

Criminals aim to make big money in a guns for drugs swap

High-powered firearms in Queensland gun stores and school cadet armouries are being targeted by criminals aiming to make big money swapping them for Papua New Guinea cannabis. Federal Agent Gary Wood took part in one raid which netted cannabis bound for the Australian drug market. This feature was published on November 24, 1996 and is printed courtesy of Brisbane's *Sunday Mail*.



Part of a cannabis haul from PNG

Criminals stealing high-powered guns from Queensland gun stores and school cadet armouries are making fortunes swapping them for Papua New Guinea cannabis.

The profits are enormous and explain the rash of break and enters in Brisbane recently where large quantities of guns have been stolen.

Investigators in Papua New Guinea and Australia yesterday confirmed that many of the weapons ending up in the hands of native freedom fighters and criminals came from Brisbane.

Federal Agent Gary Wood said yesterday: "There have been arrests in Papua New Guinea recently where criminals have admitted that they had swapped cannabis for guns acquired by break and enters in Australia, and particularly Queensland".

Investigators said the black market for weapons in Papua New Guinea was "red hot" because of fierce demand from several groups. The Papua New Guinea Government was talking about enforcing similar gun bans to Australia's new legislation in the face of the country's shocking crime rate, with violent crime and murders still on an upward spiral.

Weapons were reaching the Free Papua Movement known as the OPM, who were waging a guerrilla war in the Irian Jaya (West Irian) bush, trying to gain independence from Indonesia.

"Other weapons are falling into the hands of tribal factions in the highlands who have been hating and killing each other with bows and arrows and machetes for centuries," an investigator said.

"And others in the market are the 'raskol' gangsters who do their raping and pillaging in the townships and cities.

"Add to that there is an election in Papua New Guinea due early next year [1997] and elections up here can be very lively affairs.

"The demand is so hot that an ordinary old shotgun worth \$300 or \$400 in Brisbane can be swapped for three or four kilograms of

Assault weapons go north

TWO gun raids in Brisbane and the Gold Coast in the past couple of weeks added to the haul of stolen weapons worth millions of dollars on the Papua New Guinea drug black market. Eight semi-automatic or self-loading rifles and 12,000 rounds of ammunition were stolen when thieves smashed their way into a firearms store on the Gold Coast on November 13.

One of the guns, a Colt AR15 rifle was the type used by Martin Bryant in the Port Arthur massacre. Another, a Springfield M14 rifle was similar to that used in the 1987 Hoddle Street massacre in Melbourne. Other guns stolen included AK47 rifles and one with a 100-shot, drum magazine. The Soviet-made AR47 assault rifle is used by millions of regular soldiers, terrorists and guerrillas around the world. Ten crates of AK47 ammunition, each holding 1200 rounds, also were stolen.

The guns were about to be destroyed as part of the Federal Government's gun buy-back scheme.

Earlier this month, Army officials ordered the removal of all firearms from 27 school Cadet units in southeast Queensland.

This followed the theft of six SLR rifles and four .22 rifles from the Camp Hill State School cadet armoury.

Last year police reported hundreds of weapons had been stolen in break-ins of private homes and gun shops and criminals seemed to be targeting members of gun clubs.

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locally-grown cannabis, which is worth eight grand a kilo in Brisbane.

“So one shotgun can yield more than \$30,000.”

Papua New Guinea’s National Narcotics Bureau confirmed the guns-for-drugs trade, but said it was hard to determine the scale because of the big coastlines involved. “We have no way of keeping constant surveillance,” a spokesman said.

A recent National Intelligence Organisation report said the trade usually involved shotguns, handguns and .22 rifles, although there had been instances of military rifles. More of these were expected because of the gun bans in Australia.

The report said there had been a marked increase in the trade in recent years involving “big time” criminals from Australia, especially along the Torres Strait/Western Province border.

The report complains about a severe lack of Customs officials and surveillance equipment both from Papua New Guinea and the Australian side.

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TEAMWORK: From left, Federal Agent Gary Wood, Customs officer Dave Wintrip and Queensland police officer Sergeant Greg Baade.

All aboard for the cannabis run

By Peter Hansen
The Sunday Mail

The only public service former Papua New Guinea Cabinet Minister Clement Eric Hesaboda has done lately has been to demonstrate how simple it is to find people ready to smuggle drugs into Australia.

His case shows that in his poverty-stricken country, volunteers are almost lining up to have a go because it looks so simple to get through our underguarded north.

Hesaboda used to be Finance and Planning Minister in the Fly River Provincial Government in Western PNG before he was sacked for corruption.

So then he set about making a fast dollar smuggling cannabis into Australia.

His startling story was revealed when he pleaded guilty in a Cairns court earlier this month and he is now serving a two-year sentence in a north Queensland jail.

How he went about it should have alarm bells ringing in Canberra.

The background of his case shows there are swarms of poverty-stricken villagers ready to make the hazardous trip across open sea in tiny boats with drugs if it means a few dollars for food for their families.

“In his case he had about 20,000 volunteers to pick from,” said one PNG investigator, referring to the thousands of villagers living like refugees in Daru in the PNG Western Province.

Daru is the main settlement of the Western Province at the mouth of the Fly River.

Now it accommodates about 20,000 people displaced from their homes in scores of villages along the Fly, villages ruined by pollution from the notorious Ok Tedi copper mine.

“These villagers are crowded into there like it was Somalia,” an investigator said. “Daru has the only bank around there, so they all crowd in for their subsistence payments.

“They have no prospects of employment. That was where this bloke Hesaboda set about recruiting his crew to smuggle cannabis into Australia.”

His plan was to make use of “mother ships”—large fishing boats with refrigerated holds that anchor more or less permanently near islands in the middle of Torres Strait to take crayfish catches from fishermen from the nearby island villages.

Torres Strait has more than 150 islands or atolls, but only a few have stores.

Local villagers from these tiny islands use dinghies from these mother ships or their own frail craft to dive for crayfish. They use the