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 ***News Release***

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**Fishy tale of cigarettes smuggled to UK hidden in aquarium pumps**

Two men and a woman, who smuggled cigarettes into the UK hidden among fish pumps, have received sentences totalling more than 10 years in jail after an investigation by HM Revenue and Customs (HMRC).

Al Gui He, 38, from Charlton, Ya Ming He, 44, of Greenwich, and Shou Chen, 48, address unknown, were caught out when Border Force officers at Heathrow Airport, discovered hidden tobacco that had arrived from China and referred it to HMRC for investigation.

The trio used lock-ups at six storage facilities across London to store the illicit cigarettes and hand-rolling tobacco (HRT), evading £475,000 in unpaid excise duty in the process.

HMRC officers searched a self-storage unit in Charlton rented by Gui He and Chen who used the alias Huang Xin. They found HRT concealed in table tops and cigarettes among packaging for army toys, fish pumps and dummy camera boxes. Three days later, on 17 June, 2016, they swooped on a storage unit in New Cross and arrested the trio as they turned up for a delivery of illicit tobacco.

Chen, the brains behind the crime, fled before the trial started while his right-hand man Gui He disappeared once the jury started considering its verdict.

Simon Kiefer, Assistant Director, Fraud Investigation Service, HMRC, said:

“Chen and Gui He dodged paying tax and are now trying to avoid justice by going on the run. We need the help of the public to track them down so they can begin their prison sentence.

"These criminals created an uneven playing field for legitimate businesses and put a burden on the honest majority. HMRC will continue to crack down on those involved in the sale, smuggling or distribution of illicit tobacco which is stealing from the public.

“This was a lengthy and complex investigation, which involved the close co-operation of a number agencies. We are satisfied that the sentences passed reflect the serious nature of these offences, including the significant loss to the public revenue and also the danger to public health.

“If you know the whereabouts of Chen and Gui He, or of anyone committing tobacco fraud, please report it to HMRC online or by calling our Fraud Hotline on 0800 788 887.”

Some 116,200 counterfeit cigarettes hidden in boxes along with 96kg of hand rolling tobacco, evading more than £50,000 in excise duty, were found in lock-ups across South London in Charlton, Bermondsey, New Cross, Eltham and Beckenham.

The trio had also evaded around £425,000 importing HRT through Heathrow hidden in restaurant table tops, attempting to cover their tracks by claiming they were for a Chinese restaurant which did not exist.

Chen flew on a one-way ticket to China before the trial started at Woolwich Crown Court on 23 July, 2018 while Gui He also absconded. They were found guilty and sentenced in their absence to five and four years in jail respectively. Ming He was sentenced to 16 months imprisonment.

On sentencing, His Honour Judge David Miller, said:

“This was a highly sophisticated enterprise involving concealments of tobacco in furniture via freight importations and cigarettes via parcels from China.

“The large quantity of counterfeit cigarettes onto the UK market amounted to a significant risk to public health.”

The seized tobacco was forfeited to the Crown along with £1,315 cash found during searches and warrants issued for the arrest of Chen and Al Gui He.

**Notes for Editors**

1. Shou Chen (aka Chuanshou CHEN or Huang XIN), address unknown, DOB 08/04/1970, was sentenced in his absence to five years in jail at Woolwich Crown Court on 13 August, 2018. He was charged with fraudulent evasion of duty, contrary to section 170(2) of the Customs and Management Act 1979, unauthorised use of a trade mark in relation to goods, contrary to section 92(1)(c) of the Trade Marks Act 1994 and possession of an identity document with improper intention, contrary to section 4(1) and (2) of the Identity Documents Act 2010.
2. Al Gui He, of Sunbury Street, Charlton, London, SE18, DOB 03/10/1979 was sentenced in his absence to four years in jail. He was charged with fraudulent evasion of duty, contrary to section 170(2) of the Customs and Management Act 1979, unauthorised use of a trade mark in relation to goods, contrary to section 92(1)(c) of the Trade Marks Act 1994.
3. Ya Ming He, of Ridge Close, Greenwich, London, SE28, DOB 21/04/1974. She was charged with unauthorised use of a trade mark in relation to goods, contrary to section 92(1)(c) of the Trade Marks Act 1994 and sentenced to 16 months in jail.
4. Anyone with information about the whereabouts of Shou Chen or Al Gui He or people suspected of smuggling, selling or storing illegal tobacco should report it online at: <https://www.gov.uk/report-tobacco-or-alcohol-tax-evasion> or contact our hotline on 0800 788 887.
5. Follow HMRC Press Office on Twitter @HMRCpressoffice

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