

ISSUE 8

CLEARED AND READY TO FLY

The implementation of the Regulated Air Cargo Agent Regime aims to tighten the security screening of outgoing air cargo on commercial passenger flights, ensuring a comprehensive defence system against potential threats.

In March 2003, a bomb exploded in the cargo hold of a Thai Airways B737 at Don Muang International Airport in Bangkok. The incident, one of the rare occasions where a bomb was planted in the cargo hold of a commercial plane in recent years, led aviation authorities to take a closer look at air cargo security in passenger aircraft. The International Air Transport Association (IATA) pegs the region's air cargo industry to expand by 18.5 per cent in 2010, prompting the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) to advocate that states adopt more stringent supply-chain security measures for their air cargo industries, as these have become potential terrorist targets in recent years.

THE FRONTLINE OF SAFETY

To beef up its air cargo security, Singapore established the Regulated Air Cargo Agent Regime (RCAR), a joint initiative between the Civil Aviation Authority of Singapore (CAAS) and the Singapore Police Force (SPF). The initiative's success hinges on air cargo agents' voluntary participation for inspections that adhere to cargo security standards and protocols laid out by the ICAO.

The framework requires each regulated air cargo agent (RCA) to submit a Security Programme (SP) that specifies the measures and procedures in handling, clearing, storing, securing and transporting cargo. The process starts from the time the cargo is accepted until it is lodged at the air freight terminal or handed over to another RCA. The SP will also specify the standards for cargo protection, including where it is stored. RCAs also have to possess valid industry-recognised security certification such as the Transported Asset Protection Association (TAPA), Customs-Trade Partnership Against Terrorism (C-TPAT) or the Secure Trade Partnership (STP) to make sure that they comply with security requirements.

SUPPLY-CHAIN SECURITY

As RCAR's implementing body, the Airport Police Division (APD) works closely with the Cargo Terminal Operators (CTO) to make sure cargo that board commercial passenger aircraft has been checked. Equipped with Explosive Trace Detector technology and X-Ray machines, the CTO screens outgoing cargo for explosives, weapons, contraband items and anything that could interfere with airplane operations. Other security screening measures include physical checks, sniffer dogs and decompression chambers.

The APD also ensures that RCAs implement their security protocol in its entirety. Sam Tan Hong Ti, Deputy Superintendent of Police, Security Regulatory Branch, APD said, "The SP must be carried out on the ground. Some of the things we look out for are, for example, unattended cargo or unguarded premises."

SETTING INTERNATIONAL STANDARDS

As an overseer of the international aviation landscape, ICAO has been encouraging states to tighten their supply-chain management. ICAO's Annex 17 provides a set of Standards and Recommended Practices (SARPs) for member-states to consider when establishing their own civil aviation security programmes. Aside from providing SARPs, ICAO helps states to identify deficiencies and provide suitable recommendations for their security systems through its Universal Security Audit Programme. These audits also provide useful feedback on the provisions of Annex 17 to ensure a secure supply chain.

The Future of Air Cargo Security

Phillip Mah, Division Head of Aviation Security, CAAS, is convinced that the implementation of the RCAR will lead to a more secure environment for both passengers and cargo, saying, "Steps have been taken to make sure that passengers are not adversely affected by the additional security screening of onboard cargo. The seamless security process also ensures that the passengers can travel with peace of mind, not just from terrorist threats but also from the elimination of risks such as transmittable diseases through animals, plants and food items."