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THIS STORY IS FROM APRIL 3, 2012

Demand for imported cigarettes fuels smuggling

K R RAJEEV (https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/TOIREPORTER/AUTHOR-K-R-RAJEEV-479224153.cms) / TNN / Updated: Apr 3, 2012, 05:49 IST

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to-shift-jagathy-sreekumar-to-kozhikode-move-over-gold, gadgets, and gizmos. Fuelled by increased demand in north India, foreign cigarettes have become the latest lucrative contraband among smugglers.



Customs officials at Karipur International Airport did not have to think twice before subjecting the oversized baggage of Kunjammu Abdul Aziz, a passenger from Dubai, to a detailed search when he landed at the airport last Wednesday.

The search yielded 26,000 foreign cigarettes. The face of Abdul Aziz was still fresh in the minds of customs officials as it was just five months back he was booked for trying to sneak in 32,600 illegal cigarettes.

"Over 60 cases were registered last year in the Karipur Airport against people trying to sneak in commercial quantities of foreign cigarettes. Seven cases have been registered in the first three months this year," said Joannes George, assistant commissioner of customs at the airport.

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The favourite brand with the smugglers has been the Gudang Garam, the aromatic flavoured cigarettes made in Indonesia. The brand constitutes around 80% of the illegal cigarettes smuggled through the airport with foreign brands like 555 and Malboro making up the rest.

The clove, mint, and cardamom flavoured sticks commands a premium in Mumbai and north Indian markets, especially in the cold season. Many smokers believe its spice flavour would keep them warm and serve as a defence against cold and fever!

Industry sources says a carton of Gudang Garam could fetch Rs 1,300 in north India during peak winter season, while it would cost below Rs 500 when sourced from free ports like Dubai.

The cigarettes are illegally imported as personal baggage, or via illegal door-to-door courier services mostly from Dubai and other UAE cities.

Directorate of Revenue Intelligence (DRI) officials said that [cigarette smuggling](#) has become sophisticated with major organized rackets leading the operations.

"They employ paid carriers who make frequent return trips to UAE staying there for just 2-3 days. Many agents had even acquired frequent flier status with a leading airlines," a DRI official said.

The officials fear that cigarette smuggling could eventually turn into organized crime rackets and force the carriers to smuggle high value goods and narcotics. "There are cases in which the carriers have tried to smuggle saffron concealed in cigarette cartons," a DRI official said.

Meanwhile, law enforcement authorities say the existing customs law does not allow the arrest of the offender as the value of smuggled goods is less than Rs 5 lakh. Customs can only fine them and confiscate the goods.

Usually the offenders are booked for economic offence under section 111 of the Customs Act for illegal imports of goods in commercial quantity.

They are also booked under the Cigarettes and Other Tobacco Products (Packaging and Labelling) Rules, 2006, for trying to distribute cigarette packs without mandatory health warning.

Udayan Lall, director of New Delhi-based [Tobacco Institute of India](#) (TII) said high taxes on cigarettes in India have increased the demand for smuggled international brands, which are cheaper. "The large and porous borders of India contribute to the easy availability of smuggled brands," he said.

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To stem the influx of contraband, Lall says, the government should ban sale of cigarettes in duty-free shops and exclude it from the list of duty-free baggage. Quoting the figures from Euromonitor International, an international research organization, Lall said illegal cigarettes in India account for 16% of the industry, having grown by 58% between 2004 and 2009 making India the 6th largest illicit cigarette market in the world.

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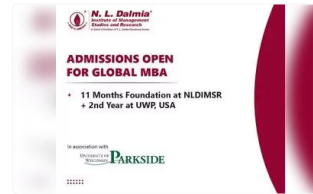
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