

Hong Kong Customs mounts special operation against unfair trade practices by fitness centres

â€‹Hong Kong Customs has mounted a special operation codenamed "Tornado" since the end of last year against unfair trade practices by fitness centres. Customs officers conducted enforcement actions in the past week and smashed three fitness centres in Mong Kok and Yau Ma Tei. Eight persons were arrested after being suspected of having engaged in aggressive commercial practices in the course of selling fitness services in contravention of the Trade Descriptions Ordinance (TDO). Around \$670,000 is involved in the service contracts.

Customs officers earlier received information alleging that staff members of three fitness centres in Mong Kok and Yau Ma Tei imposed undue influence and used aggressive commercial practices when selling fitness services to customers, forcing them to procure fitness club membership.

Subsequent to an in-depth investigation, Customs officers took enforcement actions and arrested eight persons. Aged between 21 and 26, they comprise one director and seven salespersons of the fitness centres.

The operation is ongoing.

Until yesterday (August 26), 19 persons were arrested during the "Tornado" operation after being suspected of having engaged in aggressive commercial practices in the course of selling fitness services in contravention of the TDO. The arrested persons, aged between 21 and 43, comprise four directors and 15 salespersons of the fitness centres. A total of about \$1.8 million is involved in the service contracts.

The Group Head (Unfair Trade Practice Investigation), Ms Suzette Ip, said at a press conference today (August 27) that Hong Kong Customs will continue to step up enforcement to combat unfair trade practices by fitness centres.

She reminded traders that they must comply with the requirements of the TDO. Consumers are also reminded to procure services from reputable shops. Before making a purchase decision, consumers must not give their identity cards, credit cards or automated teller machine cards to salespersons. They must also refuse firmly to sign any paper if they do not fully understand the service and price details, or if they do not intend to make a purchase.

Under the TDO, any trader commits an offence of engaging in aggressive commercial practices if harassment, coercion or undue influence is used to impair a consumer's freedom of choice or conduct, causing the consumer to make a transactional decision. The maximum penalty upon conviction is a fine of \$500,000 and imprisonment for five years.

Stressing its priority given to consumer rights protection and zero tolerance for unfair trade practices, Hong Kong Customs pledges that it will continue its stringent enforcement actions against such practices by fitness centres.

Members of the public may report any suspected violations of the TD0 to Customs' 24-hour hotline 2545 6182 or its dedicated crime-reporting email account (crimereport@customs.gov.hk).