

# 7 held as heroin rings are smashed

By Marçal Joanilho

NARCOTICS agents believe they have smashed two major Hongkong-based syndicates that used mahjong tiles to smuggle tens of kilogrammes of pure heroin to New York.

Seven people, including two Americans who were arrested in Brooklyn, New York, have been held in a three-month investigation conducted by officers of Hongkong's Narcotics Bureau and the United States Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA).

It is the first known case of an international drug syndicate using the complicated tactic and time-consuming process of concealing heroin in mahjong tiles.

The arrests also revealed a new area of cooperation between Americans and Asians, who are known to be closely knit in the illicit drug trade.

According to Narcotics Bureau Chief Inspector Tang Kam-moon, DEA undercover agents entered into a deal with the supplier in Hongkong in January.

The two Americans, aged 20 and 21, were arrested in mid-February when they allegedly delivered 3.5 kilogrammes of No 4 heroin to the undercover agents in an apartment in Brooklyn.

The pure heroin, worth US\$35 million (HK\$270 million) in the US, was concealed in the 288 tiles of two sets of mahjong.

To trace and identify the principals of the syndicate, DEA extended its investigations to Hongkong and, with the help of the Narcotics Bureau, moved in on the suspects.

Narcotics detectives raided a hotel room in

Tsim Sha Tsui East early Wednesday morning, and arrested four local Chinese, including the owner of a travel agency.

Officers then made a series of raids yesterday and arrested a 20-year-old woman and impounded \$100,000 in cash and valuables.

But no drugs were found in the five raided premises.

Chief Inspector Tang said the arrests revealed that there were two well-organised syndicates - one that smuggled drugs from China to Hongkong and then to the US, the other smuggling drugs from Thailand to Hongkong and then the US.

He said this was the first uncovered drug smuggling tactic using mahjong tiles that the bureau had come across and that they suspected the packing could have been done across the border.

Chief Inspector Tang said they would be informing counterparts in China to help trace the mahjong makers and the drug route.

The drug is believed to have come overland from the Golden Triangle via Hunan and Guangdong before being smuggled into Hongkong.

Anti-drug agents are still trying to establish how the two sets of mahjong landed in New York unnoticed until they were delivered to the undercover agents.

They also believe the two syndicates were responsible for tens of kilogrammes of drugs smuggled into New York during the past three months.

The woman suspect has been released on bail while the four men are being detained.