



Air safety measures still leave big gaps

Mark Dodd

DANGEROUS gaps still exist in Australian airport security procedures, a year after the Wheeler report detailed a litany of deficiencies at the nation's major gateways.

In response to Thursday's trans-Atlantic terror plot, the federal Government announced yesterday a review of airline security regulations but there were no immediate changes to existing rules.

Manufacturers of security equipment say there are problems with detecting liquid or plastic explosives in carry-on luggage while the federal Opposition has questioned why hundreds of airport employee security cards remain unaccounted for.

No requests had been issued for Australian airlines to carry out special checks for liquid or plastic explosives, an Australian Federal Police spokesman said last night.

In line with the Wheeler recommendations, a senior federal police commander was now stationed at all major airports while local airlines had employed sky marshals to improve on board security, Attorney-General Philip Ruddock said yesterday.

But Mr Ruddock said Australian airport security would not be changed unless the Government received specific advice of a terrorist threat.

"I take advice from competent agencies on a regular basis," Mr

Ruddock said.

"In a situation we've just seen those issues are addressed again to see whether the information we have available to us will prompt a change.

"No recommendations have been made to me for such a change."

Opposition spokesman for homeland security Arch Bevis said serious flaws remained in Australia's airport security.

"They (the Government) said that they would have 100 per cent of luggage on international flights being X-rayed and that would be in place two years ago. It's still not in place in every airport," said Mr Bevis.

Regional airport security in Australia was also below standard, he claimed.

And he challenged the Government to account for 384 missing aviation security identification cards.

"Cards will occasionally be missing or lost but it doesn't mean we're happy about it," said a spokesman for federal Transport and Regional Services Minister Warren Truss.

The federal Government had spent \$1.2 billion on aviation security since September 11, 2001, while security upgrades had been carried out or were in the process of being implemented at more than 150 regional airports.

Australian carriers had been

forced to incur major costs as a result of adopting new security requirements.

National carrier Qantas's security bill topped \$260 million last year while the company now employs more than 1500 locally based security personnel.

Sydney Airports Corporation will have spent close to \$90 million to meet "checked baggage screening" measures by the end of the year, the respected *Australian National Security Magazine* reports in its latest issue on aviation security.

The Weekend Australian understands Qantas pilots have mixed feelings about the presence of armed air marshals — usually two, travelling in high-value seats in business class.

One West Australian-based designer of airport security equipment said it was inevitable that more rigorous screening for explosives would be carried out on hand-held luggage.

Gary Pennefather, of QR Sciences, whose screening equipment for plastic explosives will soon be installed at more than 1000 US air checkpoints, says that within the Australian airline industry there was general acknowledgement that "carry-on" screening measures for plastic explosives at Australian airports was a weak spot.