

Illicit cigarette seizures by Hong Kong Customs this year exceed annual figures of last four years (with photos)

Hong Kong Customs has so far this year seized over 66 million suspected illicit cigarettes, a figure that already exceeds the annual seizure amounts for each of the last four years. In the latest three cases on May 16 and yesterday (May 18), a total of about 2.36 million suspected illicit cigarettes and about 30 000 suspected illicit heat-not-burn (HNB) products were seized at the Air Mail Centre of Hong Kong International Airport (HKIA), the Kwai Chung Customhouse Cargo Examination Compound and the River Trade Terminal, with an estimated market value of about \$6.6 million and a duty potential of about \$4.5 million.

Customs officers inspected three inbound air mail parcels from Japan at HKIA's Air Mail Centre on May 16 and yesterday and seized about 30 000 suspected HNB products inside the parcels. After follow-up investigation, Customs officers yesterday arrested a 43-year-old man suspected to be connected with the case in a residential unit in Tseung Kwan O.

Through risk assessment, Customs officers yesterday selected a seaborne inbound container declared to contain instant noodles arriving in Hong Kong from Vietnam for inspection. About 2.2 million suspected illicit cigarettes were found inside the container. A 48-year-old woman and a 30-year-old man suspected to be connected with the case were arrested.

On the same day, Customs officers also selected a seaborne transshipment container, which was declared to contain assorted goods, from Huangpu, Guangdong, heading for Panama via Hong Kong for inspection. Upon inspection, Customs officers found about 160 000 suspected illicit cigarettes inside the container.

Investigations of all the cases are ongoing.

Customs will continue its risk assessment and intelligence analysis for interception at source as well as through its multi-pronged enforcement strategy targeting storage, distribution and peddling to combat illicit cigarette activities.

Customs made an annual seizure of 63 million suspected illicit cigarettes in 2016, followed by 60.7 million, 53.4 million and 55 million in the next three years.

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 (DCO), tobacco products are dutiable goods to which the DCO applies. All HNB products containing tobacco in content are also dutiable goods subject to the control of the DCO. Any person who imports, possesses, sells or buys dutiable commodities without a valid licence 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).

