

Hong Kong Customs steps up enforcement actions against seaborne illicit cigarette smuggling activities with seizures worth about \$100 million (with photo)

Hong Kong Customs mounted a special operation over the past two weeks to combat illicit cigarette smuggling activities by sea and detected four large-scale illicit cigarette smuggling cases involving seaborne containers. A total of about 28 million suspected illicit cigarettes with an estimated market value of about \$100 million and a duty potential of about \$69 million were seized.

In the first case, through risk assessment and intelligence analysis, Customs selected and inspected a 40-foot container, declared as carrying plastic boards and arriving in Hong Kong from Taiwan, on November 15 at the Kwai Chung Customhouse Cargo Examination Compound. Upon inspection, Customs officers seized about 9.3 million suspected illicit cigarettes inside the container.

On the same day, Customs detected another case at the Tuen Mun River Trade Terminal Customs Cargo Examination Compound where officers inspected a 40-foot container, declared as carrying flower pots and decoration lighting and arriving in Hong Kong from Nansha, Guangdong. About 1.6 million suspected illicit cigarettes were seized therein.

After a follow-up investigation, Customs officers targeted two 40-foot containers, both declared as carrying washbowls and arriving in Hong Kong from Nansha, Guangdong, for inspection on November 22. A total of about 5.5 million suspected illicit cigarettes were seized inside the two containers, leading to the successful detection of the third case.

In the fourth case, through risk assessment, Customs officers selected a 40-foot container, declared to contain electronic parts and arriving in Hong Kong from Thailand, for inspection at the Kwai Chung Customhouse Cargo Examination Compound on November 27. About 11 million suspected illicit cigarettes were seized inside the container.

During the operation, seven men aged between 34 and 63, suspected to be connected with the case, were arrested and the five containers suspected to be involved with the cases were detained.

All the above-mentioned cases have been duly followed up. While believing that some of the suspected illicit cigarettes would have been re-exported to overseas regions, Customs will continue to trace the source and flow of the illicit cigarettes. The likelihood of further arrests is not

ruled out.

Customs noticed that illicit cigarette syndicates would conceal the illicit cigarettes by mixing them with daily products, such as flower pots, plastic washbowls or Christmas decorations, in order to evade customs inspection and increase the difficulty of customs enforcement.

With the Christmas holidays approaching, Customs will continue to step up enforcement to vigorously combat illicit cigarette activities through risk assessment, intelligence analysis and interception at source.

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.

Customs stresses that it is an offence to buy or sell illicit cigarettes. 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).

