

ZIMBABWE INDEPENDENT

Botswana Seizes US\$3,1 million Zim Cigarettes

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BOTSWANA a fortnight ago intercepted cigarettes worth US\$3,1 million from Zimbabwe that were to be smuggled to Asian countries such as India and China.

The smugglers allegedly used undesignated entry points to Botswana and were confronted by the police at Tshesebe but managed to escape leaving the contraband behind.

Botswana police found 108 boxes with 54 000 cartons of Derby cigarettes, 133 boxes containing 66 500 cartons of Pacific cigarettes, and 128 boxes containing 64 000 cartons of Seviles cigarettes.

Sources at Plumtree Border Post on Tuesday said smuggling through the main border post and several illegal entry points was rife as “truck drivers are well connected”.

“Smuggling of cigarettes has been on the increase since September but we only hear about it when they are arrested in Botswana” said the source.

Drivers would produce fake declarations forms to immigration officials for their smooth passage, said the source.

“A worrying trend has developed in that smugglers only come on certain days when they know (immigration officials) who would be on duty,” the source said. “Secret operations to identify culprits at the border were once conducted but no one was caught as information leaked.”

Matabeleland South police spokesperson Tafanana Dzirutwe declined to comment on the case saying it was a “diplomatic issue that can be handled in Harare”.

Botswana is fast becoming a prime route for a cigarette smuggling syndicate to Asian countries and South Africa.

Finance minister Tendai Biti on Wednesday expressed concern over high rates of smuggling, mainly at Beitbridge Border Post.

Adam Molai, executive chairman of Savanna Tobacco, the manufacturer of **Pacific** and Derby cigarettes, professed ignorance on the smuggling of his company’s brands.

“Unfortunately I’m not aware of this incident but I can comment on cigarette smuggling in general,” Molai said in a written response to questions from the Zimbabwe Independent. “There is no product in the world, that I’m aware of, that is smuggled as much as cigarettes. In a quest to circumvent paying high excise duties prevailing in their countries of origin, various players choose to attempt to smuggle cigarettes to try and make super profits.”

He said due to resource constraints, his company was not represented in most markets it exports to and relied on third parties to distribute its brands.

“Whilst we take stringent measures to verify the authenticity of all customers buying through extensive due diligence processes that also include the embassies of the countries whose citizens are buying from

us, we cannot vouch for the veracity of the information we get from them,” Molai explained. “In addition to the due diligence process we undertake, we also escort every truck carrying our brands to the point of exit to ensure that our export documents are acquitted by Zimra given that cigarettes are an excisable product. This also serves the purpose of ensuring that the goods being exported have left the Zimbabwean territory as we remain liable for local excise duties until our cigarettes have left Zimbabwe.”

The scourge of smuggling, he said, also included counterfeiting of cigarettes.

“As recently as last year our Pacific brand, like all other established brands, fell victim to counterfeiters in South Africa,” Molai said. “Should you go to the informal markets in Botswana, Zambia and South Africa you will find large volumes of Madison, Kingsgate or Everest. These cigarettes are not exported by BAT Zimbabwe, but still end up on the market in Botswana, South Africa, and Zambia.”