

# West African syndicates tricking Australians into risking death on drug-running missions

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More than two dozen Australians are detained in China on drug smuggling charges, with several facing the death penalty after being lured into becoming drug mules, a 7.30 investigation reveals.

More than two dozen Australians are detained in China on drug smuggling charges, with several facing the death penalty or life in jail after being lured into becoming drug mules, a 7.30 investigation has found.

The Australian Federal Government and Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade have made a series of high-level representations to China this year, troubled by evidence a wave of Australians in Chinese prisons were duped or coerced into smuggling millions of dollars worth of drugs.

Senior Government officials have told 7.30 crime syndicates with their roots in West Africa have scammed or pressured scores of vulnerable people — the frail, elderly, brain-damaged, mentally ill and juvenile — into couriers drugs into Australia through countries with the death penalty.

The 7.30 team has unravelled the inside story of these syndicates, analysed evidence and spoken to drug couriers who say they were scammed into undertaking dangerous journeys through China, Malaysia and the Philippines.

A total of 26 Australians are detained in China on drug smuggling charges.

The Australian Crime Commission (ACC) says dozens of couriers lured by the syndicates have been caught in Australia in the past two years.

"Since 2013, there's been 39 people arrested at the border who have been clearly groomed by these syndicates that are operating offshore," ACC national manager of investigations Richard Grant told 7.30.

Two-thirds of those couriers whose cases have been finalised in the Australian courts were cleared of any wrongdoing.

This year alone, Australia has made 11 representations to China on behalf of nine Australians facing the death penalty there on drugs charges.

Another nine Australians are detained in mainland China on drug related charges or convictions, while eight more are detained in Hong Kong, where the maximum penalty for drug smuggling is life.

## Hong Kong Nine includes four Australians

In Hong Kong, a legal battle is brewing over the fate of four Australians in jail on drug smuggling charges along with five other Westerners, who all claim to have been scammed online by the same syndicate into carrying luggage containing drugs.

Along with a 10th courier, members of the group were caught at Hong Kong airport with a total of \$36 million worth of the drug ice, weighing 29.5 kilograms, hidden in their luggage as they set off for Australia between April 2014 and March 2015.

The Australians are: Western Australian mine worker Kent Walsh, 49, Darwin warehouse worker James Clifford, 62, Melbourne woman Suong Thu Luu, 44, and Melbourne pensioner Joerg Ulitzka, an Australian resident and German citizen.

Walsh was the last to be arrested. He was caught with two kilograms of ice hidden in the soles of shoes in his luggage in March.

The father-of-two's family say he was vulnerable to scammers after suffering brain damage in a car accident six years ago.

"He was in hospital for quite some time, was out of work for 12 months and ever since then, he has never been the same," said Walsh's sister Lisa Barker.

"He has quite a few metal plates and screws in his head and it has really affected his thinking and the way that he analyses situations. His thinking seems clouded."

The cases of eight of the alleged drug couriers came before Hong Kong's High Court on Wednesday, where Judge Kevin Zervos slammed Hong Kong Customs for "unacceptable" delays in analysing crucial evidence.

"One of the concerns that has struck me is that Customs is good at apprehending people who are transporting drugs but does little about the people running the syndicate," Judge Zervos said.

The group's high-profile defence barrister, Gerard McCoy, told the court there was CCTV showing the same Chinese woman delivering a bag containing drugs to each of his clients.

Dr McCoy asked the judge to travel to Australia and the US to interview the Australian Federal Police and American authorities.

"The AFP will definitely have to be questioned," he said. "They are sitting on a mound of evidence."

Australian prison chaplain Father John Wotherspoon has been visiting the four Australians regularly in Hong Kong and said their stories at first sounded like "science fiction or a fairytale".

"Some of them were in contact with internet people for more than a year and being reeled in like a fish and eventually tricked into coming to Hong Kong, and then tricked into carrying a bag back to Australia," Father Wotherspoon said.

"And nearly all of them have the same story: that they were given the bags at the last minute before they had much of a chance to check."

## New York socialite has drug charges dropped

Barrister Gerard McCoy is arguing for the group's cases to be expedited after an 83-year-old New York socialite, Elizabeth Kummerfeld, had her drug smuggling charges dropped in Hong Kong in April.

Ms Kummerfeld, the widow of former New York deputy mayor and News America president Donald Kummerfeld, was caught at Hong Kong airport a year earlier en route to Australia with two kilograms of ice in the lining of a backpack.

"I was innocently tricked into carrying these two kilos of ice to Australia but I did not know it was there and that I was carrying it," Ms Kummerfeld told 7.30.



Western Australian mine worker Kent Walsh is part of the Hong Kong Nine facing drug smuggling charges. (Credit: ABC licensed)

"I didn't touch it and I didn't even know what 'ice' was. To me, 'ice' was something you put in a Coca-Cola to drink it."

At age 83 and legally blind, Ms Kummerfeld is one of the world's oldest and most connected drug smugglers.

She raised hundreds of millions of dollars with actress Elizabeth Taylor as co-founders of the American Foundation for AIDS Research in the 1980s but later fell from grace when she was fined for her involvement in a Ponzi scheme.

Years later, Ms Kummerfeld lost her vast life savings to Nigerian email scammers posing as fundraisers for humanitarian projects.

In an elaborate email con, she was convinced by a man posing as a Nigerian banker to travel from New York to Hong Kong and onto Australia to collect and deliver what she was told would be contracts for a multi-million-dollar compensation payment, but was instead handed a backpack lined with drugs in Hong Kong.

ACC national manager of investigations Richard Grant said drug courier scams like the one that lured Elizabeth Kummerfeld could be highly sophisticated.

"When they've got somebody on the hook, then they've got a really good way of reeling people in," he said.

"Some of them are through romance scams, some through business opportunities, some through simply ingratiating themselves with people who are travelling, but the bottom line is that this is exploitation of people who are either naive or vulnerable."

### Intellectually disabled among drug smugglers

Several other Australians in jail for drug smuggling in China claim to be the victims of scams, including former Adelaide jockey Anthony Bannister, intellectually disabled Brisbane man Ibrahim Jalloh, and Bengali Sherriff.

In June, 7.30 revealed disability pensioner John Warwick died in a Chinese prison hospital (<http://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-06-18/crime-syndicate-duping-elderly-into-trafficking-drugs/6555984>) last year, where he was detained on suspicion of smuggling drugs after being lured to the city of Guangzhou by online scammers.

In Malaysia, Australian grandmother Maria Elvira Pinto Esposto was arrested at Kuala Lumpur Airport en route from China to Melbourne with more than a kilogram of ice last year. She claims to be the victim of a romance scam.

Human rights lawyer Craig Tuck, who represents several alleged drug smugglers claiming to be the victims of such scams, said the syndicates were playing with people's lives.

"Australians and New Zealanders are attractive to the cartels because the Australian or a New Zealand passport is an access or a gateway between countries," he said.

"We're seeing international organisations that are recruiting people through deceptive practices in a systematic brutal way with the ultimate aim to exploit them.

"It's breathtaking that people are prepared to use other people, to exploit other people, to recruit them, to deceive them, to do things which can result in a death penalty and then quickly replace that person in the supply chain."

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