



Stakeholder Update

FROM THE IPR CENTER OUTREACH & TRAINING UNIT



Illicit cigarettes seized in black market probe worth nearly \$5 million



CARTAGENA, Colombia – Homeland Security Investigations–Cartagena, working cooperatively with Colombian authorities, have seized more than two million packs of cigarettes worth nearly \$2.3 million as part of an ongoing joint investigation of counterfeit cigarettes believed to be part of an illegal trade of black-market tobacco.

The seizures led to the arrest of eight individuals, based on information received by the Colombian Navy that a Colombian flagged vessel was smuggling illicit cigarettes from Panama through San Andres Island and Cartagena, with a final destination of Aruba.

The seizures are part of *Operation Up in Smoke*, a joint effort between the National Intellectual Property Rights Coordination Center; Customs and Border Protection (CBP) Container Security Initiative (CSI)-Cartagena; Colombian Navy; and Fiscal and Customs Police, a unit of the Colombian National Police in charge of investigating large financial frauds. Their work also supports the National Directorate of Taxes and Customs.

The investigation was conducted with the assistance of brand protection experts from Phillip Morris International.

Last month, seven individuals were arrested following the seizure of more than \$1.7 million worth of counterfeit cigarettes. The arrests and seizure occurred after the Colombian Navy interdicted a vessel in Colombian waters about 40 miles north east of Cerro Aguila (Antioquia). After boarding the vessel, authorities discovered more than 1.7 million packs of black-market cigarettes bearing the brand name of “WIN.” It appears the vessel traveled from Panamanian waters where the individuals allegedly acquired the illegal cargo.



In July, authorities arrested six individuals after the Colombian Navy interdicted two go-fast vessels in Colombian waters off the coast of Necoclí, a town and municipality in Colombia located on the eastern shore of the Gulf of Urabá. After boarding the vessels, authorities discovered 187,500 packs of black-market cigarettes bearing the brand names of “ULTIMA” and “GOLD CITY.”

Since its beginning, *Operation Up In Smoke* has resulted in the seizure of more than four million packs of cigarettes with a street value of \$4.6 million. Authorities have made a total of 32 arrests.