

\$1.2b ice haul is biggest ever

■ Sydney

An international drug syndicate has been busted allegedly smuggling more than a billion dollars of ice into Australia, concealing it in bras and other items.

In the biggest seizure of liquid methamphetamine in Australia's history, investigators discovered 720 litres of liquid methamphetamine disguised in gel push-up bras, paint bottles and art sets.

Four people have been charged over the import and manufacture of the drugs.

"This has resulted in 3.6 million individual hits of ice being taken off our streets with a street value of \$1.26 billion," Justice Minister Michael Keenan said yesterday.

Early last month, officers found 195 litres of liquid methamphetamine in gel bra inserts in a shipping container brought to Sydney from Hong Kong.

The Australian Federal Police then discovered a further 530 litres concealed in art supplies in storage containers at Miranda, Hurstville, Padstow and Kingsgrove.

It is believed the drugs were destined for Sydney's streets and beyond. A 33-year-old man, a Hong Kong national, has been charged with importing a border-controlled substance in relation to the bras.

Three people, a 59-year-old male Chinese national, a 37-year-old man and a 52-year-old woman who are both Hong Kong nationals, have been charged with taking part in the manufacture of a commercial quantity of a prohibited drug.



Evidence on show: Police display seized methamphetamine that was hidden in art sets, gel bras and paint bottles. Picture: AP

Investigations are continuing and further charges could be filed, Joint Organised Crime Group authorities said.

If convicted, the three face life imprisonment. Australian Federal Police NSW commander Chris Sheehan said he was "very, very confident" the syndicate had been disrupted.

"We are alleging that the people that we have arrested weren't just mere bit players, they were significant players within this criminal network,"

he said. The cracks started to show in the international syndicate's local operation in November when an Australian Border Force officer at Sydney airport identified a high-risk passenger arriving from Hong Kong, who was believed to be part of a shore party for an international narcotics syndicate.

Shore parties are runners who do not have knowledge of who is directing them.

Last year, the ABF intercepted 7.2 tonnes of narcotics, a "signif-

icant portion" of which was ice, NSW regional commander Tim Fitzgerald said.

"We have noticed a trend in recent times where syndicates will use liquids to conceal methamphetamine so whether it's as a gel insert, whether it's within wine bottles, it certainly is a method of concealment that the syndicates are attempting to use," he said.

Up to 70 per cent of ice in Australia is believed to have been shipped through China, accord-

ing to figures from the Australian Crime Commission.

Those figures prompted a partnership where AFP officers have gone to China to work with local agencies probing drug trafficking in Taskforce Blaze. "That investment in our international relationship, is achieving the sorts of dividends we're seeing today with this very significant drug bust," Mr Keenan said.

AAP

■ EDITORIAL P20

Drugs drive shop theft

■ Jon Solmundson

A Geraldton magistrate has warned drug-driven shoplifting has become so bad, she will soon have to elevate stealing charges to District Court, where those convicted could be given jail time.

The comments were made at a hearing for Donelle Joy Thompson, 51, who stole five pairs of jeans, valued at \$200, from Cotton

On. Thompson had stolen the jeans to trade to her partner for drugs, and eventually returned them but they were too soiled to resell. Magistrate Donna Webb said dealers gave their customers shopping lists of goods to steal in exchange for drugs.

"There's drugs behind it all the time," she said.

Thompson was fined \$800 for stealing.

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