



Airport security still lacks force

Paul Maley | March 19, 2009

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MORE than three years after a government review found major gaps in aviation security, police numbers at Australian airports remain well below strength.

The Police Federation of Australia yesterday said low police numbers and divided responsibility between the states and commonwealth was putting commuter and public safety at risk.

Federation president Mark Burgess said the number of sworn police guarding Australia's major airports remained 35 per cent below the target set by the Council of Australian Governments in 2005.

"We (also) understand the numbers have deteriorated further since June 2008," Mr Burgess said. "In other words, the major airports are understaffed with sworn police by a staggering 35 per cent or more."

The claim was contained in the federation submission to the Transport Department's green paper into the aviation sector.

Mr Burgess said as of June last year, 233 state and territory police officers had been seconded to Australia's airports -- 124 short of the 2005 COAG commitment and 101 short of a subsequent reviewed commitment. Furthermore, the federation has been receiving anecdotal reports that the number of police at the airports has declined since then.

Under the Unified Policing Model to safeguard Australia's airports, state and territory police are seconded to the Australian Federal Police, who have overall responsibility for airport security.

The arrangement was the product of the 2005 review into aviation security conducted by British expert John Wheeler, who found the AFP lacked the manpower to guard the airports.

The Howard government had commissioned Sir John to review airport security after reports in The Australian exposed major breaches at Sydney airport.

Yesterday, the AFP acknowledged a shortfall but said it was working with the states to raise a full complement of officers.

AFP aviation national manger Roman Quaedvlieg said the target was to have 328 officers in Australia's airports. "There are around 40 officers either in training or scheduled to undergo training by the end of the financial year -- about half the total shortfall," Assistant Commissioner Quaedvlieg told The Australian.

Mr Burgess said the crux of the problem was the model of so-called "shared responsibility" of airport security. The actual effect had been "divided responsibility", with no one level of government taking responsibility.

"This failure, after three years of implementation of the COAG 2005 agreement, leaves our major airports exposed to risks or crime and terrorism," he said.

The federation argued that the shared-responsibility model diminished the resources of the states and territories. "The arrangement depletes the states and territories of experienced sworn police officers and means that they have to recruit from far and wide, including recruiting from overseas police forces."

But Assistant Commissioner Quaedvlieg said the states had committed to providing the agreed complement of officers.

"Our negotiations with the states have been productive and fruitful, and we hope to have the full complement by the end of the calendar year."

Mr Burgess said that morale was also an issue: "It's probably not an overly exhilarating place to work."

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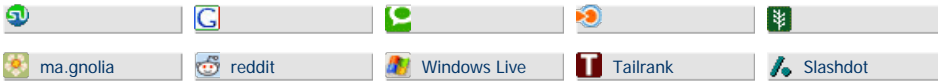
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