

THE COUNTER COUNTERFEIT FORCE



Superintendent Laurent Sartorius, the head of the Central Anti-Counterfeit Office - the 'Office central pour la répression des faux' - of the Belgian Federal Police.

The coming Security Printers, International Conference and Exhibition in Seville in October will hear about the fight against counterfeiting of banknotes and forgeries of ID documents from a wide variety of involved actors, from printers and suppliers to central banks and police forces. Of special interest are reports from the front line, such as from national or international law enforcement agencies. To give a little of the background, Infosecura talked to Superintendent Laurent Sartorius, the head of the Central Anti-Counterfeiting Office - the 'Office central pour la répression des faux' - of the Belgian Federal Police. Superintendent Laurent Sartorius, will also give a presentation in Seville.

Superintendent Sartorius explained that the Central Anti-Counterfeiting Office of the Belgian Federal police unites two sub-divisions, the Central Document Fraud Office and the National Central Office for the suppression of counterfeit currency (NCO) with a total of about 20 officers. While just about every EU national police force has a NCO, Belgium is a little unusual by having the Document Fraud Office attached to the federal police, rather than to the border protection agencies, as in most EU countries.

BANKNOTE COUNTERFEITING - A PERSISTENT HEADACHE

Historically, in most countries, counterfeiting of banknotes was met by very severe punishments, because the crime of counterfeiting had the potential to severely disrupt or even destroy a national economy. Due to the emergence of electronic bank transfers, credit cards, etc. this threat has been greatly diminished. Consequently, although punishments for counterfeiting are still officially severe, culprits are often given minimum rather than maximum sentences. But banknote counterfeiting is only in relatively few cases a crime of opportunity. More often it is a complex and organized criminal activity.

Belgium, as Superintendent Sartorius points out, has a rather high incident of counterfeit banknotes recovered, relative to the number of inhabitants. This does not mean that there are more counterfeits in circulation than in other EU countries, but that the Belgian cash cycle is very efficient in detecting these notes. It is estimated that about 80 per cent of counterfeit notes detected are printed in offset and 20 per cent are opportunistic counterfeits in laser or inkjet printing.

There is very close co-operation between the National Bank of Belgium (NBB) and the Federal Police Central Anti-Counterfeiting Office, with a part of the unit physically working in the NBB premises. This enables every counterfeit note to be examined and classified as to origin, technique and material used etc., giving the police in the field valuable information of what to look for. If the unit finds that counterfeit notes originated e.g. in the Naples area of Italy or in Bulgaria, the field operational unit will not have to look for a manufacturing site in Belgium but can concentrate instead on finding the middleman or distributor of the counterfeits. About 85 per cent of counterfeits are detected within the banking operation and only 15 per cent outside of it. This means that a large majority of counterfeits do what the counterfeiters aim for; they circulate before ending their - probably only a few weeks long - life cycle at the bank's sorting machines. Those that are detected outside the banking system have a shorter life still, perhaps only a few hours or days. This points to the need to educate cash handlers as well as the public to detect counterfeits. The machine readable features checked by the banking system are of course the final end of any counterfeit, but they come into force only after the counterfeit has done the maximum damage.

Although most counterfeits detected in Belgium are Euro notes - the €20 and €50 are the most common - their different origins make this business totally international. Close co-ordination between national police units is therefore highly important. For Euro counterfeits and within the EU, this co-ordination role is played by Europol, while for non-Euro counterfeits and operations outside the EU, it is often Interpol that acts as the co-ordinator. Fighting counterfeit banknotes before they reach the public has become more difficult - and more international - since the advent of the Internet. Criminals can now order material, such as security foils, online or they can buy whole consignments of fake notes through the Dark Net, cutting out whole risk segments. In consequence, it has become as important for law enforcement to attack the supply and distribution chain of counterfeits, as it is for Central Banks to make the notes difficult to counterfeit.

PASSPORT AND ID FRAUD - URGENT AND COMPLEX

The relentless flood of refugees fleeing war and terrorism and the almost equally relentless fear of terrorism in our midst have moved the question of passport and ID fraud into the public conscience, especially in Belgium. Passport and ID fraud is even more complex than banknote counterfeiting, explains Superintendent Sartorius. A banknote is either genuine or counterfeit and, in the case of the Euro, there are seven notes that can be

counterfeited. The number of different passports and ID documents that can be falsified is almost beyond counting. A false passport or ID card is very rarely a complete counterfeit, more likely it is a genuine document that has been altered, or a stolen blank document fraudulently personalized, a genuine document used by a look-alike or a fraudulently obtained genuine document on the base of false breeder documents or false declarations.

For travel within the Schengen area, ID cards and passports are equally useful but ID cards are perhaps a little less difficult to forge. Criminals attack for example, the standard polycarbonate ID card, which has the security features in the front, from the back, by shaving the polycarbonate card body down to a thin layer, which includes all the security features that protect the personal information. The chip that is embedded in the card is destroyed in the process, but the chip is not read at normal police checks and a genuine ID card with a non-functioning chip is not automatically invalid. Having arrived at a thin plastic front layer, criminals insert a sheet with the new personal information, photo, secondary photo and machine-readable information on the back and seal it with a new clear polycarbonate layer. The process is not perfect but it will fool most casual observers.

The extraordinarily high level of technical security of modern passports and ID cards means that instead of physically altering a document, criminals increasingly try to attack the 'issuing chain', by providing easier to forge source documents to obtain genuine ID cards or passports. Superintendent Sartorius said that Belgium is fortunate in having a very complete national register that includes all relevant information about a citizen or resident and that can be searched by the police, e.g. name, date and place of birth and present and past addresses. This makes introducing false source documents much more difficult. Such civil registers are not

universal, not even within the EU or the Schengen area. Even when such registers exist, they may be local or regional, making verification of an ID document more difficult, as they may not be centrally searchable. There are of course concerns about privacy, but very strict and definitive regulation about who can search what can alleviate some of these concerns.

Superintendent Sartorius thinks that the number and the kind of security features on most modern EU passports is sufficient to deter forgers, although as there is a learning process even among criminals, regular update of features makes sense. Excellent design and brilliant security features in passports or ID cards are no longer the full answer to ID fraud. However, it makes sense for countries that still have passports that do not reach the high present level of security to update these but it seems just as important, if not more so, to close all weak points in the issuing chain before adding new technological marvels to passports and ID cards.

THOSE THAT HAVE NOTHING

This leaves the question of what to do with refugees that arrive without any ID document at all or that have thrown away their ID documents to disguise where they came from, in order to be accepted more easily as genuinely deserving cases. Here the identification data given, whether genuine or false, has to be taken at face value and needs to be combined with a fingerprint or other biometric feature to link the person to a document, which is in turn entered into a EU or international database. While giving no certainty about the true identity of the person involved, it shows at least if the same person tries to claim asylum in several places, even under a different name. ■

DATES TO REMEMBER

09/05/2016

Start of registration

05/08/2016

Last day of early registration fee

12/09/2016

Registration closes

05-07/10/2016

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