



The Tourism Safety Initiative (TSI) is a project of the Tourism Business Council South Africa (TBCSA). Information Summaries (Infosums) are produced on a fortnightly basis and are aimed at providing information related to safety and security matters and how they impact, or could impact, the tourism space in South Africa.

Airport Follow- Home Robberies Infosum 03/2016

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Overview

This Infosum is an extract from the latest edition of the Servamus (February 2016) by Mahlogonolo Stephina Thobane, lecturer in Criminology and Security Science at UNISA

Introduction

With the opening up of South Africa to the international market after the April 1994 democratic elections in the country, there was a noticeable increase in the numbers of tourists coming to South Africa. The Department of Tourism announced that, in 2013, South Africa had reached its highest number of international tourists, exceeding the ten million mark. Statistics South Africa (StatsSA) (2015) reported that 14 317 908 foreign nationals visited South Africa in 2013, which is an increase of 8.7% in comparison to the previous year.

As expected, this dramatic increase had a positive impact on South Africa's economy and assists in job creation. Figures show that the direct contribution to the gross domestic product (GDP) grew from R83.9 million in 2011 to R93.4 million in 2013; and further to R103.5 million in 2013 (StatsSA). Similarly, tourism was attributed with the creation of 617 287 jobs in 2013 (an increase of 4.1% in comparison to 2011) (StatsSA, 2015). Where the 2014/2015 period is concerned, the Minister of Tourism, Mr Derek Hanekom, confirmed that "tourism's total contribution to the national economy for the 2014/2015 period was R323 billion supporting over 1.4 million jobs. This performance firmly entrenches the tourism sector as a major contributor to national economic development. It reinforces tourism's position as one of the six pillars of economic growth in our country" (Department of Tourism, 2015).

As shown by the above statistics, South Africa's tourism industry continues to show good growth. The above information also highlights the importance of tourism to the local economy. However, because the decision by tourists to travel to a country is affected by perceptions about safety and crime, the perception that there are high levels of crime in South Africa has a negative impact on the country's competitiveness as a desired place of destination for international tourists. Accordingly, the personal perceptions and experiences of foreign tourists in South Africa have become a vital factor in encouraging either to return, or to recommend South Africa to friends and family as a travel destination.

In an effort to raise awareness and assist South African residents and (more especially) international tourists to protect themselves against potential victimisation, this article discusses a specific form of crime affecting tourism, known as airport follow-home robberies.

Airport follow-home robberies

Even though there has been a decrease in the number of robberies at the OR Tambo International Airport since September 2014, the hijacking and robbery, often at gunpoint, of people (particularly foreign tourists) leaving the airport and proceeding on their way to their destinations has been on an increase (Phaladi, 2015). Anon (2014) explains that robbers go to the airport, rent vehicles and target specific individuals carrying valuables, and then rob them on their way to their destination. Additionally, it was also confirmed during an arrest of one of the members of a syndicate that the vehicle used during a particular robbery was hijacked. To ensure cooperation from victims, suspects pose as police officials, use blue lights to pull their victims over and flash bogus police appointment cards at the victims before robbing them of their belongings (Anon 2015a).

Cloete, quoted by Anon (2013a), confirms that the police are investigating the possibility that the syndicates have spotters operating at the airport. Spotters are members of the gang whose function is to wander around inside the airport, with the aim of identifying a potential victim. After a victim has been identified, the information is passed on to other syndicate members who may be waiting in a car outside the airport. The latter group then use the information obtained from the spotters to detect their victim, who is then followed to their destination and eventually robbed.

In cases where victims are robbed en route to their destination, offenders may also use their vehicles to box the victims' vehicle – in order to force it to come to standstill.

A personal interview with a Mr Panyapanya (a former security officer at OR Tambo International Airport) revealed that offenders are professionals and that they have prior information, such as the arrival times of specific flights and information about their target(s) being on a specific plane. In agreement with Panyapanya, Anon (2015) adds that the airport gang consists of experienced criminals with prior convictions such as murder, armed robbery and possession of unlicensed firearms and ammunitions.

When asked how offenders know who their targets are, even before they land in South Africa, Panyapanya pointed out that airport follow-home robbery is an organised crime and explained that the criminals have various “links” (in the domestic country of the victim as well as in South Africa). Accordingly, these “links” feed the robbers confidential information. As described by Panyapanya, offenders wait at the arrivals terminals and pretend to be waiting for friends or family members, or even pose as meter taxi drivers. He further clarifies that, in a case where the perpetrators are not necessarily waiting for anyone specific, they study people’s behavior to determine whether they are carrying large sums of cash or expensive goods, such as jewelry. He also mentioned that these robbers prefer business people, particularly Chinese nationals, as it is believed that they often trade in jewelry, gold and diamonds. Nonetheless, this does not mean that tourists from other countries are exempt from being victimized (Panyapanya, 2015).

Preventative measures

The National Investigating Unit (NIU), consisting of retired SAPS detectives, was formed under the leadership of the national police commissioner, Riah Phiyega. The sole purpose of the NIU is to help in the solving of airport- and gang-related crime. Gen Phiyega, at the time of the unit’s establishment, explained that retired detectives were requested to assist for two reasons. Firstly, it is believed that their experience will add value in the solving of the crime. Secondly, retired detectives working closely with the young detectives allows for the passing on of wisdom and expertise from the older to the younger generation (Anon, 2014).

It has been conveyed that, since the formation of the unit, the number of criminal acts relating to tourists have shown a sharp decline (Anon, 2014). In 2014 alone, 18 members of the so-called airport gang were arrested. One suspect was arrested in June 2015 during a shoot-out with the police, during which two other suspects were shot dead (Phaladi, 2015). Phaladi (2015) adds that another gang member was arrested in July 2015. Gen Phiyega stated that the arrests of the gang members is a breakthrough, because the masterminds are behind bars and their detention may also deter other potential criminals from committing airport follow-home robberies.¹

¹ Editor note: the latest incident took place on 04 February 2016; hence one may deduce that there are still gang members at large.

Bedfordview Community Policing Forum (CPF) member Marina Conistas is of the opinion that, in order to combat this type of crime, the possibility of involvement of transfer companies should also be investigated (Anon, 2013b).

On the other hand, Roane (2014) warns that the police also struggle to follow up on cases of tourist follow-home robberies due to the fact that victims are usually in the country for only a short period of time. As a result, the length of their stay often hampers successful follow-up and investigation by the SAPS.

How to protect yourself

The following are guidelines on how victims can protect themselves:

- If you are carrying a large amount of money or foreign currency, be extra vigilant. Pay attention in and around the airport and be alert when leaving the airport.
- Should you suspect that you are being followed, do not go home; rather drive to the nearest police station.
- If possible, call 10111 and ask the police to send a vehicle to escort you (Van Schie & SAPA 2014).

Although the tourism industry is experiencing a positive marketing climate and growth rate, there is increasing concern regarding the personal safety and security of tourists. In the light of the negative perceptions that already exist, it becomes increasingly important to address this issue as a matter of urgency.

As reported in this article, the issue of airport robberies causes grave concern and bears a negative impact on tourism and the local economy of South Africa. Similarly, what is more worrying is the violent nature in which the criminal activity is carried out, in that victims are often injured and/or lose their lives. Therefore it behoves all in South Africa who benefit from foreign tourists to share the concern of the authorities about attacks on tourists by joining forces to ensure the safety of tourists.