

Hong Kong Customs conducts special operation against illicit cigarette telephone-ordering activities in public rental housing (with photo)

Hong Kong Customs has mounted an enforcement operation codenamed "Thunder IV" in the past three weeks to combat illicit cigarette telephone-ordering activities in public rental housing (PRH). A total of about 2 million suspected illicit cigarettes with an estimated market value of about \$5.6 million and a duty potential of about \$3.9 million were seized across the territory. Fifty-five persons were arrested.

During the operation, Customs officers detected 53 relevant cases in different districts, including Chai Wan, Shau Kei Wan, Ap Lei Chau, Kwun Tong, Wong Tai Sin, Sham Shui Po, Kwai Chung, Tsuen Wan, Sha Tin, Tai Po, Sheung Shui, Tuen Mun and Yuen Long, resulting in the above-mentioned seizures of suspected illicit cigarettes. In those cases, Customs officers raided four suspected illicit cigarette storage centres and detained six vehicles suspected to be used for illicit cigarette distribution.

In the above-mentioned cases, 44 men and 11 women, aged between 21 and 88, were arrested, including both illicit cigarette sellers and buyers. All the cases have been duly followed up.

Customs started the "Thunder" special operation in September last year to step up enforcement against illicit cigarette activities in PRH. The operation has been in its fourth phase till now and will be continued.

Customs has all along been enhancing enforcement against illicit cigarette activities on all fronts, including cross-boundary smuggling, storage and distribution as well as peddling, through intelligence analysis. If PRH units are found to be involved in illicit cigarette activities, Customs will notify the Housing Department for follow-up action after the conclusion of court proceedings.

Customs reminds members of the public that selling and buying of illicit cigarettes are illegal. Under the Dutiable Commodities Ordinance, anyone involved in dealing with, possession of, selling or buying illicit cigarettes commits an offence. The maximum penalty upon conviction is a fine of \$1 million and imprisonment for two years.

Members of the public may report any suspected illicit cigarette activities to Customs' 24-hour hotline 2545 6182 or its dedicated crime-reporting email account (crimereport@customs.gov.hk).

