

Security now tighter at Woodlands Checkpoint: Motorists

Boot checks done one at a time, number of people in vehicle also cross-checked

By HOE PEI SHAN

SECURITY has been tighter in the last two days at the Woodlands Checkpoint, according to motorists who use it regularly.

Vehicles are now inspected one at a time – instead of in groups as before – by customs officials, who also cross-check the number of passengers in the car.

The measures follow the authorities' announcement on Tuesday that a Malaysian woman sneaked through the checkpoint by car to enter Singapore illegally last week.

Motorists said the tweaks may have contributed to the atypical mid-week jams that plagued the Causeway on Wednesday and yesterday, with some drivers saying they took hours to clear immigration and customs.

Previously, vehicle inspections were done in batches, with border officers checking the boots of three to five cars in one go, and letting each group drive off together.

But on Wednesday, cars were stopped and inspected individually, and allowed to drive away only one at a time.

"It was very unusual, and it's the first time I've seen it happen," said health-care professional Chan Wai Chuen, 54, a Singaporean who drives between Singapore and Kuala Lumpur every fortnight for work. He was stuck in traffic at the border for more than two hours on Wednesday afternoon.

"It was a real hassle, as we had to wait three times longer than usual to get through, and that was the cause of the jam."

Mr Chan said he understood border security may have been heightened following Friday's intrusion, but said "there has to be a better way". On its own,

he added, the actual vehicle check "did not seem any more thorough".

Yesterday, motorists noticed yet another change: drivers had to hand slips of paper with the number of passengers written down by the passport control officer to the vehicle inspection officer conducting the boot checks, to be cross-checked.

"They wrote down our car plate number and the number of people, handed us the piece of paper, and told us to submit it to the other officer later on, adding to procedure and the time taken to clear all checks," said Malaysian student Liow Wei Ting, 25, who travels daily from Johor to Singapore for school.

She hoped the measure would be a temporary response to a crisis, recalling it being last implemented in 2008, after former Jemaah Islamiah leader Mas Selamat Kastari escaped from detention.

Draughtsman Lee Cheng Hwui, 44, who has driven to work in Singapore daily for the last 18 years, also remembered having to pass such slips of paper after the Sept 11, 2001 terrorist attacks in the United States.

The Immigration and Checkpoints Authority (ICA) declined to confirm the changes, and would only say:



A long line of vehicles on the Causeway waiting to enter Singapore at 6.15pm yesterday. Drivers said they took hours to clear immigration and customs at the Woodlands Checkpoint on Wednesday and yesterday. ST PHOTO: LIM SIN THAI

"Traffic build-up is inevitable when many vehicles and travellers converge at the checkpoint at the same time."

The authority separately issued an advisory yesterday, forecasting heavy traffic at both the Woodlands and Tuas checkpoints from next Monday through to

early February, due to the Chinese New Year holidays. It also said it "will put in every effort and continue to take the necessary measures to improve clearance efficiency as much as possible without compromising security".

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Malaysian teacher had no passport

THE Malaysian woman who allegedly sneaked past border security at the Woodlands Checkpoint a week ago had no passport or identification documents on her when she was arrested.

This means teacher Nurul Ruhana Ishak, 28, may have also slipped past the Malaysian immigration checkpoint before arriving at the Singapore end of the Causeway.

"Currently, we do not have any information on how she could have passed through both checkpoints without being stopped," the Malaysian High Commission told The Straits Times yesterday.

Deputy High Commissioner Kamsiah Kamaruddin said Malaysian authorities are looking into how Nurul could have gone through the Johor checkpoint.

The high commission said Singapore police "did not find any incriminating evidence or material" on Nurul, who was nabbed on Monday after allegedly driving into the compound of Singapore's Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) without authorisation. It said that the woman, who is from Kedah and teaches at a secondary school in Selangor, has "refused to speak to anyone", including her family members.

A divorcee believed to have mental health problems, she allegedly slipped past the duty officer at Woodlands Checkpoint by tailgating a car just before 2pm last Friday.

An alarm was raised two minutes later and the arrival zone was locked down, but her Malaysian-registered car was gone. An islandwide alert was issued. A probe into the border intrusion is ongoing.

Police said on Wednesday that Nurul has been charged with criminal trespass at the MFA compound and remanded at the Institute of Mental Health for a psychiatric assessment. The Straits Times understands that her parents and younger brother are in Singapore.

The high commission said it will provide her the necessary consular assistance.

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