

Hong Kong Customs detects four large-scale sea smuggling cases with suspected illicit cigarettes and duty-not-paid manufactured tobacco seizure worth about \$240 million (with photos)

Hong Kong Customs stepped up efforts to combat illicit cigarette smuggling activities by sea. Through risk assessment and intelligence analysis, four related cases involving sea containers were detected from October 3 to 21. A total of about 51 million suspected illicit cigarettes and about 1 700 kilograms of suspected duty-not-paid manufactured tobacco with an estimated total market value of about \$240 million and a duty potential of about \$180 million were seized.

In the first case, Customs on October 3 selected and inspected a 40-foot container, arriving from Thailand to Hong Kong and declared as carrying rice noodles, at the Kwai Chung Customhouse Cargo Examination Compound. Upon inspection, Customs officers seized about 8 million suspected illicit cigarettes inside the container, and a 63-year-old man suspected to be connected with the case was arrested.

In the second case, on October 10, Customs selected and inspected two 40-foot containers, arriving from Singapore via the Mainland to Hong Kong and declared as carrying lighting accessories and kitchen utensils, at the Tuen Mun River Trade Terminal Customs Cargo Examination Compound. Upon inspection, Customs officers seized about 21 million suspected illicit cigarettes inside the containers.

In the third case, Customs inspected a 40-foot container declared as carrying kitchen utensils and arriving in Hong Kong from Vietnam via the Mainland on October 16. About 10 million suspected illicit cigarettes were seized, and a 66-year-old truck driver was arrested. During the subsequent control delivery operation on the same day, Customs officers further arrested a 44-year-old man at a metal hut in Tong Yan San Tsuen, Yuen Long. The next day, they seized about 1.8 million suspected illicit cigarettes and about 1 700kg of suspected duty-not-paid manufactured tobacco at another metal hut in Kwu Tung, New Territories.

In the fourth case, after a follow-up investigation, Customs on October 21 inspected a 40-foot container, arriving in Hong Kong from Vietnam via the Mainland and declared as carrying kitchen utensils, at the Tuen Mun River Trade Terminal Customs Cargo Examination Compound. Upon inspection, Customs officers seized about 11 million suspected illicit cigarettes inside.

Investigations of the four cases are ongoing.

Customs will continue its risk assessment and intelligence analysis for interception at source as well as through its multipronged enforcement strategy targeting storage, distribution and peddling to spare no effort in combating illicit cigarette activities.

Smuggling is a serious offence. Under the Import and Export Ordinance, any person found guilty of importing or exporting unmanifested cargo is liable to a maximum fine of \$2 million and imprisonment for seven years.

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.

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Members of the public may report any suspected illicit cigarette activities to Customs' 24-hour hotline 182 80 80 or its dedicated crime-reporting email account (crimereport@customs.gov.hk) or online form (eform.cefs.gov.hk/form/ced002).

