From airport to court: the rising tide of foreign drug mules

Young, female and going overseas? Stay alert, writes **Andrew J Wight** in Bogota.

It's every traveller's nightmare. One moment you are at the airport, bound for your next destination, the following, you are whisked away by police and end up in prison in a country where you don't speak the language and where penalties can be draconian.

In early April, South Australian woman Cassandra Sainsbury, 22, found herself living this nightmare.

She was detained at Bogota's El Dorado International Airport by police, apparently acting on a tip-off. They allegedly found 5.8 kilograms of cocaine distributed between sets of headphones in her luggage.

She reportedly told her Colombian lawyer that she was tricked and given the headphones by a man she knew only as Angelo or Tom. The man offered to buy her the headphones cheaply and brought them to her at the airport.

As she awaits her next hearing and adjusts to life in El Buen Pastor, a Colombian women's prison with a fearful reputation, it makes sense to put this all in context.

Is this a freak occurrence or part of a larger trend? Could it happen to another young Australian visiting Latin America? Already this year, 19 foreign drug mules have been arrested, according to a statement to the press from Lieutenant Colonel Jorge Triana, head of the anti-narcotics police at the El Dorado International Airport. To find out whether there was an emerging trend of foreign, female mules, Fairfax Media spoke to Coletta Youngers, a Senior Fellow at The Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA), an influential think tank focused on policy and development in Latin America.

Ms Youngers was candid that, although there was a general dearth of hard evidence, her many years of first-hand experience on the ground on the continent leads her to believe a shift is happening. The numbers seem to paint a picture of a trend as well.

According to a 2011 study in Argentina, nine out of 10 foreign women in prison for drug offences at the federal level in Argentina were there for serving as mules; 96 per cent were first-time offenders.

"A lot of time, the women don't understand the risk they are taking. They don't understand that if they get caught they are going to end up in prison, with penalties that are extremely high," she said. While judges across Latin America are handing down softer penalties where appropriate and permissible, the penalties could still range from eight to 20 years in prison, according to Ms Youngers.

"My impression is that judges [in mule cases], where they have flexibility and don't need to enforce mandatory minimums, seek out the lower range of sentences. They are a bit more lenient on foreign women," she said.

Michaella McCollum, 20, of Ireland, and Melissa Reid, 18, of Britain, were dubbed the Peru Two in 2013. Photo: AP

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"These prisons are very unpleasant. Often there is not enough food and medicine available, so it has to come from family outside, family that these women often won't have in-country."

Another famous case of foreign, female mules in Latin America garnered world-wide attention: two British women dubbed the "Peru Two".

Melissa Reid and Michaella McCollum were jailed in 2013, at the ages of 18 and 20 respectively, after 11 kilograms of cocaine worth an estimated £1.5 million ($2.6 million) was found in their luggage at the international airport in Lima, Peru.

Reid and McCollum originally faced a maximum of 15 years in prison if found guilty but decided to plead guilty in the hope of getting a lighter sentence. They were jailed for six years and eight months in December 2013.

They were released and expelled from Peru three years ahead of schedule because of good behaviour and international pressure.

Colombian prison statistics included in a 2010 report from the Transnational Institute showed that, of the 320 foreigners in custody in the 2007-2009 survey period, 237 (74 per cent) were there for drug-related offences.

According to a 2016 WOLA Report, the population of women prisoners in Latin America climbed 51.6 per cent between 2000 and 2015, compared with 20 per cent for men.

In Argentina, Brazil, Costa Rica and Peru, more than 60 per cent of female prisoners are behind bars for drug-related offences.

"Women have long been used in drug smuggling and foreigners have often been used because they can face less scrutiny than others," said Dr Vanda Felbab-Brown, a senior fellow of foreign policy at US think tank The Brookings Institution.

"The visa-free requirements for many foreigners helps in travel and often they are more credible tourists and thus can receive reduced scrutiny at airports."

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