



07 JAN, 2024

Accustomed to smuggling?

New Sunday Times, Malaysia



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Nightmare in Forest City

FOREST City, Malaysia's 100-billion-dollar dream city of the future and the only residential duty-free zone, is now afflicted with a nightmare of a torment: smuggling of quota-restricted goods. And this bad dream isn't a 2024 story. It is an ordeal of old. Like in all afflictions, a precise date is hard to come by, but it is at least as old as 2019, a mere three years after the city was built. And there is no subtlety to the smuggling either. As you make your way to the duty-free complex, an "agent" approaches with an offer to take quota-limited alcoholic beverages and cigarettes for a fee. As the correspondent of this newspaper found out, the ruling fee on Friday for smuggling a crate of beer out of Forest City was RM25. A crate of Tiger beer is being sold at RM74.30 at the duty-free store, while the ruling retail price outside Forest City is RM143.90, a smuggler's darling of a price. That is almost RM70 per crate that doesn't make it to the Treasury. Add to this the unpaid duties on cartons of cigarettes and liquor, and the loss to the public purse during all these years of smuggling in Forest City takes on a titanic proportion.

We needn't be rocket scientists to conclude that smuggling activities in Forest City are a pressing issue. Anecdotal evidence alone will suffice. Runners are conspicuous. Dressed as runners, they brazenly approach anyone and everyone, offering to spirit out quota-assigned goods for a fee. Such barefaced defiance is a sign of one thing: that Customs officers are working in cahoots with smugglers for a fee, too. They may be doing this for two reasons. One is that the officers and their families may be under a you-are-with-us-or-else threat. This isn't

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an invention by officers hankering after bribes. The menace is real. No less than a Customs deputy director-general (usually the head of enforcement) was killed by a smuggling ring as he was leaving for work in Putrajaya in 2013. These enforcement officers must be protected. One way to do this is to implement frequent transfers of officers. But the Customs Department practice of keeping an officer for five years is a hindrance. Five years is long enough for the threat of the thugs to work on an officer. Another is to go for profiles in courage. The murdered deputy director-general was one. Courage always trumps menace. The second reason why the officers are smuggler-friendly is because they are plainly corrupt. To be blatantly blunt, such officers have made greed their god. There should be no place for such officers in the Customs Department.

But we are not done yet. The best way to get rid of the menace posed by the smugglers is to get rid of smuggling. Here we enter a national malaise. For some inexplicable reason, our enforcement agencies wake up to a problem when it is too late. Consider Forest City's case. The Customs Department should have acted when the first runner reared his ugly head at the Fisherman's Wharf, as the duty-free complex is called. Now it is a hydra-headed monster of a problem. Unkind though it may come across, we say the Customs Department asked for it. Let's hope the problem is one of excision, not extirpation.



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SUMMARIES

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