EDITOR’S NOTE

Dear Readers,

As the world awakens after the winter season, we at RILO WE are ready to get right back into the swing of things and welcome the arrival of this spring issue of the RILO Info Magazine!

Spring means new beginnings and this issue is full of them! Not only do we have the honour to introduce the new Secretary General of the WCO, Mr. Ian Saunders and the new Vice-Chair of the WCO Europe Region, Mr. Øystein Børmer. But we are also very pleased to welcome two new National Contact Points to the RILO WE family: Ms. Cecilia Karlsson-Faudot (Sweden) and Ms. Elsa Beaugas (France). Congratulations on the new positions - we look forward to the future cooperation!

For our RILO WE team, a spring issue always comes with a sense of optimism. And there is a lot to look forward to!

This edition includes articles focusing on significant seizures from France (contaminated foods), Germany (luxury vehicles /captagon), Sweden (perfumes containing illegal allergens), Italy (cultured pearls), Spain (cocaine) and Ireland (OZEMPIC ingredient), all of them illustrating noteworthy trends and modi operandi.

In this issue, you will also find a highly useful research from Norway on explosive precursor chemicals, including risk indicators for suspicious shipments.

In addition, in these pages we explore the potential of innovative Virtual Reality training methods for customs officers, as already implemented by Finland.

And, of course, we are bringing you up to date with regard of the latest international control operations as well as meetings, conferences and workshops with the participation of the RILO WE.

As always, we are eternally grateful to our community members who read and support the RILO Info Magazine.

Enjoy the spring season and happy reading!

Your RILO WE Team
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Dear colleagues,

On the first day of the new year in 2024, I, Cecilia Karlsson Faudot, stepped into the role of the National Contact Point (NCP) for Sweden. This responsibility is not merely a job; it is a commitment that I embrace with a sense of humility, fueled by the aspiration to contribute to its positive evolution.

My professional journey traces back to the autumn of 2012 when I commenced my tenure as an Expert in Intelligence and Analysis methods at the Swedish Customs. However, my roots in this field dig even deeper, as I dedicated 12 years of service at Europol, where I held the position of Senior Analyst. During my time at Europol, I carried diverse responsibilities, notably overseeing analysis projects centered around organized crime originating from the former Soviet states and within ethnic Albanian groups.

One of my recent significant undertakings was within Empact. Here, I led an operational initiative aimed at combating organized crime, focusing specifically on High-Risk Criminal Networks. After four years of dedicated efforts, the project culminated in a successful, coordinated international operation involving countries and organizations spanning 16 nations across four continents. Our collective focus extended to addressing customs-related criminal activities, marking a pivotal milestone in our pursuit of a safer global community.

In my present role within Empact, my focus remains steadfast on combating corruption in ports. Simultaneously, I am dedicated to the refinement of analytical models within the intricate processes of high-value targets and operational task forces.

My international experiences have imparted a profound understanding of the paramount importance of communication and collaboration. These elements are the backbone upon which we can effectively fulfil our crucial mission of preventing and halting criminal activities in our society. As I embark on this new chapter, I eagerly anticipate collaborating with all my esteemed colleagues within RILO West.

Best regards, 

Cecilia Karlsson Faudot – New NCP Sweden

Dear colleagues,

My name is Elsa and I am the new NCP for French customs. I took my position at the end of 2023, replacing my colleague Corinne Makhloufi.

I had trouble writing this short introduction about me after seeing the wonderful careers you have all already achieved, all the projects you have worked on, and all the topics you have dealt with.

I joined French customs 4 years ago and started at the General directorate, based in Paris, working on excise products, and more specifically on tobaccos.

Since I started working on customs fraud I am discovering a all new world. I feel very lucky to have the opportunity to learn everyday and I intend to continue that way.

I look forward to meeting you all in Köln next September.

Best regards, 

Elsa Beaugas – New NCP France
WORLD CUSTOMS ORGANIZATION WELCOMES NEW SECRETARY GENERAL: MR. IAN SAUNDERS

January 3, 2024, marked a milestone in the history of the World Customs Organization (WCO) as Mr. Ian Saunders officially took office as the new Secretary General.

This change in WCO leadership was celebrated by a handover ceremony from Dr. Kunio Mikuriya, the outgoing Secretary General, at the WCO Headquarters in Brussels, Belgium, symbolizing both continuity and the opening of a new chapter for the organization.

In June 2023, at the WCO’s annual Council sessions, Mr. Saunders was elected by the Members, represented by Directors General of Customs from around the world. His nomination by U.S. Customs and Border Protection was not only a reflection of his outstanding career and vision for the future of global Customs operations, but also of the global confidence in his ability to guide the WCO through the ever-evolving landscape of international trade and security.

As Mr. Saunders embarks on his five-year term, he brings a clear and forward-looking agenda to the forefront. In his own words: "While respecting the WCO’s rich past, there is a need to innovate and adapt to modern challenges. I intend to lead the Organization by forging strong and enduring public-private partnerships, leveraging technology, and promoting inclusiveness for effective global Customs cooperation, ensuring transparency and openness as fundamental principles of good governance." This statement was made during his first address to the organization, setting a tone of progressive leadership and commitment to global collaboration.

The WCO Members and the Secretariat staff extend a warm welcome to Mr. Saunders, and collectively look forward to this new phase in the WCO’s history which starts under his leadership. His tenure at the WCO commences at a pivotal time, presenting the opportunity for significant advancements in the world of Customs.

On 24 June 2023, Mr. Ian Saunders was elected Secretary General of the World Customs Organization (WCO). He took office on 1 January 2024.

As WCO Secretary General, he provides leadership and executive management for the global Customs community’s priorities, including developing global Customs instruments, standards and tools; securing and facilitating global trade; protecting revenue collection; building Customs-business partnerships; and delivering capacity building in support of Customs reform and modernization.

Prior to joining the WCO, Mr. Saunders worked as Deputy Assistant Secretary for the Western Hemisphere at the U.S. Department of Commerce. In this role, he was responsible for developing programmes, policies and strategies designed to strengthen the United States’ commercial position in this region of the globe.

Mr. Saunders spent most of his career with U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP), where he held several senior positions including Assistant Commissioner for International Affairs, Deputy Assistant Commissioner for International Affairs, and Acting Deputy Executive Assistant Commissioner for Operations Support. Earlier in his tenure at CBP, he was Director of International Policy and Programs, Director of International Training and Assistance, and held several staff positions working on bilateral, regional and multilateral portfolios. Mr. Saunders entered the U.S. Government Senior Executive Service in 2008.

He has undergraduate and graduate degrees in International Affairs from Georgetown University in Washington DC, and has attended executive courses at Harvard University’s Kennedy School of Government and the American University.
INTRODUCING THE VICE-CHAIR FOR THE WCO EUROPE REGION:
MR. ØYSTEIN BØRMER

Øystein Børmer, Director General of the Norwegian Customs has been appointed as the new Chair of the WCO Europe Region for 2023/2024.

Mr. Børmer has been part of the Norwegian Customs since 2017, having previously occupied various high-level management positions in the Norwegian Government Agency for Financial Management, Ministry of Finance as well as the Norwegian Parliament. His qualifications include, inter alia, a Master of Economics (Cand. Oecon.), 1994 from the University of Oslo.

RILO WE has great confidence in the wealth of experience and expertise he will bring to the role, leading the WCO Europe Region to new heights. We look forward to working under the leadership of Mr. Børmer to continue serving our members and advancing our mission.

The next Regional Heads of Customs Conference will take place on 29th of April 2024 at the WCO Headquarters in Brussels. RILOs from the WCO Europe Region regularly participate in this meeting with an observer status.
French Customs
Le Havre customs officers prevent the import of almost 50 tonnes of unsafe, non-compliant brown rice

The French Customs at Le Havre Port prevented the importation of 48.8 tons of brown rice presenting a danger to consumers health due to insecticides content (acetamipride and imidacloprid) exceeding permitted thresholds

On 17 and 21 January 2024 customs officers at the port of Le Havre made seizures in shipments from Pakistan that were destined for companies in the food industry in the Paris region.

Customs officers take samples of food import shipments, in accordance with European regulations that impose a certain number of physical controls for specific “country/production/contaminants” combinations. These test samples are then sent to a laboratory that looks for pesticides, the maximum content of which must not exceed 0.010 micrograms of acetamipride and imidacloprid per kilogram. This level is fixed by the Regulation CE 396/2005 for brown rice.

The laboratory analysis indicated high levels of acetamipride an imidacloprid, of up to twice the authorized thresholds. As a result, the shipments were immediately seized and will be destroyed.

Acetamipride and imidacloprid are odorless insecticides of the family of neonicotinoids, or fungicides, intended to prevent bursting of rice and attacks by harmful species. Prolonged exposure or too high doses can be toxic and carcinogenic, and consumer exposure to these toxins through food must be maintained at the lowest possible level.

These results illustrate the mobilization of customs services in France, following the transfer of import controls from the Directorate General for Consumption and the Repression of Fraud (Direction générale de la Consommation et de la Répression des Fraudes) to the General Directorate of Customs and Indirect Rights (Direction Générale des Douanes et Droits Indirects), finalized on 1 June 2023.

Such import controls relate to non-animal foods as well as to materials in contact with foods. They consist in ensuring, depending on the case, health safety, biological quality and, with regard to fruits and vegetables, compliance with marketing standards.

These controls resulted in the withdrawal, on sanitary or biological grounds, of more than 210,000 kitchen items, 344 tons of cereals, 230 tons of vegetables, 39 tons of food products, 29 tons of fruit, 25 tons of 'spices, and 43,000 liters of wine as well as 40,800 kg of coffee by the French Customs at Le Havre in 2023.

https://www.douane.gouv.fr/actualites/les-douaniers-du-havre-empechent-limportation-de-pres-de-50-tonnes-de-riz-brun-non
Beginning of March 2024, on behalf of the Frankfurt (Oder) public prosecutor’s office, Customs Investigation Office Berlin-Brandenburg was able to intercept trading with high-quality vehicles to Russia.

The alleged perpetrators, who acted as a gang, are said to have sold over 400 high-quality cars worth over 28 million euros to Russia since June 2022. It appears that they deliberately violated existing EU sanctions, which expressly prohibit the export of the vehicles in question.

More than 100 officers from the Customs Investigation Office Berlin-Brandenburg and a technical unit of Berlin State Police searched a total of seven private and company addresses and a safe deposit box in Berlin and Brandenburg.

Arrest warrants had already been issued in advance for the three male suspects, aged 25, 49 and 52, and have now been executed. Furthermore, assets amounting to over one million euros in the form of cash, real estate and vehicles have been secured and confiscated.

Investigations and evaluations are ongoing.

https://www.zoll.de/SharedDocs/Pressemitteilungen/DE/Sonstiges/2024/z72_luxusautos_zfab.html
In 2023, Swedish Customs took decisive action, seizing approximately 500 shipments at the EU external border that contained hazardous or non-compliant products and product infringing intellectual property rights. A substantial portion of these seizures unfolded during coordinated national Customs actions in April and November, addressing both crime areas concerned.

Among the range of intercepted goods throughout the year, Swedish Customs uncovered notable shipments featuring beauty products, including skin care items and perfumes. The exposure of such shipments is of paramount importance, especially when these products harbour toxic chemicals or other non-compliant substances, posing severe risks to consumers who use them directly on their skin.

One specific instance involved a shipment exceeding 3 metric tonnes of perfumes from the United Arab Emirates. Swedish Customs, expressing suspicions about product safety, conducted a meticulous physical examination at the Port of Gothenburg. Subsequently, the case was transferred to the Swedish Medical Products Agency (MPA), the designated market surveillance authority responsible for investigating such cosmetic products in Sweden.

The MPA’s investigation uncovered forbidden and illegal substances in 113 different perfume types within the shipment, revealing allergic properties and the presence of at least two hazardous substances—Lyral and Lilial, recognized synthetic fragrances in perfumes. Both substances are strictly prohibited in the European Union due to their potential to cause severe allergic reactions. In response, the MPA made the decision to ban the release of these products on the EU’s internal market.

Swedish Customs is concerned about the insufficient awareness among small to medium-sized companies and consumers about the potential dangers associated with such products. The rising demand for these items further underscores the urgency of addressing this issue. In response, Customs has initiated awareness campaigns through various media channels, collaborating closely with market surveillance authorities and disseminating information to businesses and the public.

Swedish Customs firmly believes that raising awareness among the public sector and fostering collaboration with market surveillance authorities, as well as engaging with right holders in cases of counterfeit products, are the most effective methods to combat these crimes. The Customs controls at the border play a pivotal role in this effort, effectively intercepting dangerous products before they reach retail shelves and end consumers.

https://www.tullverket.se/nyheter/nyheter/tonvismedhalsofarligparfymstoppadavtullverket.5.586d06b518b6116f985818.html
Certain types of chemicals, often referred to as explosives precursors, can be used to produce homemade explosives. Norwegian Customs assesses the import of such chemicals to be a higher threat within the weapons category. Homemade explosives continues to be a sought after means of attack in planned terror attacks in Europe. There are several cases in Europe, including Norway, where commercially available chemicals have been acquired to produce explosives.

Norway implemented Regulation (EU) No 98/2013 to limit access to such substances. Many chemicals will still, under set concentration limit values, not be illegal to import, but can raise concerns due to their potential areas of use. For instance, acetone has legal areas of use within industrial/commercial industries and private use. However, it can also be used to produce explosives.

Norwegian Customs has a role in alerting relevant authorities of suspicious imports of explosives precursors regardless of whether the goods are regulated or not. Suspicion concerning the recipients' intention is sufficient. This opportunity to report suspicious imports of non-regulated chemicals is especially important considering that some terrorists and extremists actively seek the use of alternative precursors in order to bypass regulations.

Some of the information contained in this report is gathered from relevant open sources, and such information cannot always be verified or supported by secondary sources.

Likely acquisition mode for explosives precursors is online purchase on both the surface and dark web from stores/actors located abroad. In Norway there have been several cases of individuals importing explosives precursors bought via online marketplaces like eBay. Sellers can be both companies and private individuals abroad. Imports from the latter are especially concerning when it comes to possible falsified or lacking information on declarations of goods. Post/courier services are then used to ship the chemicals.

Online purchase gives buyers a feeling of anonymity and the opportunity to declare false information concealing the real content and/or recipient of the package. Like with other restricted/illegal goods, a common modus operandi is to deliberately misdeclare explosives precursors as something else, in this context often non-regulated chemicals, or use purposefully vague descriptions of goods. Buyers may also address shipments to other names/addresses to avoid identification.

Eastern-European countries are relevant export countries of chemicals imported into Norway. For instance, Lithuanian and Polish online stores offer precursors such as aluminium powder and ammonium nitrate for sale, which can then be shipped by courier.
Chemicals are also imported from Great Britain. Norwegian Customs has on several occasions identified and been alerted of shipments from Britain containing explosives precursors. These are often bought from UK companies.

Explosives precursors are also acquired from countries outside Europe, especially the US and China. Earlier confiscations include a courier shipment from the US containing chemicals bought via eBay. Numerous American websites offer relevant chemicals for sale, including substances that can be used to produce fireworks. However, several websites only sell such chemicals to buyers with a purchase history and to education/research facilities.

Explosives precursors are also offered for sale by producers and suppliers in China, and open sources show that there have been attempts to procure chemicals from such sources. Furthermore, actors on the dark net claim to sell "research chemicals" such as ammonium nitrate procured from Chinese suppliers.

Open sources confirm that online purchase of chemicals with intent to produce explosives is also a relevant modus operandi in other European countries. A person in Germany who was arrested over a suspected terror plot reportedly purchased ingredients to make explosives on online platforms such as eBay. According to open sources, a person in Spain received post shipments containing explosives precursors from Eastern-European countries, declared as “handicraft products”. In another Spanish case a person reportedly downloaded manuals for the use of explosives and sought to acquire acetone, an ingredient used to make TATP, from a Chinese supplier. Persons arrested in Germany and Denmark for a suspected terror plot in 2021 reportedly purchased explosives precursors from Poland. These open sources indicate that Eastern-European countries and China are relevant export countries, and confirms that misdeclaration is a relevant modus operandi.

The following indicator lists are not exhaustive but intended to assist customs officers in their selection and controls.

List of indicators for possible production of explosives:
- Purchase of dual-use chemicals which can be used to produce explosives
- Purchase of chemicals in higher concentrations and/or in unusual amounts
- Purchase of chemicals combined with other related goods, such as laboratory equipment/tools, protection equipment/gear, electrical components/equipment
- Lack of legal purpose for import
- Misdeclaration/lacking information about the shipments’ real content/recipient
- Shipment is arriving from one of the identified countries

List of higher risk countries:
- Eastern-European countries, especially Poland and Lithuania
- Britain
- US
- China

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6 German police arrest Syrian man over suspected bomb plot - The Local ; Germany arrests 28-year-old Syrian over 'radical Islamist' bomb plot | Reuters
7 Spain: Clandestine Explosives Lab Discovered, 1 Arrested | TRIPwire (cisa.gov) ; Spanish Civil Guard dismantle a clandestine explosives manufacturing workshop - Border Security Report (border-security-report.com)
8 Jihadist arrested Girona machine-gun tourists Benidorm beaches (euroweeklynews.com)
9 Arrested in Girona an alleged jihadist looking for weapons for a mass strafing | Catalonia | THE COUNTRY (elpais.com) ; Spanish police arrest alleged jihadist, suspected of planning gun attack on Benidorm's tourist beaches | Sur in English
10 Germany/Denmark: BMM Found during Counterterrorism Raids | TRIPwire (cisa.gov) ; Danish, German Authorities Detain 14 Suspects In Counter-Terrorism Operation : NPR
**SCOPE**

Norwegian Customs has uncovered several imports of chemicals where the intention was to produce explosives. The scope of cases uncovered during customs control has however declined in recent years. The cause of this is unknown, but there are likely several reasons including lacking prioritization and training.

There are still persons/milieus in Norway seeking this capacity. According to the annual threat assessment by Norwegian Police Security Service (PST), use of explosives remains an attractive means of attack for actors within both Islamic and right-wing extremist milieus.

There is a range of producers/suppliers both on the surface and dark web. Many suppliers on the surface web state that they have restrictions on sale. For instance, some state that they only sell certain chemicals to registered entities. Some dark web marketplaces claim they do not allow the sale of explosives precursors. It is however possible that sales still occur as certain products are easy to find and have many sellers.

There are not many open entries where explosives precursors are offered for sale. In certain open discussion threads people are warned not to enquire about such products due to their areas of use and potentially attracting attention from authorities. However, explosives precursors can be relatively easy to acquire if the purchaser is involved in or have access to certain groups/milieus.

**ASSESSMENT**

Explosives precursors are in many cases strictly regulated or are under considerable international surveillance. The scope of import to individuals is therefore likely relatively low.

There are however challenges which render it difficult to uncover explosives precursors at customs controls. Internet sale and import of chemicals in smaller quantities challenges the enforcement of restrictions in several European countries. Smaller quantities can be spread across several different shipments, and thereby “disappear” in the large flow of goods. This combined with the opportunity to misdeclare content/recipient/sender challenges Norwegian Customs’ ability to exercise control over the import of explosives precursors.

The Intelligence Division is therefore working continuously to identify relevant senders abroad to aid customs officers’ selection of shipments for control. This focus on senders rather than recipients also increases the possibility of identifying more shipments of chemicals, including those addressed to names/addresses not related to the real purchaser.

Customs officers are advised to pay particular attention to import of chemicals by individuals, especially in post/courier shipments. Shipments raising one or several of the risk indicators listed above are more relevant for control.

Norwegian regulations on explosives precursors only applies to private importation. It is therefore possible that actors will attempt to avoid detection by using a sole proprietorship to import chemicals. Customs officers are therefore advised to pay attention to these types of shipments as well.

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11 NTV-2023 (pst.no)
Italian Guardia di Finanza and Customs
14 Kilos of smuggled cultured pearls with a total value of 143,000 EURO seized in Chiasso, Italy

Customs and Monopolies Agency (ADM) of the Territorial Operational Section of Chiasso together with Guardia di Finanza, Ponte Chiasso Group, recently inspected an Italian passenger, resident of Switzerland, on a TILO train entering Italy from Lugano and headed to Milano.

The negative customs declaration of the traveller during the customs controls did not convince the officers, who decided to carry out further checks.

As a result, a box containing almost fourteen kilos of cultured pearls was found in the traveller's personal luggage. The pearls either were packaged in skeins of threads or were loose in bags, without any commercial documentation. The passenger declared that he did not have the invoice, but offered to provide it subsequently.

In view of these circumstances, the customs clearance has been suspended pending further investigations. When the traveller eventually provided an invoice apparently attributable, in terms of quantity, to the seized products, the declared value - just over seven thousand euros - did not appear at all appropriate. The pearls showed an extreme variety of individual pieces (in size, shape, brightness, colour, weight, etc.) and had clearly a much higher value than declared, which was, however, difficult to estimate on the spot.

The officers therefore requested an opinion of the Chemical Laboratory of Venice, an ADM office with specific analytical skills in the gemmological sector. A gemmological analysis has been performed on an adequate number of pearl samples according to the GIA standard, Gemmological Institute of America. As a result, the Laboratory classified the seized load as mostly pearls cultured in salt water of the "akoya" type (so-called Japanese pearls) and minor part as the "south sea" type (so-called Australian pearls), with a total commercial value of 143,000 Euro.

Therefore, the traveller has been charged with smuggling and VAT evasion on import and the entire batch has been seized by the authorities. Investigations are currently underway.
German Customs

The biggest ever seizure of Captagon in Germany: 461 kg pills with the value of 64.5 million USD

Since the end of 2022, Customs Investigation Office Essen under the supervision of the Department for Organised Crime of the Prosecution Office Aachen has been conducting an investigation against a Syrian criminal group in connection with commercial and gang smuggling and trading of drugs in not insignificant quantity.

During customs controls of parcels to Bahrain at Cologne/Bonn Airport end of 2022, the officers of the Main Customs Office Cologne have detected a total of 10 kg captagon pills (approximately 59,000). The drugs were hidden in seven parcels with brake cylinders.

In close temporal contiguity with this event, during a customs control at the Leipzig Airport the officers of the Main Customs Office Leipzig have found approximately 32 kg captagon concealed in aroma candles in two parcels destined for Saudi Arabia.

The investigation in relation to the senders of the parcels have led to four suspects of Syrian origin residing in Aachen, Alsdorf and Vienna. Following this, the investigation officers were able to identify a garage rented by the criminal group.

In the meantime, in the course of customs checks by the Main Customs Office Leipzig in September 2023 further 17 kg captagon pills have been seized. In this case, the drugs were hidden in a pizza oven and supposed to be shipped to Saudi Arabia.

Due to operative measures of the customs officers in September 2023, a further seizure of approximately 30 Kg captagon pills at Cologne/Bonn Airport has prevented their delivery to Bahrain. Here, the pills were concealed in an air filter.

Finally, at the beginning of October 2023, on behalf of the Prosecution Office Aachen the law enforcement officers of the Customs Investigation Office Essen have executed the arrest warrants against the four suspects and searched their residences as well as the rented garage.

In the garage storage, the investigators have discovered a suitcase with 48 kg captagon pills as well as pallets with 16 tons of sand, in which further 324 kg captagon pills were concealed.

In the course of investigation proceedings, numerous pieces of evidence have been seized.

The initial assessment of the evidence has led the investigator to a further rented storage facility in Herzogenrath, which has been searched on 14 December 2023 by the officers of the Customs Investigation Office Essen. No further evidence has been found.

The street re-sale value of the seized more than 3.2 million captagon pills amounts to approximately 64.5 million USD.

The 4 suspected Syrian citizens aged between 33 and 45 years old are currently in the pre-trial detention.

The investigation by the Customs Investigation Office Essen, Aachen Branch, under the supervision of the Department for Organised Crime of the Prosecution Office Aachen is still ongoing.
Spanish Customs
Tax Agency seizes eight tons of cocaine hidden in a container in the port of Algeciras

|| One person was arrested.
|| The container originating from Suriname contained a fake generator in which the drugs were found.
|| The metal structure containing the cocaine was designed to evade the scanner's inspection.
|| The OCG had planned the route to make detection of the illegal cargo as difficult as possible: The container stopped in Algeciras (Spain), arrived in Portugal and from there travelled overland back to Spain.

On February 12, 2024, Officials from the Customs Surveillance Service of the Spanish Tax Agency have seized 8,000 kilos of cocaine in a container in the port of Algeciras, Spain.

This seizure is one of the largest in Spain in recent years. It was successfully carried out despite a new concealment system used by the criminal organization to circumvent scanner checks, as well as a complex transport route.

The General Directorate of Operations of the Customs and Excise Department of the Tax Agency as part of its control and risk analysis actions had drawn attention to a suspicious container while it was still on its way to the port of Algeciras. This enabled the authorities to take all the necessary measures to check the container.

The 'modus operandi' used by the criminal organisation was aimed at circumventing customs scanner controls by using a port of origin on the American continent located next to French Guiana and hiding the 8,000 kilos of narcotics inside a metal structure designed and built to fit inside a container.

The transport route was intended to make detection as difficult as possible. From the port of Paramaribo Suriname, it travelled to Panama, from there to Algeciras, Spain, from where it was supposed to continue to Leixoes, in Portugal, followed by a road transport back to Spain.
For the construction of the metal structure, the criminal organization had used an alloy to disperse the scanner signal, so that the declared goods, apparently a generator, would be the only image to appear during the inspection. It is the first time that this method of concealment has been discovered by the Spanish authorities.

Nevertheless, when the image was analysed in the scanner, a large quantity of goods could be seen, perfectly stacked on pallets and taking up practically all of the available space. The initial assumption was that these could simply be legally traded goods that had not been declared.

The customs officers in Algeciras immediately broke open the metal crate, which had no opening mechanism and was fully loaded with numerous packages of bricks, bundles and sacks.

Upon opening the container, the customs officers discovered that the goods were in fact a set of pallets loaded with narcotic substance bricks. It turned out to be high-purity cocaine weighing around 8,000 kilograms, distributed in more than 7,000 stones.

The investigation is still ongoing. So far, three people are being investigated. One of them, the recipient of the goods in Spain, has been arrested and one other, the owner of the company for which the goods were destined, is wanted for arrest.

Follow on X @aduanassva
Finnish Customs
Virtual reality training

Finnish customs has noticed the potential of VR training and aims to add it as one of the training methods in the future. Customs' tasks as a protector of society include numerous different functions that can be trained with the help of VR. The advantages of the training format include the opportunity to train on dangerous and challenging topics such as radiation control and the use of force in a safe and controlled manner. In addition, training is cost-effective, because the trainees do not have to travel to the operating environments required for the training subject, for example to BCP, ports or airports, the virtual training environment can be reached regardless of time and place.

| VR TRAINING AS PART OF THE TRAINING PORTFOLIO |

The application of new innovations such as VR or AR (augmented reality) in trainings brings different learning-supporting elements to training. In the implementation of VR training, the same formulas can be followed largely as in other training. Theory and practice are applied in an appropriate ratio and the learning goal is kept in mind throughout the process.

Stepping into virtual reality is a great and somewhat unreal experience that requires the participants to involve all their senses and throw themselves into it. Some trainees make the situation tense and this may affect the performance and the experience. In addition, the trainee may experience extra pressure, for example by thinking too much about how his own actions look in the eyes of those around him who are following his performance. In connection with these, one of the most important tasks of the trainer is to create a safe and stimulating atmosphere for the trainees and clear goals for the training. It is about meeting the participants individually and motivating them.

| VR TRAINING DESIGN AND RELATED PEDAGOGY |

From a pedagogical point of view, VR is one teaching method that alone is not a complete training. The VR part of the training requires other activities and entities around it, such as the theory related to the training topic and the preparation part for the training. It is clear that as VR trainings become more common, along with routine and experience, the centrality of the VR part of the training will increase and more trainings can be built around the virtual part.

The most challenging and time-consuming part of the VR process is preparing the training script. The script is the part of the training, which creates the VR environment and the scenarios that take place there, and adapts the goal of the training to this whole. The work from an idea to a finished training requires mastery of the substance of the training subject as well as a pedagogical idea of how virtual reality can be used to reach the goal. This creation process is usually attended by the subscriber of the training and the producer of the content.

| APPLICATION OF VR TRAINING IN CUSTOMS TRAINING |

In Finnish customs, the adoption of virtual reality training as part of training methods has happened slowly, but surely. The training format has been successfully applied in the last couple of years, the benefits of the training are undeniable. The subject of the training was occupational safety related to customs control work, which is extremely important in all customs activities. The goal of the training is to improve the participants' ability to detect occupational safety risks and to comprehensively develop a way of working that takes occupational safety into account and to transfer what has been learned to work practices.

As the target group of the training, customs inspectors are a challenging group in their own way. When preparing training materials, you have to master the substance of the training topic and other related knowledge; there is no room for mistakes. Customs officers are precise and critical in a good way - professionals in their field who notice errors and contradictions in, for example, terminology related to training or processes. Therefore, in the planning and implementation of the training, you have to pay attention to the details and try to modify the content of the training in real time.
THE FUTURE OF VR TRAINING AT FINNISH CUSTOMS

The subject of Finnish Customs previous VR training was radiation, equipment and occupational safety in the use of the x-ray device. The impact of the trainings was clearly noticeable, with the feedback received from the participants, the observation and prevention of both the x-ray device and occupational safety risks in general are clearer concepts and with the immersive experience fresh in the memory. In addition to the actual topic, the training also covered Customs’ occupational safety activities. As a by-product of this, measures to improve occupational safety were achieved, with which occupational safety risks were identified at BCP-level and measures were taken.

With national training, the impact of VR education also extends beyond the borders of Finland. Finnish Customs has participated in various international events and presented its own VR training. This international work has produced joint projects for consultation on VR education in other countries. Finnish Customs' training is valued at an international level, the introduction of VR is a good example of the innovative thinking model of Finnish Customs' training and its effort to develop training methods to meet today's challenges.

Analysis report: Virtual reality training by Finnish Customs Educational services
Immo Kilpinen, immo.kilpinen@tulli.fi
Teacher and training planner
Personnel and competence development, Educational services
On January 26, 2024, during a search of premises in Meath (Ireland) by the Irish Health Products Regulatory Authority (HPRA), assisted by An Garda Síochána, a quantity of illicit medicinal products purporting to contain a powder form of Semaglutide (active ingredient of OZEMPIC) were seized. It appears that these were being imported from China and sold online via social media in Ireland. During the search several shipments for Irish customers were identified.

Due to the shortage of injection pens like Ozempic to treat Type 2 Diabetes, individuals have been identified as selling kits for the injection of Semaglutide - the kit contains a glass vial with white powder presumed to be Semaglutide, two syringes and some sterile water. These kits are being sold on Social Media sites such as Instagram and Facebook for as much as €130. It is estimated that the contents of each kit costs no more than €10.

The product is shipped from China in plain unadorned white boxes. Each box contains 10 vials. It is possible that the sterile water and required syringes are being imported from the same source in China, however they may be sourced from another EU Member State, or Third Country such as the UK. Please note the attached photograph showing syringes marked as “Insulin Syringes”.

Custom Officers should also be aware of the risk associated with the importation of this type of syringe and possibility that they are to be diverted into the illicit marketplace.

If you have you observed such practice, have any additional information, or identify any items (in particular unusual seizures/concealments) which may be of interest please email the Intelligence Development Unit ipfmdidu@revenue.ie
According to a recently distributed Intelligence report of the Canada Border Service Agency (CBSA) it is highly likely that the use of tracking devices to facilitate Contraband Smuggling will increase significantly. The report illustrates and describes their exploitation potential for illicit use and the related upcoming emerging challenges for Customs administrations.

The report also compares the two types of tracking devices (GPS and Bluetooth-powered) and their possible suitability for illicit use in different types of transport modes (Land, Marine, Air).

Administrations which are interested in getting the report should contact:

Canadian Intelligence Tactical Operations Centre

ITOC.COTR@cbsa-asfc.gc.ca
Operation JUBILARIAN II
Misuse of ATA carnets
WCO and Australian Border Force

HOW OPERATION JUBILARIAN II CAME ABOUT

In 2017, the Australian Border Force (ABF) conducted a project that identified a group of overseas jewellery merchants whose business model involved suspected repeated exploitation of the ATA[1] carnet. The ATA carnet is an international Customs document that permits duty-free and tax-free temporary admission of certain goods to countries that are part of the ATA carnet system for up to one year; including commercial samples, trade fair or exhibition goods and professional equipment.

This project became a catalyst for a WCO-endorsed Operation, called JUBILARIAN, whose first edition was conducted in 2019 - 2020. The objective was for participants to identify the misuse of ATA carnets for the importation of jewellery and precious gemstones and to share their experiences and lessons learnt with each other.

39 Customs administrations joined the ABF-led Operation. The Operation highlighted vulnerabilities in the carnet system. Four of the five high-risk entities identified by the ABF (being regular users of ATA carnets to import jewellery and gemstones into Australia) were found to be misusing the carnet system to evade revenue.

Following the conclusion of JUBILARIAN, the ABF continued to monitor and disrupt the misuse of ATA carnets for the importation of jewellery into Australia, to identify the potential extent of revenue evasion through the carnet system.

ESTABLISHING OPERATION JUBILARIAN II

In 2022, the ABF proposed the conducting of another Operation on the misuse of ATA carnets to the WCO. This proposal was warmly welcomed, and endorsed at the 43rd Enforcement Committee in March 2023.

46 WCO Members participated in JUBILARIAN II from July to October 2023. The Operation had an expanded scope of intent (in comparison to the former), including to:
- identify revenue fraud and potential trade-based money laundering (TBML) specifically involving the importation of jewellery and precious gemstones through the ATA carnet system,
- enhance the global conversation on revenue leakage,
- formulate a strategy to enable an appropriate enforcement response to operational activity.

The ABF conducted rigorous assessments on more than 100 high-risk jewellery carnets, commencing in October 2022, resulting in the selection of 13 high-risk entities for targeting during Operation JUBILARIAN II.

PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

Operation JUBILARIAN II identified a number of methodologies employed by criminal groups utilizing ATA carnets to evade revenue, including:
- Phoenix activity – phoenix activity occurs when a director creates a new company to continue the business of a company that has been liquidated, or otherwise abandoned, to avoid paying outstanding debts;
- Possible false declaration of origin noted on carnet at the time of issue;
- Significant funds being transferred out of Australia electronically by foreign representatives with established Australian bank accounts in their personal names, prior to their departure, possibly in an attempt to avoid detection and declaration under Australia’s Anti-Money Laundering and Counter-Terrorism Financing Act 2006;
- ATA carnet holders sending consignments of jewellery items through the cargo stream and making false declarations regarding value and goods description to avoid payment of revenue;
- In addition to jewellery imported under carnets, additional undeclared jewellery items being carried by representatives entering Australia, attempting to avoid payment of revenue, and potentially selling the carnet jewellery in breach of carnet conditions.

During the Operation, the ABF progressed three claims through the National Guarantee Organisation to recover short paid import duties and taxes to the amount of AUD $130,000. These claims are indicative of widespread misuse, and highlight the difficulty Customs authorities have in detecting such fraudulent use, particularly in the airport environment.
ENFORCEMENT CHALLENGES IN THE ATA CARNET ENVIRONMENT

Operation JUBILARIAN II highlighted that carnet exploitation is almost certainly enabled by high-tempo operating environments such as airports, defined by increasing passenger numbers and the challenges in conducting thorough examinations within compressed timeframes and competing priorities. Conducting in-depth examinations of passengers and their luggage is difficult in the operational environment.

Customs officers must match and verify carnet consignments on a line-by-line level. When Customs officers are presented with carnet jewellery items, their role is to confirm that the goods being presented are those described on the carnet general list. Without adequate professional jewellery expertise or technology, it is difficult for Customs officials to verify authenticity of jewellery before endorsing the import voucher and counterfoil. The same challenge occurs when goods are presented for export endorsement. It is difficult for Customs officials to verify the authenticity of the jewellery, or to confirm that the goods being presented for export are the same goods that were presented at the time of importation, prior to endorsing the export voucher and counterfoil.

Moreover, most authorized representatives of ATA jewellery carnets generally have more than 500 different lines of jewellery itemized. Controls place an additional burden on operational resources particularly when a non-compliant carnet contains insufficient detail to distinguish one item from another and, in such quantity that, taken as a whole, they no longer constitute samples as per the definition of ‘samples’ in the International Convention to Facilitate the Importation of Commercial Samples and Advertising Material (Geneva, 7 November 1952).

Many Customs officers are further challenged by their limited exposure to ATA carnets and the carnet system’s vulnerability to abuse. When a traveller declares their carnet goods on arrival, Customs officers may not be familiar with the carnet document or the examination procedures to establish elements of non-compliance.

Last but not least, carnet legislation is not only complex, but also varies from one country to another. Issuing authorities in each country have different criteria for eligibility, despite specific guidance in the relevant conventions. This proves a challenge when it comes to eligibility of carnet goods in other countries and territories. During Operation JUBILARIAN II, the question of what quantity constituted a ‘sample’ of jewellery items was raised amongst participants. As an example, although an ATA carnet may be issued for 900 pieces of jewellery articles as samples, the Customs authority of the importing country may consider that number of items too many to be considered a sample, and maintain that a reasonable sample size should consist of 150 articles. Another country may accept 25 articles as a reasonable sample size, whilst yet another may consider only five articles as an adequate quantity for a sample.

In response to WCO Members’ requests to enhance their capacity to combat the problem of commercial fraud, the WCO has produced a number of technical materials and guidance documents (https://www.wcoomd.org/en/topics/enforcement-and-compliance/activities-and-programmes/revenue-programme.aspx).

In addition, a group was established on the CENcomm, the WCO web-based communication system, with the aim of enabling WCO Members to share experiences, best practices and studies on national and international operational cases. This approach enhances the global conversation relating to revenue leakage and enables administrations to have access to current information, promoting swift action where necessary on emerging fraud methodologies.

The CENcomm group called GTEN - JUBILARIAN II was the primary means of facilitation for Operations JUBILARIAN and JUBILARIAN II, and enabled global information sharing among participants. Members that have participated in the Operations can continue directly exchanging information using the CENcomm group for as long as it is available.

Effective risk management ensures that Customs administrations deploy resources cost-effectively, and cooperation amongst partner agencies will increase the effectiveness of trade enforcement by ensuring all administrations involved are identifying and collecting all legally due revenue.

MORE INFORMATION

For more information, or carnet enquiries and referrals, please contact the ABF National Temporary Imports and Securities Team ntsis@abf.gov.au

Operation MADEIRA DE LEI
Successful police cooperation in fight against illegal timber trade
EUROPOL

From 13 to 17 November 2023, Europol coordinated an international operation against illegal timber trade, which involved law enforcement authorities from France, Germany, Italy, Netherlands, Portugal and Spain. Brazilian authorities were also involved, as well as law enforcement from Costa Rica and Panama, who joined this reoccurring operation for the first time in 2023. The actions targeted environmental crime, illegal logging, smuggling, document fraud, money laundering and tax evasion.

THE OPERATION LED TO

- 226 inspections
- Seizures include: timber from Myanmar with an estimated value of EUR 12 000; Brazilian timber - equivalent to 2 maritime containers - with an estimated value of EUR 67 000
- 1 criminal investigation initiated.

A LUCRATIVE PRACTICE WITH PERNICIOUS EFFECTS ON CLIMATE

Illegal timber trade is an ominous practice that entails the clear-cutting of an area of forest equivalent to a football field every two seconds worldwide. The illegal trade of timber depletes origin countries’ natural resources and has direct impact on deforestation and, consequently, on climate change.

At the same time, illicit timber trade is one of the most financially rewarding transnational criminal activities, generating an estimated USD 7 billion. Organised criminal groups camouflage the origin of the timber through document forgery and bribery to pass customs checks and reach their destination - consumer countries.

Various timber types such as teak, rose wood, ipé and pernambuco are in high demand in European countries, where they can be used for multiple purposes, including for the creation of ornaments and general construction.

EUROPOL’S ROLE

Europol deployed experts and analysts into the hotspots across the EU, delivering expertise and operational analysis support to the involved countries and law enforcement authorities. Europol also provided operational support through a Virtual Command Post. Before the operation, law enforcement authorities met in a dedicated workshop to share learnings and best practices to combat illegal timber trade.

PARTICIPATING AUTHORITIES

- **Brazil**: Federal Police (Polícia Federal);
- **France**: French National Gendarmerie (Gendarmerie Nationale) – Central Office for Combating Environmental and Public Health Attacks (Office central de lutte contre les atteintes à l’environnement et à la santé publique OCLAESP);
- **Costa Rica**: Criminal Investigation Department (Departamento de Investigaciones Criminales) and Prosecutor;
- **Germany**: Federal Criminal Police (Bundeskriminalamt);
- **Italy**: Italian Carabinieri (Arma dei Carabinieri);
- **Netherlands**: Dutch Food and Consumer Product Safety Authority (Nederlandse Voedsel- en Warenautoriteit);
- **Panama**: National Police (Policía Nacional) and Prosecutor;
- **Portugal**: National Republican Guard - SEPNA (Guarda Nacional Republicana – SEPNA).
- **Spain**: Spanish Guardia Civil (Guardia Civil – SEPRONA) and SVA from Spanish Customs (Servicio de Vigilancia Aduanera).

courtesy of EUROPOL
The first edition of the Annual Conference of Drug Control Networks took place in Strasbourg, from 6-8 December 2023 and brought together over 170 experts from 40 countries, 5 international organizations, academia and the private sector.

It was the first edition of a new conference format launched by the Pompidou bringing together participants from different drug control and law enforcements sectors: trafficking through airports, general aviation, precursors control, and drugs related cybercrime. This integrated conference format allowed for more synergies between different law enforcement services, in particular border control, criminal investigation and customs services.

As every year, the WCO RILO WE Annual report of seizures has been presented.

The second edition of the Annual Conference of Drug Control Networks will be organized in autumn 2024. Please note that registration for the 2024 Conference will be open in spring 2024.

Ms Samantha CLOITRE-ORENSTEIN from the Pompidou Group Secretariat (Samantha.CLOITRE-ORENSTEIN@coe.int) is responsible for the organisation of this activity and is at your disposal for any further information you may require.
The World Customs Organization (WCO) organized the 31st Global Meeting of the Regional Intelligence Liaison Offices (RILO) at its Headquarters in Brussels from 30 January to 1 February 2024. All 12 RILOs from across the world, including RILO Western Europe (RILO WE), together with the representatives of the WCO Secretariat and the WCO CEN Team took part in discussions on various common themes, including data collection and data quality in CEN.

Welcoming remarks were delivered by Mr. P.Kumar Das, Director of Compliance and Facilitation at the WCO. He stressed the particular importance of the 31st GRM as it marks the first meeting where, following the sunset of the CENMaT in 2023, a broader agenda has been embraced, now including both RILO matters and CEN Applications matters.

The meeting was chaired by Roy Diaz, the head of RILO South America and covered a wide range of topics, including ways to enhance the visibility of RILOs, presentations from the Universal Postal Union (UPU), RILOs’ support for the ITR, the evaluation of the promotion and implementation of the WCO Charter of Data Quantity and Quality Enhancement in the CEN, the evaluation report of the nCEN/CTS Impact Assessment and the way forward for the iCEN project, as well as discussion on CEN applications and CTS.

During the first day of the meeting, Heads of RILOs presented a summary on their activities, alerts and analysis products, as well as key issues and operations in the relevant regions. RILO WE provided an update on its CENcomm-based initiatives: the CENComm 3-based online libraries CAVA, VeRIL (including VeRIL-Barge, VeRIL-Seal and VeRIL-Cruise) and the upcoming development of ARGO, related respectively to concealment in motorized vehicles, vessels and commercial aircrafts.

The meeting was concluded by the nomination and election of the new Chair Ms. Munerah ALRASHEED, Head of RILO ME, and the new Vice Chair Mr. Birame Sidy KANE, Head of the RILO WA, which were unanimously supported by the GRM.
Following the 31st Global RILO Meeting in Brussels in February 2024, delegates from RILO Middle-East, RILO South-East Africa, RILO Asia Pacific and RILO JIO Caribbean took the opportunity to visit RILO WE’s office for a cooperation meeting in Cologne, Germany.

RILO WE invited the representatives of the above mentioned partner RILOS to Cologne to discuss the ongoing cooperation projects and to give a deeper insight into the work of RILO WE.

In addition, the participants were provided with an overview of the organisation, tasks and responsibilities of the German Customs Investigation Service and visited the customs facilities at Cologne Bonn Airport, with a special focus on the customs operations at the UPS transit hub – one of the biggest parcel hubs in Europe. The detailed tour of the UPS facilities was followed by a discussion with the control units of the German customs, accompanied by an impressive presentation of samples of the seized goods. In conclusion, a representative of UPS explained the history and comprehensive strategy of UPS as well as its cooperation with the German customs administration.

The delegation also received a warm welcome by a high level representative of Zollkriminalamt, the German central customs law enforcement agency. The customs administration of Germany has been hosting RILO Western Europe since its establishment almost 26 years ago and has always been a great supporter of the RILO cause.

Cooperation meeting and field visits to study and compare operational procedures are an important instrument of sharing best practices in the international customs community.
On February 6, 2024, delegates from RILO Western Europe took part in the Opening Ceremony of the new RILO AP office in Tokyo, Japan. The statutes of RILO AP provide for a regular rotation of the host country. Prior to moving to Japan, RILO AP has been hosted by South Korea from 2012 to 2023.

The ceremony started with a video message from Mr. Fumio Kishida, Prime Minister of Japan. After that Mr. Ian Saunders, Secretary General of the WCO and Mr. Katsuo Yakura, Minister of Finance of Japan executed the symbolic Handover Ceremony with South Korea.

Mr. Toshihiko Osawa, Head of RILO AP, introduced his international team and gave the guests from the global customs community the opportunity to visit the new RILO AP office in the centre of Tokyo.

Following the Opening Ceremony of RILO AP, RILO WE took part in the WCO Roundtable conference which also took place in Tokyo. RILO WE used the opportunity to inform the delegates from the Asia Pacific Region about its upcoming tool which is currently still in the progress of development: a new global online library with focus on concealments in commercial aircrafts at international airports. The so-called ARGO library (Aircraft Rummage Ground Operations) is a web-based application aimed at providing frontline officers useful information in preparation of a physical check of an aircraft. RILO WE presented examples of cases which have already been uploaded to the provisional ARGO library. For the purpose of having a solid starting stock of cases the Asia Pacific countries were invited to provide RILO WE with similar cases/documentation about already detected concealments at the airports in the region.
In March 2024, the 4th Introduction Workshop for the New National Contact Points (NCPs) took place in Cologne, Germany for a total of 5 participants from 4 Member administrations of RILO WE: France, Denmark, Sweden and Switzerland.

The contents of the workshop aimed at providing the participants with an overview of tasks and responsibilities in their role as NCPs, the organization and structures of RILO WE and the World Customs Organization (WCO) as well as upcoming initiatives, projects and operations. The inclusion of theoretical knowledge as well as practical examples made the training session more interactive and provided hands-on experiences to the participants for a deeper understanding of the cooperation concept within the Global RILO Network, CEN data collection and analysis.

All new NCPs of RILO WE will be offered an introduction workshop by RILO WE.
The 19th Session of the Global Meeting of the Regional Entities established by WCO Members and Council Vice-Chairs’ Offices took place on 19 and 20 February 2024, utilizing a hybrid format. RILO WE took place as an observer.

Mr. Norikazu Kuramoto, Director of ROCB Asia Pacific, chaired the 19th Global Assembly, with over 170 delegates in attendance representing Vice-Chair Offices, Regional Offices for Capacity Building, Regional Intelligence Liaison Offices, Regional Training Centers, Regional Dog Training Centers, Regional Customs Laboratories, and host administrations of regional entities.

The session warmly welcomed the representatives of the new Council Vice-Chairpersons and delegates from recently established regional entities into its global community.

Over the course of two days interactive discussions covered various topics of common interest, including the revised Work Programme for the Global Meeting (2022-2025), updated “Good Practices Guidance for Vice-Chairs (Offices) across the Six WCO Regions”, and “Good Practices Guidance for ROCBs and RTCs”. Additionally, discussions centred around WCO E-Learning developments, the implementation of the WCO Distance Learning Strategy (including the CLIKC platform), the WCO virtual reality training project, the outcomes of the survey on Customs training management to support the development of agile national training strategies, and a refresher on the WCO Expert Management and Accreditation Policy.

As usual, Regional Entities seized the opportunity to share experiences and good practices. Updates from various WCO Directorates and units were also provided, with a primary focus on areas impacting capacity-building activities and the work of regional entities.

Participants reiterated the significance of the global assembly in empowering regional entities to fulfil their missions and playing their essential roles in managing and mobilizing available resources effectively.

The Global Meeting concluded by electing Mr. Souod Salem AlAgroobi, Director of ROCB MENA, as the Chair and Mr. Antonio Lo Parco, Director of ROCB Europe, as the Vice-chair for the 20th Global Meeting.
On March 13, 2024, RILO WE together with the BALKAN INFO Team of the German Customs conducted a BALKAN INFO system workshop for Croatian customs authority and police. The aim of the workshop was to present the capabilities and advantages of the system for effectively combating drug smuggling through the best possible cooperation between all law enforcement authorities along the Balkan route.

The BALKAN INFO system is hosted on the WCO CENComm3 platform and connects police/ customs/ border force officers as well as international organizations along the BALKAN route. The system's features facilitate and intensify the international information exchange on possible threats (warning messages) and seizures, enable users to react promptly to current trends/ modi operandi and create risk profiles for their national systems.

All information relevant to the fight against trafficking of drugs and drug precursors along the Balkan route* can be exchanged via the BALKAN-INFO system. The scope of information and level of sharing is subject to the individual guidelines and policies of each participating member.

*Transportation of narcotics and precursors from east to west through Turkey/Iran or at least one state of the Balkan Peninsula
  Transportation of narcotics and precursors in the opposite direction, if heading to Turkey or a state of the Balkan Peninsula
  A transport across the Black Sea and the Caucasus Route is also included.

For more information: BALKAN-Info.GZD@zka.bund.de
From 18 to 22 March 2024, the 44th Session of the Enforcement Committee (EC) of the World Customs Organization (WCO) was held at the WCO Headquarters in Brussels.

The circle of participants included representatives from WCO Member administrations, Regional Intelligence Liaison Offices (RILOs), international organizations, observers and key enforcement and compliance stakeholders.

The meeting was opened by Mr. Ian Saunders, the Secretary General of the WCO. In line with the official theme of the conference, “Enhance Customs Enforcement Through Partnerships”, Mr. Saunders emphasized the critical importance of partnerships in addressing the multifaceted challenges of customs enforcement.

Under the Chairmanship of Mr. David Dolan from US Customs and Border Protection, the delegates took note of, discussed and approved an important number of activities, instruments and tools, as well as some ambitious new projects.

In particular, the delegates discussed the Progress Report on Enforcement Committee Work Programme for the financial year 2023-2024. The other agenda items of the Meeting were dedicated to in-depth discussions on current and future WCO Compliance & Enforcement focus areas such as environment, drugs, security and IPR of the WCO, enforcement through partnerships, intelligence and risk management, CEN issues as well as money laundering and financing of terrorism. Fruitful panel discussions were conducted on these topics with Members, other international organizations and private sector representatives.

The conference concluded with the elections of Mr. Hugo Christian Meyer from Austria as the Chairperson and Rebecca Jonassen from New Zealand as the Vice-Chairperson to preside over the 45th session of the Enforcement Committee in 2025.
The CEN database on customs seizures and criminal offences is necessary for the analysis of illicit trafficking in the various areas of Customs competence. Its functionalities enable users to retrieve data, which is crucial to defining strategies, preparing risk indicators, and identifying trends.

National cases are manually entered into the CEN database by officers responsible for this task in each customs administration around the world or in a large number of cases, by being automatically uploaded by the RILOs/WCO Secretariat.

|| MAIN FEATURES
A web-based, unique, global database on customs seizures
Read-only access available for all customs officers worldwide on request and approval
Used to define strategies, to prepare risk indicators and to identify trends
Efficient platform for national threat assessments
Includes a Concealment Picture Database (e.g. X-ray images)
Over 1,000,000 cases are available in the CEN database
The application is available in English, French, Spanish, Portuguese, Russian, Arabic, Georgian, Ukrainian and Serbian language.

The information on the following pages is based on CEN data and analysis carried out by the RILO WE team for frontline awareness.

We encourage our members to enter national seizures into the CEN database (or report to the RILO WE) in a timely manner for a more effective analysis of the new trends or modus operandi and exchange of information.

Please contact rilowe@zka.bund.de if you are interested in an analysis of certain commodities/countries/trends/etc. or if you would like personal access to the CEN database.
On January 21, 2023, Danish customs discovered a 107 cm tooth of a narwhal (Monodon monoceros) in a mail shipment from GREENLAND at Copenhagen (DENMARK) mail center. (CEN ID 1635658)

Under the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), international trade in narwhal and its parts/derivatives is regulated. The species Monodon Monoceros [ORDER listing Cetacea spp.] has been listed in CITES Appendix II since 13/02/2003 and in EU wildlife Regulations - Commission Regulation (EU) No 2021/2280 of 16/12/2021 Annex B since 20/05/2023. Specimens of species listed in Appendix II to the Convention, including products and derivatives other than meat products for commercial purposes, taken by the people of Greenland under licence granted by the competent authority concerned shall be treated as belonging to Annex B. A zero annual export quota is established for live specimens from the Black Sea population of Tursiops truncatus removed from the wild and traded for primarily commercial purposes.

https://speciesplus.net/species#/taxon_concepts/8084/legal
Illegal substances in air compressor

In November 2023, Icelandic Customs inspected a Peugeot Boxer van used as courier vehicle, arriving in Iceland by ferry from DENMARK. The driver was the only occupant and stated he had borrowed the vehicle from a friend. The driver was operating a non-registered business in Iceland, running a courier service for packages between Iceland and Poland.

There was no specific intelligence to target the driver or the shipments on-board the vehicle. The cargo area of the van was filled to its absolute capacity. Upon emptying the van, a large air compressor was located against the wall separating the cab from cargo area. The air compressor appeared brand new, a KUPCZYK model 495 with a 270 Liter tank. Upon closer inspection, Customs Officers noted a faint smell of fresh paint in one area on the air compressor’s air tank. The quick connect fitting on the air tank outlet was removed and a snake inspection camera was inserted which revealed the air tank was full of contraband.

A can of pepper spray and 35 packages of various anabolic steroids in ampoule and pill form, which the driver had hidden on his person, were seized. Two packages of steroids were located in the driver’s backpack. The air tank was cut open with an angle grinder. Inside the air tank Customs Officers found: 1,379 packages of various anabolic steroids in ampoule and pill form; 4,403 x Contalgin 200 mg pills; 11,211 x Oxycontin 80 mg pills, and 3,004 grams of powdered Ketamine.

Inspection of the inside of the air tank showed that a 12cm x 50cm rectangle had been cut out of the side of the air tank and welded back into place once the contraband was inside. Fiber insulation was used to protect the contents inside from welding damage. Steroid packages were glued together and wrapped in plastic wrap to form blocks. The blocks were taped together and to the inside of the air tank using two-sided tape to prevent the items from moving. The air tank was so tightly packed that there was no movement of the contents without forcefully removing the packages. Where the tank had been cut open was covered with epoxy to create a smooth surface to maintain the cylindrical curve on the outside of the air tank. The air tank was resprayed with colour matching paint. When visually inspected, the outside of the air tank appeared symmetrical and seemed to retain the proper curvature of the air tank. However, by running one’s hands on both sides of the outside of the tank, it was easy to detect anomalies where the opening had been made – there was a pronounced ripple like effect. This turned out to be the most detectable flaw with the air tank modification. No other contraband was located. Further information cannot be disclosed at this time, as the investigation is still ongoing.
Crystal meth couriers from UNITED STATES

In November 2023, four cases were reported to the CEN database of couriers carrying substantial amounts of Crystal Meth departing from the UNITED STATES and being arrested at European airports:

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<th>Departure Date</th>
<th>Departure Location</th>
<th>Departure Country</th>
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<td>1644593</td>
<td>05/11/2023</td>
<td>London / Gatwick</td>
<td>UNITED KINGDOM</td>
<td>30 kg</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>New York / JFK</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1623700</td>
<td>14/11/2023</td>
<td>Amsterdam</td>
<td>THE NETHERLANDS</td>
<td>20.2 kg</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Los Angeles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1623699</td>
<td>14/11/2023</td>
<td>Amsterdam</td>
<td>THE NETHERLANDS</td>
<td>47.7 kg</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Los Angeles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1623698</td>
<td>14/11/2023</td>
<td>Amsterdam</td>
<td>THE NETHERLANDS</td>
<td>24.1 kg</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Los Angeles</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Based on the available CEN data (21/02/2024) the TOP 5 Departure Countries for Methamphetamine heading to RILO WE region are:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Departure Country</th>
<th>2021</th>
<th></th>
<th>2022</th>
<th></th>
<th>2023</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No. of cases</td>
<td>total quantity</td>
<td>No. of cases</td>
<td>total quantity</td>
<td>No. of cases</td>
<td>total quantity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MEXICO</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>949 kg</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>472 kg</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>20,063 kg</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THAILAND</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>6,121 kg</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>147 kg</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>17 kg</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LAOS</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>24 kg</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>40 kg</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>4,005 kg</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UNITED STATES</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>192 kg</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>39 kg</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>128 kg</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SOUTH AFRICA</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>162 kg</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5 kg</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>122 kg</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For the last three years, 85 % of all reported methamphetamine seizures with the RILO WE region as destination were made in mail shipments. Most of the methamphetamine couriers come from West and Central African region (main country Nigeria).

Further Reading:

‘EU Drug Market: Methamphetamine’ describes the European methamphetamine market from production and trafficking, to distribution and use. It details the processes, materials and players involved at different stages and levels of the market. The module takes a threat assessment approach, identifying the key issues and defining recommendations for action at EU and Member State level.

This resource is a module of EU Drug Markets: In-depth analysis, the fourth comprehensive overview of illicit drug markets in the European Union by the EMCDDA and Europol.

Last update: 6 May 2022

In May 2023, Czech Customs found 73 live reptiles in an unclaimed suitcase at Prague Airport. The suitcase was loaded at the Prague Airport and then sent back to Prague from Tel Aviv (ISRAEL) airport as unclaimed baggage. The animals were hidden in plastic boxes and within socks.

(CEN ID 1565353)

The following CITES listed and non-CITES listed species were found:

- Testudo hermanni (Hermann’s Tortoise) - 5 pieces
  CITES LISTING Appendix II ; [FAMILY listing Testudinidae spp.]
- Python regius (Royal Python) - 8 pieces
  CITES LISTING Appendix II ; [FAMILY listing Pythonidae spp.]
- Eunectes murinus (Anaconda) - 5 pieces
  CITES LISTING Appendix II ; [FAMILY listing Boidae spp.]
- Lampropeltis triangulum (Milksnake) - 20 pieces
- Lampropeltis getula (Eastern Kingsnake) - 19 pieces
- Elaphe taeniura (Beauty Rat Snake) - 3 pieces
- Elaphe spp. - 3 pieces
- Lampropeltis spp. - 4 pieces
- Elaphe guttata (also Pantherophis guttatus, Corn Snake) - 1 piece
- Pituophis melanoleucus (Eastern Pine Snake) - 1 piece
- Rhacodactylus ciliatus (also Correlophus ciliatus, Crested Gecko) - 4 pieces.
Modus Operandi: Hidden concealment in side panel of delivery vans

Swedish Customs has reported three cases with the same Modus Operandi, where a constructed compartment is found in the side of a car transporter during inspection.

The access to the compartments is controlled by an electronic locking mechanism powered by the vehicle’s battery. The hatches to the hidden compartments are unlocked either by using a specially programmed car key with central locking programmed against a receiver in the instrument panel (that is, with a different car key than the one intended for the vehicle), or through a button in the driver’s cabin.

The hatches for the hidden compartments are further secured with magnets to keep them in place.

The hatches are heavy and reinforced with lead-like material, the inside of the hidden compartment is lined with foil-like material (“Bitmat”) which, together with the hatch’s design, appears to be an attempt to prevent X-ray inspections. During the inspection, X-ray tests were conducted, yielding results that were non-conclusive.

More detailed images and information about these concealments and other concealments in all types of vehicles can be found in the CAVA—VEHICLE CONCEALMENTS LIBRARY on the WCO CENcomm3. The tool is available for all law enforcement officers in the WCO Europe region and easily accessible via the web. If interested please contact us.

CASE 1
CEN ID 1647446
Peugeot, Boxer, 2013
When: 12/07/2023 at 19:45
Where: Ystad hamn
What: 9 kg cocaine
Who: Polish citizen (male)

CASE 2
CEN ID 1647455
Fiat, Ducato, 2012
When: 21/07/2023 at 08.00
Where: Öresund Bridge, Malmö
What: 16 kg cocaine
Who: Polish citizenship (male)

CASE 3
CEN ID 1647456
Peugeot, Boxer, 2013
When: 21/07/2023 at 07:27
Where: Öresund Bridge, Malmö
What: 12 kg cocaine
Who: Lithuanian citizen (male)
On February 5, 2024, Danish Customs seized a postal letter at the Copenhagen mail centre coming from the UNITED STATES, which contained an unusual seizure: A total of 16 cotton swabs and 7 pieces of pipette bottles, all containing psilocybin mushrooms. (CEN ID 1650288)

**RECOMMENDATION**

This seizure is a part of a diversification of hallucinogenic mushrooms smuggling methods observed in recent years. Already in 2006, the EMCDDA noted an increase in the use of hallucinogenic mushrooms. This trend seems to have gained momentum in recent years, with an increased interest in medicinal psilocybin noted in North America, with an focus on microdosing, where law enforcement seizures have risen noticeably in recent years. It should be noted that psilocybin has been decriminalized in some US states.

All of this suggests that psilocybin might be starting on the same path as cannabis in North America.

**FURTHER READING**

EMCDDA case study on Hallucinogenic Mushrooms (2006)  

A CBC News look at the growing market of medicinal psilocybin  
https://www.cbc.ca/newsinteractives/features/magic-mushroom-medicine

CBC News looks at Micro-Dosing Psilocybin  

Psilocybin decriminalization in the United States  
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Psilocybin_decriminalization_in_the_United_States

U.S. National Institutes of Health  
In January 2023, the World Customs Organization (WCO) launched the Customs Enforcement Network (CEN) data visualization project with an online event. The event brought together participants from 86 WCO Member administrations from the six WCO regions, as well as from the 12 RILOs. The RILOs play a crucial role in the data collection and analysis process on which the new functionalities of the CEN data visualization tool are based.

The CEN is a powerful tool used by Customs enforcement since the year 2000. It collects data and information for intelligence purposes and serves as a central repository for enforcement-related information. CEN’s success relies on the regular flow of high-quality data provided by all WCO members, and RILOs are instrumental in facilitating the collection and verification.

The new CEN data visualization tool takes CEN to the next level, making it easier than ever for users to access and analyse the data stored in CEN. The tool features interactive dashboards that provide real-time data analysis, making it an invaluable tool for strategic and operational decision-making.

The goal of CEN data visualization is to make data available by presenting it in an easily accessible, comprehensive and digestible way for all CEN users without analytical skills or sophisticated IT knowledge. By summarizing complex information, dashboards play a central role in understanding trends and patterns behind raw data. Detailed information on goods, detection and concealment methods, routes and, in general, new fraud trends are now more easily accessible.

For more information, contact: WCO CEN Team cis@wcoomd.org.

The CEN DATA VISUALIZATION TOOL can be reached in two different ways:

1. Via CEN
   Login to CEN.
   https://newcen.wcoomd.org/cen/login/login.jsp

   Links > CEN Data Visualization

2. Via WCO Members website
   Login to WCO Members website

   If you do not have a WCO members login, request registration here:
   https://www.wcoomd.org/Login.aspx
CAVA

VEHICLE CONCEALMENTS LIBRARY

The German Bundeskriminalamt established a library with documentations about concealments in vehicles to support law enforcement officers to detect concealments in vehicles (Cars, trucks, coaches and mobile homes). Based on this documentation the CAVA VEHICLE CONCEALMENTS LIBRARY was initiated by the RILO WE together with the German Bundeskriminalamt to make the information available for law enforcement officers in other countries, to collect more material and share information with a wider community.

CAVA contains a library with documentation (pictures and videos) about concealments in vehicles sorted and searchable by brand/model).

CAVA is hosted on the WCO (World Customs Organization) CENcomm3.0 platform a web-based real-time communication tool that is accessible 24/7 and limited to a selected closed user group. Information transmitted via this platform is encrypted, secure and accessible. All users are connected via a secured URL address using separate logins and passwords issued for this purpose.

A mobile version of the CENcomm platform is available on smartphones.

It is possible to request access for units (like departments, units, teams, etc.) with a generic email account as well as for individual officers with a personal mail account.

Access can be granted to all law enforcement officers (Police, Customs, Border Guard) in Europe. To gain access, the interested unit/office must contact the administrators of the CAVA platform and provide First Name, Last Name, Country, Administration (Customs, Police, Border Force), Unit, email address.

CAVA enables all users to quickly contact the CAVA administrators to share information about new concealments/ modus operandi that can be uploaded to the library.

In the recent years, an increased use of vehicles with professional, hiding places for the transport of drugs, cash and weapons has been observed. Based on assessments of the German Police the number of these courier vehicles in Europe is likely to be in the five-digit range. Finding the built-in hiding-places is very time-consuming without specific instructions or without knowledge of design-related options of different brands/ models.
The Vessel Rummage Information Library (VeRIL) is based on the information that the two colleagues of the German customs rummage team Hamburg officials Michael Harten and Dirk Mahler have already collected in order to set up a tool for all officers who carry out vessel searches. Because of their experience and commitment, the two colleagues have been appointed administrators of the VeRIL platform by the WCO (together with the RILO WE).

The aim is to assist officers in their efforts to effectively combat smuggling on vessels and boats, generate and secure revenue, protect our societies, and share updates on seizures and modus operandi around the world. VeRIL is not a database and does not contain personal data. It is a tool kit for all officials around the world who regularly conduct ship inspections. Since VeRIL only contains ship-related data and information, it does not contain findings related to containers, as the UNODC – WCO Container Control Program (CCP) has its own platform for this purpose.

It contains the following information:

+ vessel plans sorted by IMO numbers and vessel name
+ seizures and hiding places on vessels sorted by IMO numbers
+ rummage manuals from different countries (at the moment from German Customs, an expansion is planned)
+ media releases
+ occupational health and safety information
+ videos about maritime operations, involved authorities, trainings
+ vessel related intelligence tools and contact details to rummage teams around the globe
+ and useful forms for vessel rummage

VeRIL is hosted on the WCO (World Customs Organization) CENcomm3.0 platform a web-based real-time communication tool that is accessible 24/7 and limited to a selected closed user group. Information transmitted via this platform is encrypted, secure and accessible. A mobile version of the CENcomm platform is available on smartphones.

All users are connected via a secured URL address using separate logins and passwords issued for this purpose. Access can be granted to all law enforcement officers (Police, Customs, Border Guard) worldwide.

In order to obtain personal access, the interested unit/officer must contact the administrators of the VeRIL platform and provide First Name, Last Name, Country, Administration (Customs, Police, Border Force), Unit, email address.

In order to expand the content of the library, all users of the platform are encouraged to share information like

+ new seizures and insights to maritime smuggling on vessels
+ vessel plans
+ training materials like rummage manuals.

The information should be send to the VeRIL administrators, as exclusively the administrators manage the maintenance of the content of the library.

If you and your administration is interested in a personal demonstration please contact with the RILO WE first, as the administrators are still active law enforcement officers within the Hamburg Rummage Team and it may take some time before they are able to get in contact.

We are happy to hear from you and we wish "Happy Hunting",

Michael Harten and Dirk Mahler

For more information
VeRIL.HZA-hamburg@zoll.bund.de
RILOWE@zka.bund.de