

Customs seeks NCL's help to decode 'gold paste' formula

Airport May Get Hi-Tech Machinery To Help Catch Smugglers

Illustration: Aamir Shaikh

Joy.Sengupta@timesgroup.com


Pune: Customs officials at the Lohegaon airport, who recently caught flyers smuggling gold in a semi-solid form, have turned to the Pune-based National Chemical Laboratory (NCL) for help.

Sources close to the development told **TOI** that samples of the semi-solid substance have been sent to the NCL for identification and that a meeting with the scientists and experts was scheduled for sometime this week.

"While we have cracked the two cases, the fresh modus operandi continues to bother us," a customs official said. "In both cases, the doorframe metal detector and hand-held metal detector couldn't sense the presence of the gold. It was only our passenger profiling method, intelligence and instinct that helped us catch the smugglers and the gold paste," the official added.

In a bid to identify with chemical being used to create the mixture, the officials decided to rope in NCL. "We need technical expertise to identify how they are mixing the gold — in powdered form — with other metals," the official added.

On April 9, customs officials had arrested two persons, including a woman, with gold worth Rs46 lakh. In the case of the woman, the gold was in the form of a paste that she had concealed on her body. The ve-



FULL METAL RACKET

NEW MODUS OPERANDI

- ▶ Small tiny pieces of gold concealed in chocolate, wax spreads and jams
- ▶ The gold is powdered, then mixed with a powder of iron and potassium
- ▶ A solvent is added to the mixture to give it a semi-solid jelly-like form

THE CHALLENGE

- ▶ It is tough for customs officials to nab the culprits as the paste/mixture is not easily caught by metal detectors at airports
- ▶ Officials have to rely on instinct and bodily searches to seize gold smuggled in this form
- ▶ Apart from Pune, such cases have been reported in Kerala's Nedumbassery, Kozhikode and Thiruvananthapuram airports

THEY ATTRIBUTE IT TO THE BURGEONING COST OF GOLD IN INDIA

GOLD RATE
₹31,286/10G

CUSTOMS' TAKE

- ▶ Customs officers suspect a Mumbai-based man is behind the gold-smuggling racket
- ▶ Just in March, officials have seized 10 illegal consignments of gold

THE WAY FORWARD

- ▶ New, enhanced equipment that will be able to detect gold in such forms will soon be in place at Pune airport
- ▶ Customs have partnered with the National Chemical Laboratory to identify the other elements in the mixture and its source
- ▶ Once the chemical and its source are identified, customs officials plan to contact the manufacturers and inform them about the illegal trade

Smugglers use jam cans & choco spread to strike gold

Customs Officials Extra Alert At Airport

INNOVATIONS UNLIMITED

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ry next day, they arrested another person with gold worth Rs11.7 lakh. In this case too, the gold was found in the form of a paste and was concealed in the lining of the flyer's trousers' waistband.

"It is important to identify the chemical as once we know about it, we will have a better understanding of its nature and why, when mixed in it, gold is able to evade metal detectors," another official said.

An official said they will revise their strategy accordingly. "A fresh strategy needs to be developed. Our men at the airport remain alert as we try to fully understand the new technique," the official said.