Malaysia uses sniffer dogs to fight movie pirates

By Clarence Fernandez
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SEPANG, Malaysia (Reuters) - Malaysia deployed two sniffer dogs in its battle against music and movie piracy on Tuesday, becoming the first country in the world to use the animals to hunt for disks of illegal recordings hidden in cargo.

Two female Black Labradors, "Flo" and "Lucky," demonstrated their technique by sniffing through piles of sealed cartons in an air cargo hangar and then signaling their handler about a suspect package by sitting down in front of it.

"It's cost-effective, and in terms of time, it's very effective too," said Domestic Trade Minister Shafie Apdal, adding that the dogs took only 10 minutes to check boxes that security officials would have needed a day to plow through.

Malaysia, which figures on a U.S. watchlist on piracy, has dramatically stepped up efforts to rein in copyright pirates as it negotiates a free-trade pact with the United States.

Shafie said Malaysia would try out the dogs for a month, carrying out searches at border posts, in cargo hangars and storage centers to see where they functioned best before the government made a decision on setting up a permanent dog unit.

"The arrival and deployment of Lucky and Flo will make Malaysia the first country in the world to test the capability of dogs in detecting optical disks in hidden compartments or shipments," he said at Malaysia's biggest air-cargo center in Sepang outside Kuala Lumpur.

The trial is a joint effort of the Malaysian authorities and the Motion Picture Association, which groups six major Hollywood movie companies.

The MPA has spent $17,000 on the dogs, including eight months of training to detect the chemicals used in optical discs, one official said.
"No one's ever trained dogs to sniff polycarbonate before,"

Mike Ellis told reporters. "These dogs were taken from scratch and trained how to sniff these chemicals."

Trained by a handler in Northern Ireland who usually teaches dogs to find bombs, Lucky and Flo are aged three-and-a-half, and can find, but cannot distinguish between, CDs and DVDs, burned and replicated disks, or legitimate and pirate disks.

"However, the dogs will be valuable in locating disks being shipped in unlikely or unregistered containers," the MPA said.

The grouping estimates that copyright theft cost its members about $1.2 billion in lost revenue in the Asia-Pacific region last year, a fraction of annual worldwide losses of $6 billion.

In 2006, Malaysian authorities seized 25 VCD replicating machines capable of turning out 87 million pirated disks a year.

Handler Dave Mayberry said Lucky and Flo would start work alongside Malaysian officials on Wednesday, despite feeling the heat after moving from temperatures of 3 degrees Celsius (37.4 F) in Britain to 36 degrees Celsius (96.8 F) in Malaysia.

"They have a very thick coat for the cold weather at home," he said. "The longer they stay here, the thinner that will get."
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