

Hong Kong Customs steps up enforcement to combat illicit cigarette peddling activities

Hong Kong Customs mounted a large-scale special anti-illicit cigarette operation codenamed "Tempest" in February 19 to step up enforcement in combating illicit cigarette activities on all fronts at each control point and across various districts. During the operation, Customs not only cracked down on cross-boundary cigarette smuggling activities by interception in the upper stream and shut down storage and distribution centres in the middle, but also tackled peddling activities in the lower end. Today (April 15), Customs also conducted operations in Sham Shui Po and detected three illicit cigarette peddling cases.

Customs officers intercepted three suspicious men, aged 23, 59 and 67 respectively, in Sham Shui Po this afternoon and seized between 200 to 800 sticks of suspected illicit cigarettes on each of them. They all claimed the cigarettes were for personal use. The three arrested men were charged with "possession of goods to which the Dutiable Commodities Ordinance applies".

As of today, Customs has detected a total of 179 peddling cases of illicit cigarettes this year, with a total of about 150 000 suspected illicit cigarettes, with an estimated market value of about \$610,000 and a duty potential of about \$430,000, seized. A total of 179 individuals, including 160 men and 19 women, aged between 17 and 86, were arrested. Most of them are buyers of illicit cigarettes and there is a trend of young people being involved. Also, Customs found that more than half of the cases occurred in Sham Shui Po, Kwun Tong, Tuen Mun and Tsuen Wan districts. The number of illicit cigarettes seized from the arrested persons ranged from 100 to over 6 000 sticks, with the majority intended for personal use.

Customs stresses that it is an offence to buy or sell illicit cigarettes. Among the illicit cigarette cases in 2023, the court sentenced a maximum penalty of four months' imprisonment on individuals who purchased illegal cigarettes for personal use. Customs reminds members of the public, especially young people, to never become involved in illicit cigarette activities to avoid creating a criminal record that affects their future.

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).