

Growing Number Of SA Drug Mules Held As New Hub Emerges

Written by Rudi Prinsloo

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Around 30 South Africans are arrested every month in Brazil on drug smuggling charges - a huge increase in the past two years as South Africa emerges as a new hub in the global drug smuggling business.

Friends/Family of South African Detainees Abroad (FOSADA) sounded the alarm Friday over what it called a dramatic increase in the number of South Africans detained in Brazil on suspicion of being drug mules.

"Two years ago, there would have been the order of 10 to 20 a month in Brazil," FOSADSA chairwoman Lucy McDermid told Deutsche Presse-Agentur dpa.

Hundreds of South Africans were currently awaiting trial, serving sentences or were on parole in the South American country, which does not produce coca but shares borders with three countries - Colombia, Bolivia and Peru - that cultivate the crop.

According to McDermid, South African drug mules typically enter Brazil posing as a holiday-maker, via a circuitous route that might involve stop-overs in places such as Switzerland and Bolivia.

After a few days in Brazil they are given luggage containing the cocaine to take back home.

One South African woman said she had been offered 20,000 rand (around 2,000 dollars) for the job, McDermid said.

FOSADA was also noticing an increase in arrests in Asia, in countries such as Thailand, Pakistan and Japan. Late last year, a South African was also arrested in China on drug smuggling charges - the first such case known to FOSADA, which could give no further details on that case.

In Asia, hash, heroin and amphetamines are the drugs usually being smuggled.

From South Africa, the drugs travel to Europe and other destinations by land, air or sea, with the national carrier, South African Airways (SAA), emerging as one conduit earlier this year.

In two separate incidents in January and February, SAA crew members were arrested at London's Heathrow airport, on arrival from Johannesburg, after drugs (cocaine and hash in the first case, cocaine alone in the second) were found in crew luggage.

South Africa and southern Africa have long been staging points in the drug smuggling circuit but the growing volume of drugs seized point to an increased role, says Peter Gastro, director of the Cape Town office of the Institute for Security Studies.

"Southern Africa is conveniently located between key drug supply points in the East (Asia) and

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the West (South America)," he notes.

But compared with West Africa, where drug smuggling has exploded, Southern Africa is still the "tail-end of the alternative (cocaine) smuggling route" from South America to Europe and the US via Africa, he says.

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