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## **OLAF plays key role in Italian seizure of nearly 55 million cigarettes**

**Following a complex operation spearheaded by the European Anti-Fraud Office (OLAF), the Italian Guardia di Finanza seized this month three lorries in the Port of Trieste containing nearly 55 million cigarettes destined for the EU black market.**

It all started with Turkish Customs informing OLAF back in August 2018 about a suspicious convoy consisting of three lorries loaded with a significant quantity of cigarettes of the brand SIPAN 2015. The convoy was arriving by ferry to the port of Trieste from Mersin in Turkey, destined for a Spanish company in the Canary Islands. The transport was considered as being at high risk for potential smuggling.

OLAF subsequently informed colleagues in the General Headquarters at the Guardia di Finanza in Rome.. The lorries containing the cigarettes remained at the port of Trieste for several months, and were secretly kept under surveillance by Guardia di Finanza. Meanwhile, OLAF supported the Italian colleagues in liaising with the Spanish authorities to investigate the company declared on paper as the consignee of the cigarettes.

The Guardia di Finanza could ascertain that behind this convoy was a criminal organisation that, through using documentation of fictitious or unaware Italian and foreign companies, was trying to appear to move out the lorries and the cigarettes from the port of Trieste. The lorries would in fact be only moved on paper, as the sole aim of the operation was to smuggle the cigarettes into the EU without paying customs duties and taxes.

With enough evidence confirming the suspicions of illegal operation, the Prosecution Office in Trieste issued an order to seize the lorries. On 8 May 2020, a total of 54,711,900 cigarettes were seized and prevented from entering the EU black market. It is estimated that the smuggled cigarettes would have incurred a total loss of around €11 million to EU and EU Member States budgets.

OLAF Director-General, Mr Ville Itälä said, *"We congratulate our Italian colleagues for this successful operation. This seizure is at the same time also a very concrete example of the important role that OLAF plays in the protection of the EU's financial interests. Through our close cooperation with authorities in the Member States and our partnerships with third countries, our activities contribute to exceptional results. On this occasion we also thank the Turkish Customs for their excellent cooperation."*

## Background

OLAF has an explicit mandate to fight tobacco smuggling, which causes heavy yearly losses to the budgets of Member States and the EU in evaded customs duties and taxes. To this end, OLAF constantly monitors and gathers relevant information from several sources and analyse it to detect systems of fraud, including the people and companies involved as well as several other parameters. When the information is considered as reliable, OLAF then passes it on to the competent services in the EU Member States for further actions.

### OLAF mission, mandate and competences:

OLAF's mission is to detect, investigate and stop fraud with EU funds.

OLAF fulfils its mission by:

- carrying out independent investigations into fraud and corruption involving EU funds, so as to ensure that all EU taxpayers' money reaches projects that can create jobs and growth in Europe;
- contributing to strengthening citizens' trust in the EU Institutions by investigating serious misconduct by EU staff and members of the EU Institutions;
- developing a sound EU anti-fraud policy.

In its independent investigative function, OLAF can investigate matters relating to fraud, corruption and other offences affecting the EU financial interests concerning:

- all EU expenditure: the main spending categories are Structural Funds, agricultural policy and rural development funds, direct expenditure and external aid;
- some areas of EU revenue, mainly customs duties;
- suspicions of serious misconduct by EU staff and members of the EU institutions.

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