

OLAF-led Joint Customs Operation NOXIA II delivers major results against the illicit trade of dangerous substances

The European Anti-Fraud Office (OLAF) led a large-scale joint customs operation conducted by the customs administrations of 40 partner countries in Asia and Europe under the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM), with the support of the World Customs Organization (WCO). Operation NOXIA II targeted shipments suspected of containing illicit cigarettes, waste, drug precursors, and pesticides.

NOXIA II is a unique joint customs operation designed to facilitate the exchange of real-time information on suspicious shipments and place them under surveillance by participating customs authorities simultaneously in Asia and Europe, in order to detect and seize the illicit goods targeted by the operation. Some of the key objectives of the operation are to exchange knowledge about fraud schemes, routes and emerging trends, and to build a collaborative network of customs officers working together to tackle the challenges posed by global illicit trafficking.

Seventeen countries from the Asia-Pacific region took part in the operation: Australia, Bangladesh, Cambodia, the People's Republic of China (mainland and Hong Kong SAR), India, Kazakhstan, Lao PDR, Malaysia, Mongolia, Myanmar, New Zealand, Pakistan, the Philippines, the Republic of Korea, Singapore, Thailand and Viet Nam; and twenty-two EU Member States: Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Poland, Portugal, Slovakia, Slovenia and Spain, together with the United Kingdom.

The operation led to the coordinated seizure by the participating customs authorities of 149.5 million cigarettes, over 3,000 tonnes of illicit waste, 66.5 kg of pseudoephedrine, 52 tonnes of solid pesticides, and 21,000 litres of liquid pesticides.

The conclusion of the operation does not signify the end of the work. One of its key goals is to establish an ongoing exchange of information within a network of like-minded expert investigators, coordinated by OLAF.

Cigarette smuggling

NOXIA II revealed the use of sophisticated global routes to smuggle cigarettes into the Asia-Pacific region and Europe. The smuggling of cigarettes via sea containers remains the main threat, given the low risk it presents compared with the high illicit profits derived from the trafficking of large volumes of cigarettes. Other global trends detected include the use of dark vessels, air freight, e-commerce and postal parcels. Over 105 tonnes of tobacco, more than 223,000 e-cigarettes and 114 litres of e-liquids were also intercepted, preventing large quantities of illegal and unregulated products from entering consumer markets.

Over 3,000 tonnes of illicit waste intercepted

More than 3,000 tonnes of illicit waste were intercepted while being moved from Europe to Asia. Much of this waste was falsely declared as “end-of-waste” material—supposedly treated and reusable—or as directly usable in production processes. Significant quantities of these materials were untreated, non-recyclable, or even contaminated, posing serious environmental and health risks. The seized waste included electronic waste, textile and paper waste, plastic waste, car wrecks, ink cartridges and rubber tyres.

The operation confirmed the consolidation of various fraudulent techniques, such as triangulation, diversion and false declarations, which attempt to remove thousands of tonnes of waste from the control of the relevant authorities.

Pesticides

Among the illegal pesticides attempting to enter the EU, the main seizures involved fungicides containing carbendazim—a substance banned in the EU because it is toxic for reproduction—and plant protection products containing cyanamide, which is prohibited in the EU due to its harmful effects on human health, particularly on farmworkers. In addition, 5,000 pieces of lure for insect pest control were seized.

Drug precursors

Every year, dual-use substances are smuggled into the EU for the production of synthetic drugs in illegal factories. These drugs are produced in pill form and sold illegally in small quantities around the world. The aim of Operation NOXIA II was to shed light on the movement of these substances globally. During the operation, a significant quantity of pseudoephedrine was seized—a substance mostly used in medicine as a nasal decongestant and strictly regulated, as it is a key component in the production of methamphetamine.

OLAF Acting Director-General Salla Saastamoinen said: *“Operation NOXIA II is an excellent example of what we can achieve through coordinated international action. We have intercepted significant quantities of dangerous and illegal goods before they could reach*

consumers in Europe and Asia. This is thanks to the close cooperation between customs authorities in Asia and Europe, and the coordinating role of OLAF in providing and sharing intelligence and expertise. These results clearly show that joint efforts deliver real impact. The results of the operation also underline the continued importance of customs cooperation in tackling cross-border fraud.”

Background

Operation NOXIA II builds on the success of the [first Operation NOXIA](#), conducted in spring 2023. Both operations have focused on identifying and intercepting illicit cigarettes and dangerous substances traded in and between Asia and Europe, particularly through deep-sea container shipments.

The Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) is an intergovernmental dialogue process established in 1996 to strengthen cooperation between the two regions. It currently brings together 53 partners, representing around 68% of global trade. Joint Customs Operations under ASEM are designed to monitor high-risk consignments for a limited period to detect and seize prohibited or hazardous goods, thereby enhancing trade security and environmental protection.

OLAF mission, mandate and competences:

OLAF's mission is to detect, investigate and stop wrongdoings related EU funds.

OLAF fulfils its mission by:

- carrying out independent investigations into fraud, corruption and irregularities 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 irregularities 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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