

Speech by Secretary for Justice at 2008 International Customs Day

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Following is the speech by the Secretary for Justice, Mr Wong Yan Lung, SC, at the 2008 International Customs Day today (January 25):

Commissioner Yuen, Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is my great pleasure to join you today at this reception to mark the 2008 International Customs Day. I particularly would like to welcome Customs and law enforcement colleagues from the Mainland, Macau and overseas.

The main theme of the event this year is “Combating Illicit Trafficking in Drugs and Psychotropic Substances”. As Commissioner Yuen just mentioned, drug abuse, particularly among young people, is a subject close to my heart.

According to the 2007 World Drugs Report, some 5 per cent of the world population between the age of 15 and 64 use illicit drugs each year. This translates into 200 million people in their prime years. The annual value of the illegal drug trade is estimated at US\$322 billion. The cost to society is enormous.

I have seen the destructive effect of drug abuse on a person’s body and mind. I have seen how families were shattered by one member’s going down the drug path. It undermines the fabric of a society. And, worse still, since drug trafficking is always perpetuated by syndicates between local and international crime rings, it is also a main source of funding for other forms of criminal activities.

It is therefore heartening to know that the World Customs Organisation has placed strong emphasis on international cooperation in combating drug trafficking, and has chosen drug enforcement as its theme in international customs cooperation this year.

In Hong Kong, we have always adopted a zero tolerance approach towards drug-related crimes. Our anti-drug strategy has successfully reduced the total number of drug abusers in the past 10 years. However, the number of young abusers of psychotropic substances has been increasing in the past three years and is causing the Government and our society at large serious concerns. Young people are our future. We simply cannot allow our new generation to be eroded by drug abuse.

As announced in his Policy Address last October, the Chief Executive has set up a high-level inter-departmental Task Force chaired by me to tackle the problem. The involvement of the Secretary for Justice will ensure we have a solid legal framework on the way forward. But what is needed is of course not merely a matter of law and law enforcement. We are getting all relevant policy makers on board and using a holistic approach to address the problem, covering other important areas, including preventive education and publicity, treatment and rehabilitation, research, and external cooperation.

On this occasion, let me underline the importance of supply reduction as an integral part of our drug control strategy. Drug traffickers prey on international trade to smuggle their illicit cargoes around. We look to organisations like the WCO to lead the international efforts to eradicate the source of supply of illicit drugs and substances in the world. To stop drugs from infiltrating Hong Kong, the Hong Kong Customs service is our first and most trusted guards at points of entry. This is a particularly daunting task for you Commissioner Yuen and your colleagues because of our position as an international trade and financial centre and the huge volume of passenger and cargo flowing through our numerous boundary control points everyday. Detection of drugs is like finding needles in the haystack. When the haystack comes in tons, the challenge can be overwhelming.

However, with solid intelligence gathering and sharing, thorough analysis, and comprehensive planning, our Customs colleagues are making significant headway. Their sterling effort has resulted in the seizure of over 540 kilograms and some 30 000 tablets of illicit drugs and the arrest of over 730 people last year. I would like to commend members of the Hong Kong Customs for their professionalism and hard work. And I look forward to working closely with you in the Task Force.

Of course, apart from fighting drug, Hong Kong Customs also plays a pivotal role in combating smuggling activities, protecting intellectual property rights, safeguarding customer interests and providing efficient clearance at control points to facilitate smooth flow of people and cargo. The entire Hong Kong community is indeed very grateful for your significant service and contribution.

Ladies and Gentlemen, in a moment I will be presenting WCO Certificates of Merit to ten Hong Kong Customs officers in recognition of their exceptional performance in the fight against illicit drug trafficking. These Customs colleagues exemplify the commitment and determination of Hong Kong in joining hands with the international community to combat drug trafficking. No country or territory can fight and win the war against drugs on its own. By working together, we can better protect our society against the scourge of drugs and send drug traffickers a strong message that crime does not pay but they will pay for crime.

Thank you.

Ends/Friday, January 25, 2008