

Hong Kong Customs seizes about 1.45 million suspected illicit cigarettes in two-phased special operation against illicit cigarette telephone ordering activities in public rental housing (with photos)

Hong Kong Customs has mounted an enforcement operation codenamed "Thunder" since September this year to combat illicit cigarette telephone ordering activities in public rental housing (PRH). Customs officers conducted the second phase of the operation and mounted an operation codenamed "Thunder II" from October 27 to yesterday (November 18). In the three-week second phase operation, about 900 000 suspected illicit cigarettes and 4 000 suspected illicit heat-not-burn (HNB) products with an estimated market value of about \$2.3 million and a duty potential of about \$1.7 million were seized. Sixty-eight persons were arrested.

During the operation, Customs officers detected 66 relevant cases in different districts, including Aberdeen, North Point, Kwun Tong, Wong Tai Sin, Sham Shui Po, Kwai Chung, Tai Po, Fanling, Sheung Shui, Yuen Long and Tuen Mun, resulting in the above-mentioned seizures of suspected illicit cigarettes and suspected illicit HNB products. In those cases, Customs officers have raided seven suspected illicit cigarette storages in PRH units and two suspected illicit cigarette storages in San Tin, Yuen Long. Six vehicles suspected to be used for illicit cigarette distribution were also detained.

Fifty-nine men and nine women, aged between 15 and 89, were arrested in the above-mentioned cases. All the cases have been duly followed up.

In the first phase of the operation, Customs seized about 550 000 suspected illicit cigarettes with an estimated market value of about \$1.4 million and a duty potential of about \$1 million. Twenty-seven persons were arrested.

In the two phases of operation against illicit cigarette telephone ordering activities in PRH, a total of about 1.45 million suspected illicit cigarettes with an estimated market value of about \$3.7 million and a duty potential of about \$2.7 million were seized. Ninety-five persons were arrested in total.

Customs will continue to enhance 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).

