Massive cocaine bust, Thai women arrested

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Police seized a whopping 28 kilograms of cocaine with an estimated street value of at least US$1.4 million over the past two days after searching the bags of two suspicious passengers at the Phnom Penh International Airport, officials said yesterday.

Adding to a list of major inbound drug busts in the Kingdom during the past week, officers arrested two Thai women, Rodsiri Rungeiwa, 24, on Monday and fellow national Cha Ereedagorn, 35, yesterday, according to an airport police official who asked not to be named.

The two women have been accused of concealing more than 14 kilograms of cocaine each in their
baggage, which they checked in before boarding flights in Brazil.

“These are certainly the biggest cases of cocaine being confiscated at the airport this year,” the police official said.

The latest haul follows the arrest of Thai woman Eigean Sod Utsanee, 20, who was detained at the airport on Monday after police allegedly discovered nearly five kilograms of methamphetamines – believed to have originated in Ghana – in her luggage.

Another two Thai women, Varangkran A Phomdee, 29, and her alleged accomplice, Tangboo Ketkarn, 31, were charged in Phnom Penh Municipal Court on Saturday with possessing, transporting and trafficking more than three kilograms of cocaine, which police believe came from Ecuador via Singapore, following their arrest at the airport last Tuesday.

Major General Khieu Saman, director of the anti-drug department at the Ministry of Interior, said the cases of Rungeiwa and Ereedagorn seemed connected and police would continue to investigate whether the women had links with other suspects detained in the past week.

“We believe [Rodsiri and Cha] were part of a network of regional drug traffickers that were trying to transport the drugs to Thailand,” he said.

David Harding, deputy director of the social support NGO Friends International, said he was “gobsmacked on a number of levels” by the scale of the cocaine busts, which were unheard of in Cambodia, and the audacity of the smugglers.

“That’s, what, you’re talking about 50 US grand a kilo minimum. That’s a lot of coke,” he said. “For people to literally pack large amounts of drugs into luggage and try to get it through security does seem kind of naïve somehow, when we’re talking about that level of investment it just seems a little careless.”

Harding said the large-scale drug busts over the past few days begged the question how much and how often drugs had been trafficked through the airport previously and whether any recent changes had been made to airport security.

Olivier Lermet, country manager for the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, said it appeared cocaine traffickers were setting their sights on Southeast Asia due to its high population of young people and their increasing income levels.

“This said, cocaine is clearly a much less important threat compared to amphetamine-type stimulants, [which are] by far the most consumed and trafficked illicit substance in Cambodia,” he said.

Lermet said drug-trafficking groups from Africa, particularly countries in the continent’s west, were major players in trafficking cocaine from South America to Southeast Asia – with Thailand a common
According to our information, most of what enters Cambodia is then trafficked onwards,” he said. “[These organisations] also send cocaine to a number of countries in the region, including Cambodia, in parcel post.”

The unnamed airport police official who spoke to the Post yesterday said he and his fellow officers were now trying to determine how such big concealments of cocaine could make it so far without being detected.

“It’s our job to target passengers we believe are suspicious – we cannot go into exactly how we do this – but the question we have is why X-ray machines at the airports they have come from have not detected the cocaine,” he said.

You Sinlong, general secretary of the National Authority Combating Drugs, said he was too busy to comment yesterday, while Ke Kim Yan, chairman of NADC, could not be reached.

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