

DEBT WARS

I see your thugs and I raise you a Gatto

JAMES DOWLING

A WAR has broken out between debt collectors and a company linked to underworld figure Mick Gatto.

Controversial Melbourne builder Maxstra Constructions, which according to court documents allegedly owes subcontractors hundreds of thousands of dollars, has been accused of hiring thugs to call in debts.

A complaint has also been made to the anti-bikie Echo Taskforce after a window installer was allegedly abducted over a debt owed to Maxstra.

Maxstra denies these allegations. It says there are a high number of disputes across the construction industry and it is in dispute with only a very small proportion of its subcontractors.

But the frustrated subcontractors have hit back and hired a company linked to Mr Gatto to get what they claim they are owed.

Anthony Swords, of Gatto Corporate Solutions, said he was not afraid to battle it out with Maxstra's debt collectors. "They can't keep not paying tradies, it is putting people's livelihoods at risk," Mr Swords said.

Cabinet maker John Florea has hired GCS to chase \$240,000 for work from five jobs he did for Maxstra, including on an \$11 million city-apartment complex.



"They just pay you little amounts to come back to the job. When you can no longer afford to go to the site they claim breach of contract," Mr Florea said.

The window installer, who in court documents claims Maxstra owes him \$116,000, made a complaint to the Echo Taskforce after he said a group of heavies came to his factory and forced him to take a ride.

The man told police they

wanted him to pay Maxstra money it claimed he owed the builder for a breach of contract. He told police he was dumped at an isolated stretch of road after an altercation.

A steel installer claims he is owed \$380,000 in labour and materials for Maxstra work, including money for work on a new cancer centre.

Stonnington Council ended its contract with Maxstra to build the near \$2 million

TH King Pavilion after it said three subcontractors contacted them to say they had not been paid. The case is currently in arbitration.

Glen Eira Council has also tried to end its contract with Maxstra to build the Duncan McKinnon pavilion. It is believed the council wanted to cut ties with the builder after subcontractors claimed they too had not been paid.

Maxstra, replying through

its lawyers, denied it had hired thugs to collect debts.

"Maxstra has never engaged, hired or associated with 'heavies' or 'bikies'," it said in a statement.

"Any disputes it has had have been resolved or are the subject of ordinary lawful dispute resolution processes.

"To this end it has engaged both professional men and women to assist it in resolving disputes."

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Drugs take back seat

MORE than \$13 million worth of illegal drugs was found after a car crash on Friday night.

The green Toyota Camry sedan crashed into two parked cars in Sydney's south about 7.20pm before the driver ran from the scene.

Police found two blue ice chests and six white buckets, all filled with vacuum-sealed bags of white powder, believed to be pseudoephedrine.

Supt Gary Charlesworth said it was one of the biggest drug hauls the local force had seen.

"It was pleasantly surprising," he said. "This kind of luck rarely happens in policing."

He said the drug found in the car was commonly used to make crystal meth and was likely on its way to a "drug house".

RUDOLPH A FASHION FAV

CHRISTMAS jumpers, once only thought stylish by knitting-needle wielding grannies, are enjoying a renaissance after being adopted as a festive fashion statement by young revellers.

Responding to soaring demand for the colourful and eccentric creations, UK vintage clothing group Beyond Retro has opened a temporary store selling only Christmas jumpers in London's trendy Old Street.

Times have changed since the 2001 film *Bridget Jones's Diary*, in which Colin Firth's character Mark Darcy is made to look uncool by wearing a woollen pullover decorated with Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer.



Colin Firth's retro jumper is all the rage this Christmas.

Aussie hurt in suicide attack

A RENOWNED Afghan-Australian musician was rushed to hospital after a Taliban suicide attack targeted a school where he was watching his students perform.

Ahmad Naser Sarmast, who works between Monash University in Melbourne and the Musicians' Institute of Afghanistan, was knocked unconscious after the teenage suicide bomber detonated an explosive in Kabul, killing several people.

The Taliban claimed responsibility for the attack. "A suicide bomber blew the audience in Istiqlal High School," said Afghan interior ministry spokesman Sediq



Dr Sarmast recovering in a Kabul hospital.

Sedqiqi. The auditorium at the school, which is attached to Kabul's long-established French cultural centre, was packed at the time.

Fifteen people were rushed



HUSTLE PAYS MEN MORE

EMAILS leaked as part of the ongoing Sony cyber hack scandal reveal *Hunger Games* star and Oscar winner

Jennifer Lawrence, and co-star Amy Adams, were paid less than their male director and co-stars in last year's *American Hustle*.

The film notched \$304 million worldwide.

Java landslide kills 12, many still missing

A LANDSLIDE triggered by torrential downpours has killed at least eight people and left 100 missing on Indonesia's main island of Java, an official said yesterday.

Hundreds of rescuers were digging through mud and rubble after the landslide buried scores of houses in Jember village in central Java late on Friday, the national disaster agency said.

"At the moment eight people have been found dead and we are still looking for 100 unaccounted for," agency spokesman Sutopo Purwo Nugroho said.

"Conditions on the ground are pretty tough and we need heavy machines to clear the road that has been covered by the landslide."

A second agency official, who declined to give his name, said that 200 rescuers and 500 volunteers had joined the search for the missing.

The rainy season has started in tropical Indonesia, a time when landslides triggered by heavy rains and floods are common. The national disaster agency estimates about half of the country's 250 million population lives in areas prone to landslides.