

The Southeast Asian Times

NEWS FOR NORTHERN AUSTRALIA AND SOUTHEAST ASIA

[Return to Front Page](#)

Authorities happy with airport security despite bikie rampage

By Chris Ray

Sydney, March 24: Visitors to Australia's biggest airport, Sydney, can hardly fail to be affected by its sizeable and intrusive security apparatus.

Tarry outside the domestic terminal while picking up a passenger kerbside and guards instantly materialise to threaten a fine.

Inside the terminal staff at screening points will ferret out and confiscate your nail file, bottle of water or tube of toothpaste "no greater than 100ml/3.3oz capacity" with a scrupulousness bordering on the indecent.

Few passengers can have been spared the ritual humiliation of being ordered to strip off their belts and shoes in order to step through the metal detector.

Popular resentment at such indignities - justified by the need to combat 'terrorism' - has fuelled widespread anger and astonishment over an invasion of the airport by rival motorcycle gangs last Sunday afternoon.

About 20 warring bikies, unhindered by police or security of any stripe, battled each other across two floors of the domestic terminal for at least 10 minutes before all escaped in taxis.

One man, said to be the brother of a leader of the Hells Angels, was beaten to death with a metal bollard in front of terrified passengers including children.

The airport mayhem was the culmination of months of increasing violence between motorcycle gangs, with clubhouses bombed and residents in parts of south-western Sydney terrified by nightly drive-by shootings.

Sydney airport is jointly staffed by federal and state police under the control of the Australian Federal Police, whose Commissioner, Mick Keelty, led a rush by authorities to downplay the significance of Sunday's incident and defend the lack of any response.

Keelty, who directed the AFP's relentless and highly political persecution of Dr Mohamed Haneef, the innocent Indian physician accused of terrorist links, locked up and stripped of his visa before twice being vindicated by the Australian courts in 2007, denied that the bikie rampage represented a failing of security.

The police response was "within acceptable practice," he said.

He said police only learned of the brawl after passengers called the triple 0 emergency number.

Yet witnesses said gang members mid-flight threatened each other and used their mobile phones to call for back-up, then pushed and shoved each other as they disembarked.

At the arrivals hall private security guards appeared agitated by the sight of a large number of heavily built, tattooed men and spoke animatedly into their walkie talkies.

Members of the rival Hells Angels and Comanchero gangs shouted abuse at each other from the moment they all stepped off Qantas flight 430 from Melbourne and were met by fellow bikies in the arrivals hall, where the melee started, witnesses confirmed.

The brawl produced a round of classic Aussie buck-passing.

A spokesman for Sydney Airport Corporation, a Macquarie Bank subsidiary and owner of the now-privatised facility, referred all inquiries to Qantas, claiming security in the domestic terminal was the airline's responsibility.

Qantas quickly flick-passed the problem to the New South Wales State police.

Neither the State Premier, Nathan Rees nor his Police Commissioner Andrew Scipione would admit to any security problem at Sydney airport.

"No is the short answer," was Mr Rees's reply when asked if he was concerned about security.

Commissioner Scipione said: "This wasn't a terrorist attack. It was a very different offence. This is a brawl" that "could happen anywhere, not just in the airport."

Melbourne Airport's general manager of corporate affairs, Geoffrey Conaghan, chimed in: "This is a public safety issue, not a security matter, it would not be reviewed as such.

That is how we distinguish it, apparently nothing was brought onto the airport," he told a reporter for The Australian.

Opposition Liberal senator Bill Heffernan was among many who called for an inquiry and stated the obvious: "It doesn't say much for the millions of dollars we have spent on airport security, nor does it say much, in the event of a fair dinkum terrorist attack, (about) what would happen," he said.

And one letter writer to the Sydney Morning Herald encapsulated the travelling public's deepest fear: "It is dreadful to contemplate how much more havoc could have been wreaked if those bikies had been carrying nail files."

The Southeast Asian Times