

## Gopee-Scoon hails progress in tackling the illicit cigarette trade

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THE Anti-Illicit Trade Task Force (AITTF) made around seven seizures last year, including illegal cigarettes, alcohol, and other products, according to Trade Minister Paula Gopee-Scoon.

The minister made the statement while speaking to the media during a tour of the West Indian Tobacco Company Ltd (WITCO) facility in Champs Fleurs on Friday. The tour was part of a series of courtesy calls to companies that won awards from the Trinidad and Tobago Manufacturers' Association (TTMA) last year.

'There were about six or seven seizures. It would not have been in the public domain and there are some issues we have to iron out further, for instance when you do seize this amount of cigarettes where do you put them because after that, this person ought to be charged...but those are things still to be ironed out by the task force,' said Gopee-Scoon.

The AITTF is a public-private partnership of organisations involved in combating illicit trade in Trinidad and Tobago.

It includes representation from the Customs and Excise Division, the Financial Intelligence Unit of the Ministry of Finance, the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service, and Crimestoppers Trinidad and Tobago, among others. Gopee-Scoon believes that by now the number of illicit drugs should have decreased as a result of educational campaigns conducted by the AITTF.

Meanwhile, the minister said, cigarettes are high on the list of exports 'it is usually on our top ten on the non-energy side'.

Chairman of WITCO, Ingrid Lashley, said the company has made significant contributions to foreign exchange, profitability, and shareholder value over the years.

'I would say (we are) among the top 20 in our country over the last 120 years,' she said.

Asked about forex challenges being faced by manufacturers, TTMA's president Roger Roach said, 'Manufacturers are, I would say, at an advantageous side of the spectrum when it comes to forex because manufacturers earn a considerable amount of their foreign exchange and because the Government has put a lot of focus on the productive sector, manufacturers have a lot of opportunities to get foreign exchange. Number one, we have facilities at the Export Import Bank.' WITCO announced a remarkable milestone this month, celebrating three years without a single lost-time incident.

'This achievement reflects the company's unwavering commitment to the health and safety of its employees and operational excellence on its manufacturing site,' it stated.

The company received two awards and one honourable mention from the TTMA and the American Chamber of Commerce of T & T (AMCHAM T & T) last year.

'These accolades were awarded in recognition of the company's exceptional environmental sustainability projects, including efforts in water conservation and achieving zero waste to landfill,' WITCO stated.