

Hong Kong Customs detects illicit cigarette cases at different levels with seizures worth about \$50 million (with photos)

With the continuing of the territory-wide large-scale anti-illicit cigarette enforcement operation "Tempest", mounted mid-February, Hong Kong Customs on March 5 and yesterday (March 7) detected a cigarette smuggling case and a case involving two suspected cigarette storage centres in Yuen Long and Tsuen Wan respectively. A total of about 11.2 million suspected illicit cigarettes, with a total estimated market value of about \$50 million and a duty potential of about \$37 million, were seized.

In the first case, Customs detected an illicit cigarette smuggling case inside a metal hut in Hung Shui Kiu, Yuen Long, on March 5. About 11.07 million suspected illicit cigarettes were seized inside a 40-foot container and two trucks, and a 40-year-old man who claimed to be transportation worker and is suspected to be connected with the case was arrested.

In the second instance, Customs officers uncovered a case using shopping mall stores as illicit cigarette storage centres in Tsuen Wan last night. A total of about 500 000 suspected illicit cigarettes were seized from two stores, and a 64-year-old man who claimed to be unemployed and is suspected to be connected with the case was arrested. An initial investigation revealed that the illicit cigarette storage centres were mainly used to supply illicit cigarettes to the Tsuen Wan area. Also, Customs believes that criminals use shopping mall stores located on floors with high vacancy rates as illicit cigarette storage and distribution centres to facilitate storage and handling of illicit cigarettes, and to increase the difficulties of Customs in detecting illicit cigarettes activities.

The arrested person in the first case has been released on bail pending further investigation, while the man in the second case has been charged with "dealing with goods to which the Dutiable Commodities Ordinance applies" and will appear at the West Kowloon Magistrates' Courts on April 8.

Customs will continue to combat illicit cigarette activities on all fronts, including cross-boundary smuggling, storage and distribution as well as peddling, through a multipronged enforcement approach.

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.

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) or online form (eform.cefs.gov.hk/form/ced002/).

