



EUROPEAN ANTI-FRAUD OFFICE

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Operation NOXIA: OLAF leads operation against dangerous substances

Operation NOXIA: Over 1221 tonnes of illicit waste, 27 469 litres and 5 tonnes of illicit pesticides as well as over 67 million cigarettes and 10 tonnes of tobacco have been seized as a result of the OLAF-led ASEM Joint Customs Operation. The operation took place in spring 2023 and targeted deep-sea containers in EU and Asian ports in a bid to prevent dangerous substances from being smuggled.

Joint Customs Operations aim at placing shipments under surveillance for a limited time in order to detect sensitive, prohibited or dangerous goods – in this case pesticides and cigarettes headed from Asia to Europe as well as waste shipments from Europe to Asia.

In addition to these goods, customs authorities in close cooperation with other fellow national authorities also detained several shipments of illicit products containing over 1 600 000 batteries, 5 127 pieces of clothing, 100 game consoles and 14.5 tonnes of fertilisers – either found to be counterfeit or intended to be smuggled.

Operation NOXIA – code-named in a reference to the English word “noxious” which means harmful, poisonous due to its focus on dangerous substances – was conducted as a part of the joint efforts of OLAF and the participating countries in the fight against dangerous substances. OLAF coordinated the operation from the planning phase to the analysis of results, provided a safe communication IT environment for information sharing, analysed intelligence and brought together the responsible liaison officers. Operation NOXIA was supported by EUROPOL and the World Customs Organization (WCO).

Ville Itälä, OLAF Director-General, said: *“We are immensely proud of the seamless collaboration between OLAF and our partners at ASEM during the Operation NOXIA. The ASEM brings together 53 partners from across Europe and Asia, which represent around 65 percent of global GDP and 68 percent of global trade. Together, we have exemplified the power of international cooperation, demonstrating that with united efforts, we can combat illicit activities and protect citizens and markets from dangerous substances and smuggling.”*

The countries that participated in Operation Noxia were: 24 EU Member States, UK, Australia, Bangladesh, Cambodia, People’s Republic of China, India, Indonesia, Lao PDR, Mongolia, Myanmar, New Zealand, Pakistan, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Viet Nam.

Background

ASEM, short for The Asia-Europe Meeting, is an intergovernmental process established in 1996 to foster dialogue and cooperation between Asia and Europe. The ASEM dialogue addresses political, economic and cultural issues, with the objective of strengthening the relationship between the two regions, in a spirit of mutual respect and equal partnership. Joint Customs Operations are part of the inter-governmental discussions and their implementation is agreed by the Customs administrations of the ASEM states. ASEM has 53 Members around the world.

The conclusions of the 13th ASEM meeting of Directors General/Commissioners of Customs in Ha Long, Vietnam from 9 to 10 October 2019 call for global action to combat the illicit trade of dangerous substances. The participants agreed to proceed with the implementation of an ASEM Joint Customs Operation (JCO) to be mutually agreed by the Customs administrations of the ASEM states. The European Anti-Fraud Office (OLAF) was designated as the coordinator for such a JCO with the support of the General Department of Customs and Excise of Cambodia, the General department of Customs of Viet Nam and the General Administration of The General Administration of Belgian Customs and Excises and Excises. The JCO took place at the end of the COVID-19 crisis.

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.

Once OLAF has completed its investigation, it is for the competent EU and national authorities to examine and decide on the follow-up of OLAF's recommendations. All persons concerned are presumed to be innocent until proven guilty in a competent national or EU court of law.

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