
Chair of the UK Statistics Authority, Sir Michael Scholar KCB

Damian Green MP
Minister of State for Immigration
Home Office
2 Marsham Street
LONDON
SW1P 4DF

15 November 2011

Dear Mr Green

DRUG SEIZURES

I am writing to express concern about the Home Office press release issued on 4 November 2011, copy enclosed, which contained statistical information on the volume of seizures of Class A drugs by the UK Border Agency. This press release was embargoed until 7 November, three days before the publication of the Home Office's National Statistics on this subject, in their Statistical Bulletin *Seizures of drugs in England and Wales 2010/11*.

The Statistical Bulletin makes reference to a fall in the volume of seizures of Class A drugs in the most recent period. This contrasts with the 4 November press release, which highlights a large increase in seizures, albeit for a different time period. The 4 November press release, which appears not to have been published on either the Home Office or the UK Border Agency websites, and seems to have been distributed only to a select group of journalists, makes no reference to the forthcoming Statistical Bulletin; it was, I understand, produced without any involvement by, and without the knowledge of, the Department's statisticians; and it is highly selective in its choice of statistics, in order, it seems, to show the UK Border Agency in a good light.

It has been suggested to me that one motivation for this release was to generate positive news coverage ahead of the release of the National Statistics which showed a decline in the volume of drug seizures. I would welcome your reassurance that this is not the case. Were it to be the case, the Authority's view is that this would be highly corrosive and damaging to public confidence in official statistics.

The Statistics Authority considers that the fact and manner of the publication of the 4 November press release, in advance of the official statistics, was irregular and inconsistent with the statutory Code of Practice, and also with the Ministerial Code and published guidance on the handling of official statistics issued by the Cabinet Secretary. The Authority supports the Open Data initiative and the desire to publish important statistical information as soon as it is ready, but we believe that the right way to do this is to bring forward publication of the official statistics to the earliest date possible.

I would be grateful for reassurance that these statistics will, in future, be released in accordance with the Code of Practice, and that the scope to bring forward their publication to the earliest possible date, on a regular and pre-announced basis, will be urgently explored, as required by the Code of Practice.

I am copying this letter to the Chair of the House of Commons Home Affairs Committee and the Chair of the Public Administration Select Committee, to Rob Whiteman, Chief Executive of the UK Border Agency, and to the Permanent Secretary of the Home Office and the Cabinet Secretary.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Michael Scholar". The script is cursive and fluid.

Sir Michael Scholar KCB

BACKGROUND NOTE

Breach of principles and protocols of the Code of Practice for Official Statistics

Protocol 2: Release practices

- i. **Statistical reports should be released into the public domain in an orderly manner that promotes public confidence and gives equal access to all, subject to relevant legislation.**
- ii. Publish a timetable of statistical releases for twelve months ahead.
- iii. Ensure that no indication of the substance of a statistical report is made public, or given to the media or any other party not recorded as eligible for access before publication.

Principle 2: Impartiality and objectivity

- i. Make official statistics equally available to all, subject to statutory provisions for pre-release access.

Protocol 3: The use of administrative sources for statistical purposes

- i. **Ensure no action is taken within the producer body, or public statement made, that might undermine confidence in the independence of the statistics when released.**

Principle 3: Integrity

- i. **Issue statistical reports separately from any other statement or comment about the figures and ensure that no statement or comment – based on prior knowledge – is issued to the press or published ahead of the publication of the statistics.**

Principle 8: Frankness and accessibility

- i. Provide information on the quality and reliability of statistics in relation to the range of potential uses, and on methods, procedures, and classifications.
- ii. Prepare and disseminate commentary and analysis that aid interpretation, and provide factual information about the policy or operational context of official statistics. Adopt formats for the presentation of statistics in graphs, tables and maps that enhance clarity, interpretability and consistency.

Cabinet Secretary's official guidance on good practice in the use of Official Statistics

The UK Border Agency press release of 4 November 2011 also appears to be inconsistent with the following points from the Cabinet Secretary's guidance on "Good practice in the use of Official Statistics".¹ This states that:

- You must not selectively quote favourable data from any unpublished dataset.
- Any publication containing official statistics must provide information relating to their quality, reliability and usability.
- When preparing any publication containing statistics, including those drawn from administrative or management information, you must involve statistical professionals at the earliest opportunity.
- You must not use unpublished statistics without the advice of a statistical professional.
- Decisions taken by statistical professionals are final.

¹ http://www.parliament.uk/documents/upload/letter_brennan_090227.pdf

Press release and subsequent media reporting

On Friday 4 November, the UK Border Agency (UKBA) selectively briefed journalists. A Home Office press release, enclosed, was marked as embargoed until Monday 7 November.

The press release includes statistics on operations by the UKBA to seize Class A drugs (cocaine and heroin) at the UK border over a recent six months period (April to September 2011). The volume of seizures by the UKBA is reported to have substantially increased since the 2010/2011 financial year.

The press release includes political comments from Home Office Minister Damian Green, and policy statements from the chief executive of the UKBA. Related stories were reported in the press on Monday 7 November.^{2,3}

The press release did not reference the National Statistics.

National Statistics

On Thursday 10 November 2011, the Home Office published annual National Statistics, *Seizures of drugs in England and Wales, 2010/11*⁴. The volume of seizures by the UKBA is reported to have decreased since the 2009/10 financial year.

The National Statistics on UKBA seizures are compiled from the same management information data source as the statistics released in the 4 November press release. Data held by the UKBA are supplied to the Home Office as finalised figures. Data processing and quality assurance is undertaken before handover to the Home Office.

The National Statistics were accompanied by a Statistical News Release⁵. This included a brief note about the UKBA press release, explaining that the statistics in the press release were not wholly comparable with the National Statistics.

Comparability

The figures presented in the 4 November press release are at odds with the National Statistics.

| | Cocaine (kg) | | Heroin (kg) | |
|--------------------------|---------------|---------------------|---------------|---------------------|
| | Press release | National Statistics | Press release | National Statistics |
| April – Sept 2011 | 2,116 | - | 773 | - |
| 2010/11 | 1,951 | 1,519 | 473 | 420 |
| 2009/10 | 2,017 | 1,997 | 859 | 830 |

The press release does not reference the forthcoming National Statistics release, previous National Statistics releases, nor explain how the statistics are compiled.

² <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-15613803>

³ <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2058489/UK-border-officers-seized-cocaine-6-months-2010.html>

⁴ <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/publications/science-research-statistics/research-statistics/police-research/hosb1711/>

⁵ <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/publications/science-research-statistics/research-statistics/police-research/hosb1711/hosb1711snr?view=Binary>

Important information about the quality of the statistics is not present in the 4 November press release. For example, the National Statistics release explains that data on the volume of drugs seized fluctuate from year to year and do not necessarily move in line with the number of seizures made. This information is particularly relevant in the context of statistics about seizures by the UKBA, as the UKBA accounts for a small number of high volume seizures.

According to the note in the Home Office's Statistical News Release, the figures published in the UKBA press release cover a different geographical area: UK, including off-shore seizures in UK waters, rather than England and Wales.

The National Statistics explain that seizures from joint operations involving the UKBA and the police are recorded against the lead agency that takes possession of the seized drugs. It is not clear whether the statistics presented in the 4 November press release follow this rule.

From: **Home Office Press Office**

Date: 4 November 2011 10:02

Subject: Embargoed Home Office Press Release - RISE IN DRUG SEIZURES SHOWS AGENCY TACKLING CHANGING TRAFFICKING ROUTES

To:

113/2011

04 November 2011

020 7035 3535

EMBARGOED

NOT FOR PUBLICATION OR BROADCAST UNTIL 0001 MONDAY 7 NOVEMBER

**RISE IN DRUG SEIZURES SHOWS AGENCY TACKLING
CHANGING TRAFFICKING ROUTES**

Seizures of Class A drugs by the UK Border Agency are up as its officers respond to changing trafficking routes and techniques.

In a success for the agency's intelligence-led operations, more cocaine and heroin was stopped at the border in the last six months than during the whole of last year.

Cocaine seizures for the half year stand at 2,116kgs while the amount of heroin intercepted has nearly doubled to 773kgs.

The story behind the statistics shows work by investigators and detection officers, alongside SOCA and the police, has paid dividends despite changes to the drugs market.

Home Office minister Damian Green said:

"Stopping harmful drugs like heroin and cocaine means we're helping keep communities safe and preventing criminals exploiting the UK.

"These seizures show our investigators are keeping pace with the ever changing methods of criminal gangs to keep the border secure."

In 2010 heroin seizures fell reflecting the "poppy drought" in Afghanistan and the impact of international law enforcement activity, including SOCA, in major distribution hubs like Turkey.

Since then trafficking of the drug from Pakistan has increased with criminal gangs targeting shipments of the drug at the UK and Europe using new methods, including shipping containers and the postal system.

But thanks to excellent intelligence and the experience of staff in ports across the country, the UK Border Agency has secured notable hits against trafficking gangs, including:

- the jailing of two men in July for a total of 20 years for smuggling £4.2 million of heroin into Hull through the post using a complicated “return to sender” scam that disguised the drugs as baby powder; and
- two further men being hit with a total of 40 years in prison for trafficking 80kg of heroin into the UK via Flexistowe hidden in a container of 600 sacks of red chilli powder.

The agency’s work tackling the threat from cocaine traffickers has also seen real results working alongside SOCA and others in the UK and overseas. Recent achievements include:

- the largest ever haul of the drug found hidden on a £1 million luxury yacht in Southampton in June. The 1.2 tonne seizure of 90 per cent pure cocaine was worth up to £300 million. The Agency worked closely with Dutch law enforcement to bring the criminals to justice and in August six men were arrested in early morning raids which saw €100,000, two Harley Davidson motorcycles, two guns, a silencer and a quantity of ecstasy recovered;
- last month more than 15kg of cocaine worth £2.5 million was found hidden inside an industrial shredding machine shipped from Mexico to the UK. Four men have been arrested and charged; and
- work against well-established routes continues with a Nigerian man jailed for seven years on 21 October after he swallowed 73 packets of high purity cocaine worth £140,000.

Rob Whiteman chief executive of the UK Border Agency said:

“Our work to secure the border all day every day continues to show significant results despite the efforts of organised crime gangs to circumvent our controls.

“Thanks to our dedicated teams of staff detecting drugs, investigating criminals and helping bring them to justice we play a vital role in keeping the country safe.”

NOTES TO EDITORS

1. Seizures of cocaine and heroin in the six months from April 2011, compared with previous years) are shown below (latest statistics are based on management information and are subject to change):

| | Cocaine (kg) | Heroin (kg) |
|----------------------|--------------|-------------|
| 2011/12 (Apr – Sept) | 2,116 | 773 |
| 2010/11 | 1,951 | 473 |
| 2009/10 | 2,017 | 859 |

2. To see pictures of drugs seizures by the UK Border Agency visit the Home Office Flickr account at our Media Centre <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/media-centre/>

3. Prior to mid 2010, the majority of heroin brought into the UK travelled to the UK overland through Europe under the control of crime groups located in Turkey. Until early 2010 testing

showed that approximately 75 per cent of UK seized heroin was likely to have been trafficked via Turkey.

But there has been a significant drop in heroin coming via this route – seeing UK based criminals struggling to import the drug and resulting in a lower purity product.

Before mid 2010 there has been a significant increase in the amount of heroin being trafficked to the UK directly from Pakistan by parcel, air freight and container.

Between late 2010 and early 2011, the UK wholesale price for a kilo of heroin rose from between £18,000 and £23,000 to between £19,000 and £25,000, with some examples of high quality heroin being sold in excess of £40,000. At the same time street average street purity has continued to fall. Analysis showed purity of seized heroin fell from 46 per cent in December 2009 to 24 per cent in December 2010. These are some of the lowest purity levels since 1984.

4. The UK Border Agency is responsible for securing the UK border and controlling migration in the UK. The agency manages border control for the UK, enforcing immigration and customs regulations. The agency prevents drugs, weapons, terrorists, criminals and would-be illegal immigrants reaching the United Kingdom. It decides on the eligibility of foreign nationals to stay in the UK and enforces immigration law. At the same time, the agency facilitates legitimate travel and trade, helping protect UK revenue. Overseas, at the border and inland, the agency uses intelligence, technology, a skilled workforce, and a range of UK and international partners to deliver its objectives.

5. UK Border Agency officers use hi-tech search equipment to combat immigration crime and detect banned and restricted goods that smugglers attempt to bring into the country. They use an array of search techniques including sniffer dogs, carbon dioxide detectors, heartbeat monitors and scanners - as well as visual searches - to find well-hidden stowaways, illegal drugs, firearms and cigarettes which would otherwise end up causing harm to people, businesses and communities.

6. By the end of 2013 the National Crime Agency will make the UK a more hostile environment for serious and organised crime and strengthen our border. Organised crime costs the UK public between £20 billion and £40 billion each year and affects the everyday lives of individuals. The NCA will be responsible for tackling these crimes, which include child abuse, drug and people smuggling, illegal immigration, fraud, cyber crime and many other serious and organised crimes. It will better share that intelligence, and through the Border Policing Command, ensure all law enforcement bodies at the border are focused on preventing serious crime, including stopping drugs entering the UK.

7. The use of illegal drugs, particularly Class A, is a significant threat to the social and economic well being of the country, including its reputation overseas. In 2009, the cost to the UK of illegal drugs markets was approximately £15.4 billion.

8. The work of the UK Border Agency helps deliver the government's Drug Strategy which was launched in December 2010 and takes an uncompromising approach to cracking down on those involved in the drug supply both at home and abroad. Two key elements of its proposals for restricting supply include:

- making greater use of intelligence between agencies to increase our understanding of who is involved in drugs as a criminal business and taking action to disrupt their activity

at all levels of the distribution chain. This includes working with UK based internet providers to ensure they comply with the letter and spirit of the UK law.

- working with our partners overseas to tackle the international drugs trade and joining up with our international partners to disrupt traffickers at source or in transit countries.
9. For more information call the Home Office press office on 020 7035 3535.

Case Studies

Postal Route

Action against crime gangs targeting postal routes to traffic heroin from Pakistan is already showing results.

- In July, two men were jailed for a total of 20 years for smuggling £4.2 million of heroin through the post.
- They used a complex scam whereby packages of baby powder were sent to Pakistan where a drug gang would replace the bottles of baby powder with ones for the Pakistan market that contained heroin, reseal the packages and label the parcels 'undeliverable' and 'return to sender'.
- The innocent looking parcels were then collected by the traffickers from a number of domestic addresses across Hull - where residents were paid £100 to take delivery of packages – before being taken to Bradford.
- The plot was uncovered after UK Border Agency officers intercepted three parcels arrived at Mount Pleasant postal depot, London, in March 2011. The parcels were found to contain baby powder bottles filled with a total of 5.68kg of heroin.
- Two further packages were seized two weeks later which were found to contain 3.78kg of Heroin.
- Paul Anthony Cahalin, 28, was sentenced to 11 years at Hull Crown Court in July. Allan Edward Riley, 54, was sentenced to nine years.

Containers

The container route is also being tackled with a number of successful seizures this year. A major investigation is taking place, with some prosecutions having already taken place and more pending. Early successes include:

- Two men were sentenced to a total of 40 years for trafficking 80kg of heroin into the UK disguised as chilli powder.
- It was shipped in a single container to Felixstowe from Pakistan in November 2010 discovered by UK Border Agency officers who found the drugs hidden inside a consignment of 600 sacks of red chilli powder.
- A SOCA-led controlled delivery took place to an address in Birmingham.
- At this address the consignment was re-directed to an industrial unit in Shropshire. After arriving at the unit, the container was subsequently unloaded and the father and son arrested by SOCA officers.
- At Birmingham Court Crown in April 2011 Gulab Mohammed, 51, from Birmingham was found guilty of importation of Class A drugs after a five-day trial and jailed for 21 years.
- Khalid Mohammed, 29, of Birmingham, pleaded guilty of importation of Class A drugs and was jailed for 19 years.

Cocaine via Mexico

Work continues to tackle established routes out of South and Central America, including:

- A haul of cocaine with an estimated street value of around £2.5 seized at Heathrow Airport in late September concealed in an industrial shredding machine weighing more than 600 kg.
- The drugs had been shipped to the UK from Mexico and were found after UK Border Agency drilled into the machine.
- The find led to an investigation by the Metropolitan Police, who arrested four men in the Northampton area on Monday 3 October.
- All four were charged with conspiring to import cocaine and appeared before Westminster Magistrates on Wednesday 5 October, where they were remanded in custody.
- The drugs were so well hidden inside the machinery they have yet to be fully recovered. The estimated weight of the concealment is around 15 kg, making it one of the biggest seizures of its kind at Heathrow this year.
- The drugs, if cut and sold in the UK, would have had a street resale value of approximately £2.5 million.

Mules

Thanks to innovative work with international partners we have seen a reduction in drugs being carried by mules, but continue to be vigilant:

- In October, a Nigerian man who attempted to smuggle cocaine worth around £140,000 through London City Airport was jailed for seven years.
- Ikechukwu Lambert Eze, 37, was stopped by UK Border Agency staff on August 31 this year.
- Eze was stopped by UK Border Agency officers on his arrival from Cameroon via Zurich. Following questioning and a baggage search officers became suspicious of his reasons for travel and Eze became nervous when it was suggested he had swallowed packages.
- He was arrested and taken to Newham General Hospital, where an x-ray revealed a number of packages inside him. Eze eventually produced 73 packages of cocaine weighing one kilo, which had a purity of 91 per cent and an estimated street value of £140,000.
- He was sentenced at Isleworth Crown Court on 21 October after admitting charges of drug smuggling.