

Smuggling move snuffed out

AirAsia attendant pleads guilty to evading tobacco duty payments

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for each person.

AIRASIA and Malaysia Airlines may be bitter rivals in the skies but their aircrew seem to have no problems co-operating.

According to Australian Customs, as was presented in court, AirAsia flight attendant Ahmad Izman Ahmad Daman Huri arrived in Perth via a flight from Malaysia on Dec 23, and collected duty-free cigarettes purchased by arriving Malaysian Airlines aircrew members, as well as bringing in some on his own, for commercial purposes.

Ahmad Izman was fined A\$3,000 (RM7,500) and a further A\$112 in costs by the East Perth Magistrates Court on Dec 26, after pleading guilty to evading tobacco duty payments amounting to over A\$33,000.

His plan to stock up on duty-free cigarette purchases fell foul of Australian Customs laws because he had resold the duty-free tobacco to third parties. The resale meant that imported duty-free cigarettes are deemed commercial goods and Australian duty is payable.

Ahmad Izman, who claimed to have worked with Malaysia Airlines for eight years before shifting to AirAsia three years ago, was caught in a raid conducted on Dec 24 by Customs investigators at the Perth hotel he was staying in.

The raid resulted in 58 cartons of cigarettes seized.

Aircrew are allowed to bring into Australia the same amount of duty-free cigarettes as the average passenger — 250 cigarettes or 250 grams of cigar and tobacco products

Customs Investigations national manager Richard Janeczko told *Malay Mail* that, had Ahmad Izman succeeded in getting away with his plan, he would have defrauded the Australian government of more than A\$33,000 in revenue from duty payments.

"We believe that he (Ahmad Izman) was not the main organiser but was rather part of the process. That was why he was fined A\$3,000 instead of the possible maximum 10-year jail sentence or A\$275,000 fine or both," Janeczko told *Malay Mail* yesterday.

As such, he added, investigations into the "wider issues of the case", such as the search for the head of the operations, were ongoing.

Tobacco smuggling has become a major issue in Australia due to its high duties, with 2008 seeing a record number of tobacco and cigarette smuggling attempts foiled, including a rise in molasses tobacco, Janeczko said, with a number of arrests already made this year.

He said, besides tobacco smuggling, Australia had also seen a lot of child pornography smuggling attempts by aircrew.

"You would think those in the airline industry would know better than to attempt to smuggle stuff (into a country)," he stated, and added that Australian Customs often worked closely with Malaysian Customs authorities to curb smuggling activities between the two nations.

At Press time, *Malay Mail* had yet to receive a response from both AirAsia and Malaysia Airlines.