SECURING OUR BORDERS: THE MEASURES IMPLEMENTED BY THE MAURITIAN CUSTOMS TO BOLSTER BORDER SECURITY

Sameer Dulmeer* and Mohammad Imteaz Auckburally**

ABSTRACT
During these past few years, Mauritius has witnessed an upsurge in drug trafficking and the illicit entry of narcotics on its shores. A 2012 report by the International Narcotics Control Board (INCB) cited Mauritius as one of the top drug consuming countries in Africa. Yet, over the years the situation has further deteriorated. The scourges of drugs have reached such alarming proportions that in 2015 the Government considered it imperative to establish a commission of inquiry to investigate and report on all aspects of drug trafficking in Mauritius. The commission is currently chaired by a former Judge of the Supreme Court of Mauritius and its responsibilities extend to probing into the availability of new types of drugs, including synthetic and designer drugs, in Mauritius and the linkages between drug trafficking, money laundering, terrorist financing and other crimes.

At the level of the MRA Customs, a drug interdiction strategy was devised in 2012 where various initiatives, strategies and policy measures were implemented with a view to track down the importation of illicit substances, precursors, narcotic drugs and psychotropic substances. The authority has also invested massively in the acquisition of the latest-of-the art machines and technology. It must be said that all these efforts and investment are starting to pay off. During these few years, many cases of malpractices were foiled and successfully uncovered by the MRA Customs. Nonetheless, the battle against drug trafficking is still far from over. Traffickers are always on the look out to innovate new smuggling techniques and quite often are steps ahead of the enforcement authority.

1. INTRODUCTION
The pivotal role that Customs plays in facilitating legitimate trade and leading effective border control is not a new notion, and has been echoed for years. Yet, amidst dynamic and rapidly changing world economic order, Customs authorities, standing at the forefront of trade, have been confronted with many emerging challenges and formidable tasks. The crescendo and recurrences of terrorists’ threats and attacks have further shifted international focus to enforcement and enhanced border control and prioritised these roles over other important Customs functions.
Mauritius is no exception. Riding on the globalization and new technology waves, the local nationals are increasingly being exposed to new practices and lifestyles where drug intake has become a norm. It must be said that, in recent times, the problem of drug abuse and illicit trafficking has become a matter of serious concern for Mauritius. Even social workers are raising concern on the use of hard drugs (opium, heroin and codeine) by teenagers who have barely entered the age of puberty. It has been reported that, on average, the first shoot for a boy takes place at the age of 13 while for girls the first hard drug-taking goes to 16 years. A United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime report, ranked Mauritius fourth in the world for opiate use per capita in 2010. Moreover, Mauritius is also cited by the United States as a destination for child sex tourism: an estimated 2,600 children are trafficked internally to fuel the trade. The negative publicity has the potential to seriously impact on Mauritius tourism sector, which has often marketed the island as a paradise resort along beautiful coastlines. In fact, the direct contribution of the tourism sector to GDP was MUR36.0bn (USD1.0bn), 8.4% of total GDP in 2016 and is forecast to rise by 2.5% in 2017, and to rise by 4.7% pa, from 2017-2027, to MUR58.1bn (USD1.6bn), 9.2% of total GDP in 2027. The drug and alcohol abuse problems have trickled down to other sectors of the economy and have been taunted as being a key cause to some of the crimes and social welfare problems. It must be said that the Mauritius government has been actively promoting the Island as a tourism destination against stiff rivalry from Seychelles and the Maldives. Nonetheless, all these efforts could prove futile if the drug problems are not tackled first. In recognising the magnitude of the drug problem, the government in 2015 established a commission of inquiry to investigate and report on all aspects of Drug Trafficking in Mauritius.

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2 Ibid


with a view to tackle this problem at its root level.\textsuperscript{6} The commission is currently chaired by a former Judge of the Supreme Court of Mauritius and its responsibilities extend to probing into the availability of new types of drugs, including synthetic and designer drugs, in Mauritius and the linkages between drug trafficking, money laundering, terrorist financing and other crimes. Likewise, at the border security level, the MRA Customs has implemented a series of reform programmes which aim to reinforce security and tighten border control in order to curb the proliferation of illicit trade involving money, goods or value gained from illegal and otherwise unethical activities. The scope of illegal trading activities under the measures extend to trade in illegal drugs and illicit substances that cause health or safety risks, intellectual property infringements, smuggling, human trafficking, environmental crime, and a variety of illicit financial flows.

2. THE MEASURES IMPLEMENTED BY THE MRA CUSTOMS

Customs officers are the first line of security barriers of every country’s defence against transnational crimes and illegitimate transactions. Therefore, it is indispensible for the authority to implement fitting measures to buttress the capacity of Customs so that this line of defence is not penetrated thereby endangering the country’s security. To that end, the MRA Customs has implemented a series of measures designed to reinforce its border security and keep at bay all illicit undertaking.

2.1. The ‘Stop Drug Platform’

Public engagement forms an essential feature of any fight against drug trafficking and law enforcement agencies need to work hand in hand with the general public to tackle the vice. It has been noted that without the active participation and communion of the population the battle against drug trafficking is a forlorn one. Bearing that important aspect in mind, the MRA Customs came up with the ‘Stop Drug Platform’, which was launched at the end of 2016. Through this electronic platform, the general public may share relevant information on drug trafficking in total anonymity. The information sent is kept confidential and is analysed by a dedicated team at MRA Customs for further enquiry. A dedicated link (i.e., stopdrug@mra.mu) and a hotline 8958 have been put in place to enable the citizens to anonymously report cases of drug trafficking and smuggling.

The initial results obtained through this initiative have been very encouraging. However, due to the very sensitive and highly confidential nature, information and data could not be made available to the general public.

2.2. The Introduction of X-Ray Scanning Equipment

During the World War II, containers were purposely invented for military soldiers to efficiently move equipment without having to involve many men in the loading and unloading of ships. Nowadays, containers have become the lifeblood of global trade in helping the distribution of goods while at the same time slashing down substantially operational costs. Nonetheless, containers have also turned out to be astute ways for delinquents to smuggle drugs, contraband and illicit goods. In short, containers have become the victim of their own success – they provide transgressors with the same benefits enjoyed by ocean carriers and shippers: efficiency and security. Thus, with a view to secure the movement of global trade in such a way that does not impede but, on the contrary, facilitates the movement of that trade, the World Customs Organization (WCO) developed in 2007 the WCO SAFE Framework of Standards. This WCO SAFE Framework consists of four core elements and one of which recommends Customs administrations to perform an outbound inspection of high-risk containers and cargo, preferably using non-intrusive detection equipment such as large-scale X-ray machines and radiation detectors. Major Customs administrations around the world have already implemented X-ray inspection systems for cargo containers and nowadays X-ray scanners have now become a standard feature in many ports. The resounding success of X-ray scanning systems in other

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jurisdictions prompted the MRA Customs to invest massively in the latest state-of-the-art technology with a view of hitting two objectives with one stone – providing hassle-free and quick Customs release of legitimate goods while at the same time efficiently tracking down smuggled, undeclared and harmful consignments. For instance, since 2006 two Nuctech x-ray container scanners became fully operational in the port and airport and thereafter in 2008/09 four additional scanners were acquired and put to use at the passenger arrival hall, courier hub, parcel post office and ferry terminal. These x-ray scanners proved to be very effective in meeting the twin objectives of improving the cargo dwell time and uncovering cases of malpractices. The performance of these x-ray scanning devices is shown in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Number of Container / Consignment Scanned</th>
<th>Number of suspected Container / Consignment</th>
<th>Number of offences detected</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2006/07</td>
<td>24,383</td>
<td>1,021</td>
<td>108</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007/08</td>
<td>51,724</td>
<td>1,499</td>
<td>266</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008/09</td>
<td>52,021</td>
<td>1,896</td>
<td>396</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>61,821</td>
<td>1,914</td>
<td>411</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>55,385</td>
<td>1,499</td>
<td>157</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>53,040</td>
<td>1,377</td>
<td>135</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>54,565</td>
<td>791</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>60,439</td>
<td>1,216</td>
<td>266</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2015</td>
<td>148,866</td>
<td>2,288</td>
<td>574</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016</td>
<td>342,254</td>
<td>5,193</td>
<td>1,519</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016/17*</td>
<td>373,916</td>
<td>7,093</td>
<td>1,134</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: MRA’s Annual Reports – various issues  
* Relates to 12 months period July 2016 to June 2017
The increasing trend in the number of container/consignment scanned, number of suspected container/consignment and number of offences detected, as indicated in Table 1, could be explained by the fact that the MRA Customs started with only two scanners in 2006 (Port and Airport). Thereafter, during the year 2008/09 four additional scanners were acquired and put to use at the courier hub, parcel post and in Rodrigues Island. In addition, eight scanners located at other strategic places are being manned by the MRA Customs. Nonetheless, all the scanning exercises are performed on a risk-assessment basis as it is impossible for the MRA Customs to examine all the 300,000 to 400,000 containers\(^9\) which it has to handle on average every year. The rising number of offences uncovered through the use of these x-ray scanning is testimony of the efficiency of this non-intrusive instrument in shielding the borders from illicit entry of hazardous goods. These benefits have further translated into the improved global ranking, with the 2017 World Bank’s Ease of Doing Business\(^10\) index placing Mauritius as the top Sub-Saharan African country, occupying the 45\(^{th}\) (out of 138 countries) slot worldwide.

2.3. Sniffer Dogs (K9) Unit
Drug traffickers have adopted astute ways of introducing illicit opiate substances. Gone are those days when drugs were stuffed into teddy bears or strapped to body parts to evade detection by Customs officers. Nowadays, due to their limitless wealth, traffickers are able to employ the

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finest brains and use the most modern equipment and technology to produce, transport and distribute their drugs.\textsuperscript{11} Therefore, in order to keep them at bay, the authorities have to adopt insightful techniques as well. To this end, in 2004, a drug detector dog unit – which is known as the K9 Unit – was introduced, with the assistance of the French Customs, to support the then Customs Drug Unit (CDU) in combating illicit inflows of narcotics. The unit initially started with only 4 dogs brought from France which were called on to operate at different entry and exit points at the port, airport, parcel posts and courier hub. The excellent performance of the K9 Unit prompted the MRA Customs to reinforce the team with the acquisition of three additional drug detector dogs from South Africa in 2010. The MRA further received assistance from the South African Revenue Service (SARS) in training the dog handlers on detecting illicit drugs concealed in passengers’ luggage, cargo, aircrafts, vessels and postal consignments. The main achievement of the K9 Unit is detailed in Figure 1.

![Figure 1: Narcotics seizures made by the K9 Unit](image)

\textit{Source: MRA’s Annual Reports – various issues}

In contrast, the total drugs and narcotics seizures intercepted by MRA Customs are shown in Table 2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Value (Rs Million)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2015</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016/17</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\textit{Table 2: Total Drug Seizures effected by MRA Customs (Including the K9 Unit)}

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Details</th>
<th>Year 2010</th>
<th>Year 2011</th>
<th>Year 2012</th>
<th>Year 2013</th>
<th>Year 2014</th>
<th>Year 2015</th>
<th>Year 2016</th>
<th>Year 2016/17</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Heroin</td>
<td>36.1</td>
<td>34.8</td>
<td>33.7</td>
<td>177.5</td>
<td>177.7</td>
<td>160.6</td>
<td>148.8</td>
<td>2,672.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hashish/Cannabis</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>7.0</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>17.8</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>38.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subutex</td>
<td>31.7</td>
<td>10.4</td>
<td>9.2</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychotropic substances/Ecstasy</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cocaine</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>19.2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other narcotics</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>19.3</td>
<td>3.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td><strong>36.8</strong></td>
<td><strong>66.6</strong></td>
<td><strong>44.4</strong></td>
<td><strong>193.7</strong></td>
<td><strong>180.6</strong></td>
<td><strong>178.5</strong></td>
<td><strong>170.4</strong></td>
<td><strong>2,733.8</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: MRA’s Annual Reports – various issues  
*Relates to 12 months period July 2016 to June 2017*

When put into perspective, it can be deduced that since the year 2012, on average almost 80% of all drugs and narcotics seized by the MRA Customs were from the assistance of the K9 Unit. This demonstrates the important place which the K9 Unit occupies at the MRA Customs in combatting the illicit entry of narcotics and drugs. For these reasons the authority is seriously considering reinforcing the K9 Unit so as to have a total of about 20 dogs trained in narcotics and currency detection.

Nonetheless, one of the main challenges to the expansion of the program relates to the costs of acquiring the specially trained sniffer dogs and managing the program. Along with the dogs, the MRA Customs also need to invest substantially in training the Customs officers to act as dog handlers, who also need to be retained in that capacity in the long term. Moreover, there MRA Customs also needs to provide specific kennels both at the dog handler's residence and deployment posting. Therefore, though there is a willingness to expand the K9 Unit, the MRA’s plans may have to be delayed due to financial and logistic constraints.
2.4. The “nCEN” Platform

Nowadays, with the evolution of technology and social networking, drug trafficking and organised crimes have transcended borders and have international ramifications. Therefore, it is imperative for Customs administration to share intelligence and disseminate timely information in a secured environment among their peers for efficient border control. With this in mind, the WCO has developed the Customs Enforcement network (CEN), which became operational in 2000.\(^\text{12}\) The CEN is a web-based communication system permitting a closed user group of officers to exchange messages via encrypted channels, in real time, for the duration of an operation or project.

In an effort to liaise with partner agencies the MRA Customs implemented the National Customs Enforcement Network (nCEN) platform in 2012, which is endowed with a centralized database enabling it to manage and capture timely information relating to offences like drugs, Intellectual Property Rights (IPR), tobacco, tax and duty evasion. These critical information are, therefore, disseminated to other Customs officers in a timely manner in order to enable them to perform

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their intelligence work in the most efficient way. It must also be added that Mauritius has been the pioneer country in the ESA region to establish the nCEN since it was elected as a pilot country by the WCO Secretariat in 2008. Since then, Mauritius has been the nCEN regional leader and the Chairperson of the Customs Enforcement Management Team (CENMAT) for the year 2016. To that end, a large number of Customs officers from the MRA have received training on how to operate the system and its application and functionalities. It must be said that the nCEN has served as an effective risk management tool in formulating proactive actions to combat illicit trade.

However, a challenging area for the MRA Customs is on maintaining the successive rotation of competent officials. The MRA has to constantly identify and train capable officers to operate that platform, especially after each and every periodical transfer and rotation of officers within the organisation. The MRA Customs has yet to devise a proper succession plan for the platform in order to ensure that it is managed effectively and meets its objectives.

2.5. The Risk Management Section at the MRA Customs
In 2009 the MRA created the Risk Management Section (RMS) with a view to better cope with the risks of commercial fraud, smuggling and drug trafficking. The section, which is fully dedicated to departmental risks, analyses feedback from all MRA sections and gathers intelligence from third parties (i.e.; Passport and Immigration Office, company database,
National Transport Authority, and other enforcement authorities) to formulate selectivity criteria and makes recommendations to the management team. The RMS also regularly posts on the MRA Customs intranet intelligence bulletins, alerts and wrong classifications reports for the benefits of all Customs officers, especially those at the cargo examination locations. Recently, the Mauritius Network Services (MNS) was approached to develop a Risk Management Software so as to enhance the existing risk management module in the Customs Management System (CMS). It is worth mentioning that through the assistance of the RMS, the MRA Customs has been able to juggle with the exigencies of providing expeditious clearance of legitimate goods while at the same time reinforcing security requirements.

2.6. Fast Interception Patrol Boat

It is evident that Mauritius, being surrounded by sea, needs to reinforce its sea interdiction capacity so as to ensure optimum control of illicit movement of goods and people. Recently, an upswing in drug trafficking through sea routes were noted where consignments of drugs were thrown overboard from ferries coming from Madagascar and some were relayed to the shore by small speed boats from coastal regions near the harbour. Such shrewd actions were evading both Customs and other border enforcement agencies’ vigilance. To address this issue, the MRA Customs has acquired a fast interception patrol boat which became operational in March 2016.

13 The National Transport Authority (NTA) is the transport authority and the public transport licensing agency for Mauritius.
14 Incorporated in 1994, the Mauritius Network Services (MNS) has the mission of streamlining government services to businesses and citizens by designing innovative and effective e-government solutions.
15 The Customs Management System (CMS) is a tailor made software being used by the MRA Customs for the electronic processing of all bills of entry.
Through the regular harbour patrol, MRA Customs has reinforced its surveillance capacity not only around the port area but also beyond to track down drug traffickers and smugglers. The skippers who were recruited in 2015 have also benefitted from adroit training dispensed by the US navy. Nonetheless, more squadrons are needed to efficiently protect Mauritius against piracy, drug and human trafficking, goods smuggling and terrorism as well as small arms trafficking. The recent national budget\textsuperscript{17} has made provision to equip the MRA Customs with additional interceptor boats. Besides, the government has also commissioned into service ten Fast Interceptor Boats (FIBs) from India for the National Coast Guard (NCG). These boats are to be deployed to secure the island nation’s maritime boundaries and perform surveillance duties over the Exclusive Economic Zone.\textsuperscript{18}

2.7. Excise Stamps

On 1\textsuperscript{st} May 2009, the MRA Customs introduced excise stamps on all tobacco products as a measure to curtail down trading in counterfeited cigarettes. In fact, the law\textsuperscript{19} was amended making it mandatory for all cigarettes packs, which are put on sale on the local market, to have a proper tax stamp affixed. The revenue collected on cigarettes prior to the introduction of excise stamps was Rs 2.29 billion.\textsuperscript{20} However, following a hike in the specific duty rate on cigarettes coupled with the introduction of excise stamps, the revenue collected from tobacco rose to Rs 3.69 billion in 2013, representing an increase of 61\%.\textsuperscript{21} The excise stamp met with such success that it even got international recognition through the reward as the Best Design Award in Dubai 2014\textsuperscript{22} and Vienna 2013,\textsuperscript{23} which prompted the MRA Customs to extend its application to alcoholic products in 2013.\textsuperscript{24} Furthermore, in order to ensure full compliance by all operators, the MRA Customs has set up a dedicated mobile Excise Enforcement Team to conduct

\textsuperscript{19} Excise Regulations 1994 (Mauritius) – Part XXIA, Section 99A.
\textsuperscript{21} Ibid.
unannounced visits and onsite audits. These teams are equipped with sophisticated handheld scanners in tracking down fake stamps or other malpractices.

2.8. Operation of CCTV Camera in the Port Area

The port area is a very sensitive and high-risk place which warrants round the clock vigilance. Therefore, the Mauritius Ports Authority (MPA)\textsuperscript{25} has installed Closed-circuit television (CCTV) cameras at strategic locations, including the Customs cargo inspection sheds, x-ray scanner complex, warehouse depots and port exits in 2007.\textsuperscript{26} The MRA Customs are granted access to these on-line camera images that are constantly being monitored by Customs Preventive Officers on a 24/7 basis inside a purpose-built CCTV monitoring room inside the Customs House. This system has reduced the need to station Customs preventive officers at fixed locations where, instead, highly mobile Customs preventive units are now instantly deployed when suspicious activities are detected in the Customs area. In the same vein, and in compliance with international security standards, the number of entry and exit gates at the port has been reduced to only three and the fencing around the port area has been improved. Accessibility to the port and airport areas are now restricted to only those who have a proper valid access pass.

\begin{figure}
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{features_of_excise_stamp.png}
\caption{Features of the excise stamp}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{25} The Mauritius Ports Authority (MPA), which is a parastatal organisation in Mauritius, is the sole regulator and manager of the port and its services.

2.9. Anti-Money Laundering Unit (AMLU)

The MRA Customs has also set up an Anti-Money Laundering Unit (AMLU) in order to track down the illicit movement of currency which may be linked with money laundering and terrorist financing. The law was amended to empower Customs to require all travellers, either entering or leaving Mauritius, with more than Rs 500,000 in cash or Bearer Negotiable Instruments or its equivalent in any foreign currency, to declare that sum to Customs and state its origin and intended use. A traveller who is in transit may also be required to make similar declaration to the MRA Customs. If the Customs officer believes that the disclosure made is false or misleading, and the funds may involve money laundering or the financing of terrorism, the officer may seize the monies and refer the matter to the Police. In addition, the suspect may, on conviction, be liable to a fine not exceeding Rs 500,000 and imprisonment for a term not exceeding 3 years.

2.10. Intellectual Property Rights (IPR) Unit

Mauritius is regarded as a tourist destination where reputed trademarks and branded goods are sold in various malls. Therefore, in order to keep its shores safe from counterfeited goods and protect the interest of the tourism industry, the MRA Customs has been empowered to enforce IPR laws. In order to cope with the exigencies of the business world, the laws were further reinforced in order to allow for effective enforcement of IPR. For instance, through the use of

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“Ex-Officio” powers, the MRA Customs has now been authorized to suspend, on its own initiative, the clearance of goods which are suspected to be counterfeited.

It must be said that there is a well-established link between organized criminal groups and counterfeit products, as the infringement of intellectual property is the favourite method of financing for terrorists.\textsuperscript{29} This generates high illegal profits, which lead to the spread of such crimes and which are also invested in a huge structure of other organised cross-border crimes which are often fatal.\textsuperscript{30}

\textbf{2.11. Weighbridge}

Traditionally, Customs has been using ship or aircraft manifests as the basis for control, admissibility and assessing pre-arrival risk. However, with the evolution of trade, Customs is now compelled to make optimum use of risk management techniques to allow for the immediate release of consignments based on risk indicators among which weight is a critical factor. Consignments with a discrepancy in weight could be subject to special attention as overweight containers could indicate excess and undeclared goods and by extension potential revenue loss to the government. Inaccurate weight data also nullifies the findings of a risk exercise and leads to targeting of wrong consignments. Therefore, to gauge the exact weight of any container, the MRA Customs, in collaboration of the MPA, has already initiated all the procedures for the acquisition and installation of a weighbridge in the Port area. This will be used as a risk


assessment tool in the proper targeting of risky consignments from pre-arrival information from manifests. In addition, this will also alleviate the risks associated with wrongly declared weight which impact on industry workers, ships equipment, operational reliability and shippers.

2.12. The Customs Anti-Narcotics Section (CANS)

With the coming into operation of the MRA in 2006, there were already different sections and units at Customs which were assigned with the responsibility of protecting the borders at various levels. These were, at that time, the Customs Drug Unit (CDU), Customs Investigation and Intelligence Unit (CIIU), Flexible Anti-Smuggling Team (FAST), Joint Port Drug Unit (JPDU), Port Surveillance & Enforcement Unit (PSEU), Airport Surveillance & Enforcement Unit (ASEU), and, Commercial Fraud Unit (CFU). All these sections and units were performing their tasks independently and produced outcomes that were disjointed and lacked coordination and synergy. With that in mind, the government recommended the MRA Customs to come up with a strategic plan and thereafter a “Drug Interdiction Procurement Strategy” was devised.31

One of the major initiatives which was implemented involved the centralisation of all the erstwhile sections and units at Customs under one entity. Hence, the MRA Customs has, since August 2016, set up a dedicated Customs Anti-Narcotics Section (CANS) for drug and other illicit substances interdiction at the various points of entry. This new section has regrouped together all Customs enforcement sections and is supported by a team of 69 Customs officers who are posted on a 24/7 shift basis at the port and airport for the enforcement of national anti-drug laws with regards to import and export of goods and movement of travellers. Since its operation, the CANS has wasted no time in providing tangible results. In fact, during the first quarter of 2017, the CANS has succeeded in uncovering 23 cases of drug trafficking, including a record seizure for the Indian Ocean region32 of 135 kilograms of heroin worth Mauritian Rupees Rs 2.5 billion (i.e.; US$ 70.8 million) in March 2017.

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3. COORDINATED BORDER MANAGEMENT (CBM) AND COOPERATION

The concept of “borders” has undergone significant changes over time – the “physical borders” are still here but with integration of markets the concept of “virtual borders” has emerged and taken primacy. Therefore, risk to the borders can now lie anywhere, not just within territorial limits or national jurisdictions of a single country but across borders. This is why the WCO has considered it essential for Customs authorities to adopt a coordinated border management approach to tackle the emerging challenges they are called to face.33

The CBM34 simply refers to a coordinated approach by border control agencies, both domestic and international, in the context of seeking greater efficiencies over managing trade and travel flows, while maintaining a balance with compliance requirements. The CBM, in general, consists of two different dimensions – domestic and international. Domestic border management involves domestic coordination within and between agencies, whereas the international border management system calls for collaboration between neighbouring and trading partners. The underpinning foundation of CBM is communication, as shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Coordinated Border Management


135 kgs of Heroin concealed in sandblasters
In Mauritius, the government has devised such an approach with the firm aim of reinforcing security within and outside the borders.

3.1. Cooperation at National Level
As highlighted earlier, CBM is considered as a part of the solution for achieving greater efficiencies in the management of trade and travel flows. However, most important is the collaborative approach it promotes with other enforcement agencies in combating drug trafficking and the smuggling of illicit goods. Likewise, the MRA Customs participates in the following committees which fall under the aegis of the Prime Minister's Office (PMO), which are the:

- National Civil Aviation Security Committee (NCASC);
- Airport Border Control Committee (ABCOC);
- National Maritime and Harbour Security Committee (NMHSC).

These committees regularly meet to discuss security-related matters and coordinated enforcement actions. Such cooperation can be vital for the country not only in warding off the entry of narcotics and illicit goods but also in emergency situations when it is critical to safeguard the health and safety of the citizens, and ensure national security. One good example of such inter-agency cooperation is in 2014 when alerts were issued at the national level to contain the propagation of pandemic communicable diseases across borders and Customs fully
collaborated with the Ministry of health and other authorities to implement control policies and measures.35

Furthermore, with a view to reinforcing the fight against the influx of illegitimate goods and narcotics, the MRA Customs works in close collaboration with the Police, especially the Anti-Drug Smuggling Unit (ADSU) and NCG. This concerted collaboration has synergised the authorities’ efforts in anticipating and countering the changing trends applied by smugglers. The MRA Customs also has access to the database of the Passport and Immigration Office (PIO) which greatly assists the Customs officers in their profiling of suspicious and high-risk passengers.

3.2. Cooperation with Regional and International Agencies

The MRA Customs also makes extensive use of the various networks available for the gathering, sharing and dissemination of drug-related information at regional and international levels. Some of them include:

(i) The Pre-Export Notifications Online System – such a system is used by member states of the United Nations for easy online exchange of information on precursor chemicals, in conformity with article 10 of the 1988 Convention against Illicit Traffic in Narcotics Drugs and Psychotropic Substances.

(ii) The World Customs Organisation Regional Intelligence Liaison Offices (RILO), which enables the global sharing and exchange of information on trafficking/smuggling among the 179 WCO member countries, including Mauritius. It must be said that Mauritius is linked to the East and South African Regional Intelligence Liaison Offices (RILO) which acts as a global linkage to other Customs members around the world.

(iii) Other international Agencies collaboration in the fight against drugs trafficking – the MRA Customs works in close collaboration with the International Narcotics Control Board (INCB) and the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC). In addition, the MRA Customs concurs with the WCO in devising relevant strategies regarding drugs interdiction and for coordinated enforcement joint actions by Customs Administrations to identify consignments that may contain drugs and precursor chemical.

4. NEW STRATEGIES IN LIGHT OF THE RECENT DEVELOPMENT OF DRUG SMUGGLING

The fight against drug trafficking is a perpetual one and the authorities should always be on the lookout to innovate, identify and implement new strategies. It must be acknowledged that drug traffickers are increasingly becoming quite “skilled” at evading detection and this is rendering the task of MRA Customs more challenging. The recent drug seizures made by the MRA Customs have revealed that some of our strategies should be revamped or other new processes introduced. Some of them are enumerated as follows:

4.1. Advance Passenger Information System (APIS) or Passenger Name Record (PNR)

The APIS/PNR is any such system which allows all the travellers’ biographic data and flight details, which are initially captured by the carrier prior to departure, to be transmitted electronically to the border control agencies in the country of destination.36 These valuable details may be used proactively by the border agencies in the screening and identification of high risk passengers prior to their arrival. This project is still in the pipeline where the PMO together with the Department of Civil Aviation (DCA) is dealing with the procurement of the relevant APIS/PNR software. Hopefully, with the implementation of such a measure, the MRA Customs may act proactively and conduct their profiling exercise in a more efficient way.

4.2. Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the Police

With the intensification of drugs trafficking by way of sea, the MRA Customs, the ADSU and the NCG have aligned their enforcement actions together to beat the challenges posed by these smugglers. A Memorandum of Understanding37 (MoU) with the Police has already been prepared highlighting the major areas of cooperation between MRA Customs and Police including the ADSU, NCG and the PIO.38 It is also worth noting that there are some commercial activities, especially bunkering beyond the harbour area, which may involve arms smuggling and drug trafficking thereby seriously undermining national security. Therefore, the joint Customs and police collaboration in the sharing of resources to maintain higher levels of surveillance within the harbour and its surroundings is of vital importance.

4.3. Yacht and Pleasure Boat Monitoring System

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37 It should be noted that Customs and Police are able to jointly check and scan containers for drugs and arms.
38 The MoU discussion started back in August 2013 and same is in the process of being finalized by the end of this year.
The MRA Customs is also envisaging the acquisition of a “Yacht and Pleasure Boat Monitoring System” software which will link MRA Customs and other border enforcement authorities to better monitor the movement of all yachts and pleasure boats around Mauritius and other outer islands. Through such a system, the risks posed by all yacht and pleasure crafts will be minimised. Currently, Customs may track the position of any yacht or pleasure craft from high seas through the Vessel Tracking Websites provided that their satellite Automatic Identification System is switched on.

4.4. MRA Customs laboratory
Nowadays the *modus operandi* of drug traffickers has reached to such a level of sophistication that without the use of modern technology Customs is destined to fail. Today we have synthetic and designer drugs which are conceived in sophisticated laboratories that are extremely challenging for Customs to detect. Therefore, it is believed that all Customs and border agencies around the world should be equipped with a dedicated laboratory. This view was strongly supported by the participants at the “WCO Asia Pacific Regional Workshop on Chemical Analysis for Customs Purposes” held in Japan in 2013. The participants reaffirmed that a Customs laboratory would provide scientific support necessary for the proper and rapid uniform application of HS classification, as well as the identification of controlled substances, such as illicit drugs, at the border. This would serve an important role in enabling Customs administration to effectively and efficiently achieve their mission. It is in that perspective that the MRA Customs has initiated relevant steps for the setting up of a purpose-built laboratory to curb down the proliferation of illicit drugs and narcotics. The laboratory may also add value and further expedite the analysis process in suspicious cases of wrong tariff classifications of goods.

4.5. Acquisition of Drones
The next decade will undoubtedly be shaped by advances in nanotechnology, artificial intelligence and robotics. All these will present new challenges for the international trade supply chains and cross-border movement of people and goods. It is believed that new driverless modes of transport, also known as Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs) such as drones, will bring about another challenge for the MRA Customs to secure its borders since drones are operated

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40 The main vessel tracking websites are: marinetraffic.com and vesselfinder.com.
wirelessly and any information relating to departure, destination, and who owns and operates this novel mode of transport would pose formidable challenges to the organisation. The US Drug Enforcement Agency reported that drug-carrying drones made an average of 150 trips between Mexico and the US. Similarly, Russian news agency TASS reported that a Lithuanian self-made drone detained in Russia was used for smuggling cigarettes into Russia. According to the WCO, criminal organisations are increasingly making use of this technology to transport shipments of contraband more quickly, and with less risk of being caught. Therefore, the MRA Customs has already been provided with the necessary funds for the acquisition of two sophisticated drones equipped with night camera vision to counteract these new forms of crimes.

5. CONCLUSION

It is evident that Customs has the daunting task of fighting against the illicit entry of narcotics, terrorism threat and transnational crime while at the same time enabling free flow of legitimate trade and people. This means that Customs has to constantly juggle between law enforcement and enhancing economic competitiveness. In order to achieve these twin objectives, Customs should have a comprehensive understanding of all border threats and the potential consequences.

Mauritius, being an island deprived of any land frontier, has only the port and airport as natural borders which are nexus to a continuum of activities that threaten the national interests of both security and prosperity. In order to cope with these risks, the MRA Customs constantly reviews its strategies and establishes collaborative efforts with other enforcement agencies to secure the global supply chain system.

It must be said that the MRA Customs has left no stone unturned to implement the best available strategies and best practices to combat those scourges. The government has also invested massively in pricey equipment and technologies to reinforce the capacity of the MRA Customs through the acquisition of scanners, drug-detector dogs, fast-interceptor patrol boats, weighbridge, drones and other such sophisticated devices.

In addition, the fight against drug problem is an everlasting one and it cannot be successfully tackled without the eradication of socio-economic ills, such as poverty, unemployment, discrimination, and social exclusion. As had been said, drugs are such plagues that transcend borders. Therefore, it is in the best interest of all countries to join hands together to improve international cooperation against drugs. The current era is one of joint responsibility and better

co-ordinated border cooperation among Customs authorities. This is where the solution to tackle that scourge lies.
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