

Illicit cigarette seizures by Hong Kong Customs this year exceed annual figures of past two decades (with photo)

Hong Kong Customs has so far this year seized over 405 million suspected illicit cigarettes, a figure that already exceeds the annual seizure amounts for each of the past two decades. It also marked a two-fold increase over last year's total seizure amount. In the latest case on December 10, Customs has seized about 47 million suspected illicit cigarettes with an estimated market value of about \$130 million and a duty potential of about \$89 million in Tsing Yi. It has become the largest cigarette smuggling case detected by Customs in the past two decades.

During an anti-illicit cigarette operation mounted on that day in Tsing Yi, Customs officers intercepted three container trucks on Sai Tso Wan Road and seized about 31 million suspected illicit cigarettes inside the three containers. After an initial investigation, Customs officers searched another two containers at a nearby pier and seized about 16 million suspected illicit cigarettes.

During the operation, Customs officers arrested three men, aged between 46 and 55, and detained five containers suspected to be connected to the case.

Investigation is ongoing. Customs will continue to trace the source and the flow of the illicit cigarettes. The likelihood of further arrests is not ruled out.

Among the cigarette smuggling cases cracked by Customs this year, there were 17 mega cases involving 500 000 cigarettes or more, of which eight were cases involved over 10 million cigarettes or more, while there were 22 cases and four cases respectively last year. Of this year's 17 cases, 11 of them were detected at the import level and six of them were detected at transshipment and export levels. The number of illicit cigarettes seized were about 209 million, an increase of nearly one-fold as compared to last year's 102 million illicit cigarettes.

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 spare no effort in combating illicit cigarette activities.

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).

