

Hong Kong Customs and Australian Border Force jointly host Regional Conference on Combating Illicit Cigarettes (with photos)

Hong Kong Customs and the Australian Border Force cohosted the two-day Regional Conference on Combating Illicit Cigarette on November 20 and 21, with the meeting concluding today (November 21).

This is the first large-scale regional conference on combating illicit cigarettes held by Hong Kong Customs. The two-day Conference gathered more than 40 representatives from 18 Asia-Pacific (A/P) members of the World Customs Organization (WCO), experts from law enforcement agencies and public health professionals, including a representative from the Hong Kong Department of Health. They had an in-depth exchange of views and shared experiences on combating the cross-border smuggling of cigarettes and enforcing tobacco control policies.

In her opening speech at the Conference, the Commissioner of Customs and Excise, Ms Louise Ho, said that illicit cigarette smuggling has been a concern to many Customs administrations. In the A/P region, the situations were particularly serious in Hong Kong and Australia. According to the WCO Illicit Trade Report 2023, 90 Customs administrations reported more than 38 000 illicit tobacco cases and seized over 3.1 billion sticks of illicit cigarettes last year, representing an increase of 54 per cent and 46 per cent respectively when compared with 2022.

Hong Kong Customs always spares no effort in combating illicit cigarette activities. The amount of illicit cigarettes seized in the past four years has been continuously increasing, from around 55 million sticks in 2019 to 652 million sticks in 2023. These upward trends have indicated ongoing challenges in combating cross-border cigarette smuggling and the need for enhanced enforcement capacity. Therefore, Hong Kong Customs and the Australian Border Force cohosted the conference with an aim to facilitate the exchange of knowledge and experiences among A/P members in combating illicit cigarettes to further enhance the co-operation and law enforcement capabilities of regional members in this field.

At the same time, the Australian Border Force at the conference also reviewed and refined the A/P joint operation against the smuggling of illicit cigarettes codenamed "Yarrowdark", which it initiated this year. The participating law enforcement agencies also evaluated the trends and patterns of illicit cigarette activities to further strengthen the effectiveness of regional co-operation against illicit cigarettes.

The conference also included a series of thematic presentations and

discussions focusing on illicit cigarettes and public health concerns. Participants explored enforcement strategies and effectiveness from diverse perspectives, while fostering co-operation and information sharing among A/P members and related stakeholders.

In addition, Hong Kong Customs took this opportunity to hold bilateral meetings with law enforcement agencies in Vietnam, Cambodia, Japan, New Zealand and Singapore respectively to explore collaboration in combating cigarette smuggling activities and promote a more comprehensive exchange of intelligence information to foster closer mutual co-operation.

