

"Palm Reading" Pointed to Illegal Immigrants

Clifford Lo

A \$9,000 (\$HK) palm-sized carbon dioxide detector—originally used to carry out air pollution and industrial safety tests—helped Customs officers find the stowaways.

The American-made device found levels of the gas were four times higher than normal when it tested air from inside the container before midnight on Wednesday night at the Kwai Chung terminal.

"The reading rose sharply from the normal 500 parts per million [ppm] to 2,200ppm . . ." said the head of Customs containerized cargo division, Hui Chiu-chun. "It gave us the message that human beings might be hidden inside. So we made a further check."

He said it was the first time the detector had helped uncover stowaways. The Customs and Excise Department bought five of the machines when the extent of Hong Kong's role in human trafficking became apparent earlier this year.

Eleven cases of human smuggling from Hong Kong were detected in the United States and Canada between January and April.

"The device is used to check the level of carbon dioxide. If the test is positive, people might have hidden inside," Mr Hui said. "The detector was originally used by environmental protection groups to check air pollution. It is also used in industrial safety inspections to test whether confined places are safe for workers."

He said the department might consider buying more detectors to tackle the problem of human smuggling. Customs officers have inspected more than 33,800 outbound containers with the detectors since January. Last year two million containers were shipped from Hong Kong to North America.



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