year.

Dirco said 71% of those are serving sentences for drug-related offences.

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 jail for drug-related offences.

Glory Matipile, founder of the NGO Baagi Ba SA, said Nigerian syndicates operating in the West Rand targeted the vulnerable.

“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,” Matipile said.