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 ***News Release***

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**Duo jailed as tobacco smuggling bid stubbed out**

Two lorry drivers, who tried to smuggle more than 1.5 million cigarettes into the UK hidden between bags of wood pellets, have been jailed after an investigation by HM Revenue and Customs (HMRC).

Marin Vasilev, 40, of Willingham, Cambridge, was caught attempting to sneak the cigarettes, worth £444,641 in unpaid duty, into the UK on 1 May 2018. Border Force officials stopped him at the Port of Dover and found the cigarettes in his lorry. Vasilev was arrested, the cigarettes were seized, and the case referred to HMRC to investigate.

Venelin Nikolov, 45, from Sofia, Bulgaria, was tracked down two months later in connection with the seizure. Despite both men denying knowing each other, officers discovered they had actually swapped trailers on their way to the UK from Bulgaria.

Tom Hunnisett, Assistant Director, Fraud Investigation Service, HMRC, said:

“Tobacco smuggling deprives our public services of much needed funds and undermines honest businesses that play by the rules.

“The unpaid duty from this shipment alone is the equivalent to the annual salaries of 19 newly qualified nurses for an entire year.

“We encourage anyone with information regarding the smuggling, storage or sale of illegal tobacco to report it to HMRC online, or contact our Fraud Hotline on 0800 788 887.”

Paul Morgan, Director of Border Force South East and Europe, said:

“The size of the detection made by Border Force officers should leave people in no doubt that tobacco smuggling is worth big money to the criminals involved. We will continue to work with HMRC and the police to identify the people responsible for attempts like this and bring them to justice.”

Vasilev and Nikolov pleaded guilty to the fraudulent evasion of excise duty on the second day of their trial, at Maidstone Crown Court. Yesterday (10 December 2018) at the same court, they were both sentenced to 18 months in prison.

**Notes for Editors**

1. Marin VASILEV, of Wilford Furlong, Willingham, Cambridge, (DOB 11/04/1978) pleaded guilty to the fraudulent evasion of excise duty on 20 November 2018. He was sentenced to 18 months in prison on 10 December 2018 at Maidstone Crown Court. His HGV cab and trailer have also been seized.
2. Venelin NIKOLOV, from Sofia, Bulgaria, (DOB 28/02/1973) pleaded guilty to the fraudulent evasion of excise duty on 20 November 2018. He was sentenced to 18 months in prison on 10 December 2018 at Maidstone Crown Court.
3. 1,587,000 million cigarettes were seized on the 1 May 2018, with a duty evaded of £444,641. This is the equivalent to 79,350 20-packs of cigarettes.
4. Fully qualified nurses start on salaries of £23,023 rising to £29,608 on Band 5 of the Pay bands and pay points on the second pay spine in England. Salaries in London attract a high-cost area supplement. <https://www.nhsemployers.org/tchandbook/annex-1-to-3/annex-2-pay-bands-and-pay-points-on-the-second-pay-spine-in-england>
5. Anyone with information about people suspected of smuggling, selling or storing illegal tobacco should report it online at: <https://www.gov.uk/report-tobacco-or-alcohol-tax-evasion> or contact our hotline on 0800 788 887.
6. Follow HMRC’s press office on Twitter @HMRCpressoffice

**Issued by HM Revenue & Customs Press Office**

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