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The 28th WCO ESA Governing Council Meeting deliberates on the New Regional Strategy 2022-25

Dr. the Hon. Renganaden Padayachy, Minister of Finance, Economic Planning and Development, launched the World Customs Organisation (WCO) East and Southern Africa (ESA) 28th Governing Council (GC) Meeting at the Integrated Customs Clearance Centre (ICCC) at Le Chaland on Thursday 12 May 2022. The GC meeting was a two-day high level meeting and was attended by some fifty Commissioner Generals and Commissioners of Customs from 24 East and South African countries including Mauritius.

The Opening Ceremony was launched in the presence of High Officials of the WCO namely, Dr. Kunio Mikuriya, Secretary General, Mr. Trevino Ricardo Chapa, Deputy Secretary General and Mr. Hans Pieters, Head of Administration and Personnel. Other distinguished personalities namely, Mr. Batsirai Chadzingwa, Vice-Chair, WCO ESA region, Mr. Lary Lizza, Director, Regional Office for Capacity Building (ROBC), Messrs M. Bheekhee and V. Pareatumbie of the MRA Board, Mr. Sudhamo Lal, Director-General of the MRA and Observers from the African Union Commission, COMESA, SADC and IMF Afritac South also participated in the GC meeting.



The GC Meeting has a broad objective of enhancing the efficiency and effectiveness of ESA Customs administrations in revenue collection, facilitation of international trade, safeguarding national security, protecting society and the environment, and compiling international trade statistics. To achieve these objectives, it is very important that the ESA Customs administrations modernize and automate their procedures, processes and systems and also implement WCO's international standards, recommendations, tools and instruments in support of Members' national customs legislation and practices. This meeting has the wisdom and mandate to take key decisions in these areas for the benefit of individual member administrations as well for the benefit of the whole ESA region.



There were many important issues on the agenda of the meeting, among which, the New Regional Strategy for the period 2022-2025 was discussed. The meeting also deliberated on decisions of the 35th Regional Steering Group Meeting as well as the ESA Risk Management Compendium and Gender Equity, Equality and Diversity issues amongst others.

Keynote address by Dr. the Hon. Renganaden Padayachy, Minister of Finance, Economic Planning and Development

In his keynote address, during the opening ceremony, Dr. the Hon. Renganaden Padayachy highlighted the important role played by Customs in the economy, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, it operated 24/7 like other emergency services to ensure supply chain and business continuity. *"We are providing unwavering support to the MRA to acquire the latest tools, equipment and technology, to further enhance the operational capabilities of Customs officers and to better fight against the trafficking of illicit drugs and narcotics"*, he added.



The Honourable Minister acknowledged the support that the government provides to boost trade and investment, by implementing a variety of measures such as the National Electronic Licensing System, a single electronic platform for business licensing and the Mauritius Trade Easy portal, supported by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Regional Integration and International Trade.

Address by Dr. Kunio Mikuriya, Secretary General of the WCO



Dr. Kunio Mikuriya, Secretary General of the WCO, in his opening address thanked the government of Mauritius for cooperating with other customs administration in the WCO ESA region. He congratulated Mauritius for having WCO Accredited Experts in various fields, who assist WCO in its capacity building programme in the African region.

He highlighted the main discussions he had with the Honourable P.K. Jugnauth, Prime Minister of Mauritius during his courtesy visit in his office on 11 May 2022 concerning; the reinforcement of compliance functions, capacity building in innovative technologies, the fight against undervaluation of goods and preventing leakage of government revenue, commercial fraud and narcotics, Intelligence and Risk Management and optimisation of revenue collection on excisable goods by adopting international best practices on control over locally manufactured excisable goods, amongst others.



Dr. Kunio Mikuriya paid a courtesy visit on the Hon. Pravind Kumar Jugnauth, Prime Minister of the Republic of Mauritius. He was accompanied by (from left to right) Mr. A. Teeluckdharry, Asst. Director, Taxpayer Education and Communication Dept., MRA, Mr. V. Ramburun, Director, MRA Customs, Mr. S. Lal, Director-General, MRA, and Mr. H. Pieters, Head of Administration and Personnel, WCO. Photo courtesy of the GIS.

Address by Mr. Batsirai Chadzingwa, Vice Chair, WCO ESA region

Mr. Batsirai Chadzingwa, Vice Chair, WCO ESA region, in his address thanked Mauritius for hosting the GC meeting at a short notice and the dedication of Mauritius of its commitment in the region. *"I assure you of our devotion as Customs Administrations in the region to the full implementation of the African Continental Free Trade Agreement (AfCFTA). To support these efforts, the region has developed a new Regional Strategy seeking to ensure economic growth and intra-regional trade by facilitating trade securely, efficiently and professionally. We also aim to further develop gender inclusive, professional and modernised customs administration that are fair, efficient and effective in revenue collection and border management service",* he added.



Address by Mr. Sudhamo Lal, Director-General of the MRA

In his address, Mr. Lal, Director-General of the MRA, acknowledged the keen interest of the Minister of Finance, Economic Planning and Development, in the development and facilitation of trade. Mr. Lal stated that, as the centre of Excellence for Compliance and Enforcement, the WCO Mauritius Multilingual Regional Training Centre (RTC) is playing a crucial role in capacity building activities not only for Customs but also for other border enforcement agencies in Mauritius as well as for the ESA region. *"The RTC Mauritius has been actively organizing training programmes, locally and regionally, and include areas such as Harmonized Systems (HS), Customs Valuation, Rules of Origin, combatting illicit drugs and narcotics, Anti-Money Laundering, Counterfeit Currency and Terrorist Financing, enforcement of Intellectual Property Rights, Brand Identification of medicine and medical devices, identification of New Psycho Active Substances and Profiling Techniques, amongst others",* he added.

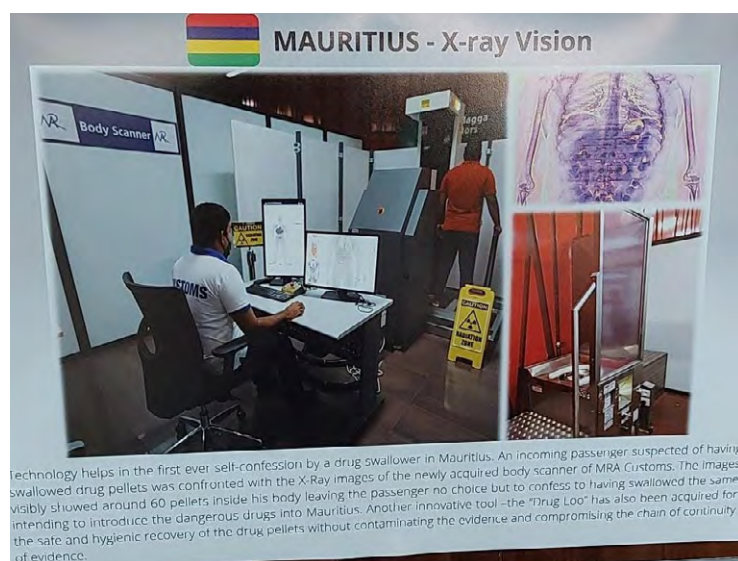


The MRA wins the WCO ESA ROCB Annual Sotho Photo Contest 2022

The Customs Department of the MRA bagged the first place in the ESA Region's Annual Sotho Photo Contest 2022 organized by the World Customs Organization, East and Southern Africa Region (WCO ESA ROCB). Dr Kunio Mikuriya, Secretary General of the WCO handed over the winner's trophy to Mr S. Lal, Director-General of the MRA, at the Governing Council meeting on 13 May 2022 at the Integrated Customs Clearance Centre, Plaine Magnien, Mauritius. For the 2022 contest, Kenya and Madagascar are the first and second runners-up respectively.

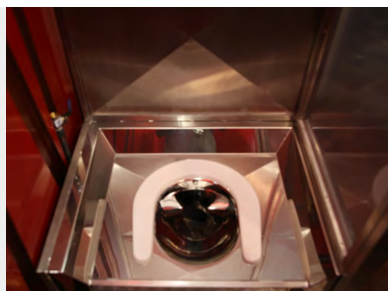


All the twenty-four ESA Customs administrations were invited to submit a photo, with a brief description, that tells a customs story for the competition. Each Head of administration was allowed to give one vote for the winner and two runner-ups. This contest was named Sotho in honour of the nation and people of Lesotho, which hosted the first photo contest in the region during Governing Council in May 2016. Fifteen ESA countries participated in the 2022 contest and all the submissions received will form part of the ESA Sotho Photo Book 2022 which will be published after the Governing Council meeting.



The photo submitted by Mauritius was mainly focused on technology. The MRA has acquired the latest technology to aid custom officers combat the traffic of illicit drugs. Technology helps in first ever self-confession by drug swallower in Mauritius. An incoming passenger suspected to having swallowed drug pellets was confronted with the X-Ray images of the newly acquired body scanner of MRA Customs. The images visibly showed around 60 pellets inside his body leaving the passenger no choice but to confess having swallowed same with the intention of introducing the dangerous drugs into Mauritius.

Another innovative tool – the “Drug Loo” has also been acquired for the safe and hygienic recovery of the drug pellets without contaminating the evidence and compromising the chain of continuity of evidence.



Launching ceremony of the Forensic Disciplines Exchange Event by Prime Minister at the ICCC

The MRA, in collaboration with the US Embassy, the Prime Minister's Office (PMO), the U.S Army Southern European Task Force, Africa (SETAF-AF) and the Forensic Science Laboratory (FSL) hosted a five-day Forensic Disciplines Exchange Programme at the Integrated Customs Clearance Centre (ICCC), Le Chaland, Plaine Magnien, from 16 to 20 May 2022. It was facilitated by a team of ten Resource Persons from the SETAF-AF and funded by the United States Department of Defense.

The aim of the 5-day event is to reinforce the capabilities to exploit crime scenes and evidence in order to properly investigate crimes and prosecute criminals, particularly in the maritime domain. The event focussed on topics related to forensic science, crime scene investigation and evidence preservation and presentation such as Sensitive Site Exploitation, Customs, Identity Activities and inclusion of Expeditionary Laboratory into operations. The event comprised both in class and onsite practical activities.

42 representatives from various Units of the Mauritius Police Force (MPF) namely from Police Medical Doctors, Scenes of Crime Office (SOCO), Major Crime Investigation Team (MCIT), Central Criminal Investigation Division (CCID), Groupement d'Intervention de la Police Mauricienne (GIPM), National Coast Guard (NCG), Anti-Drug & Smuggling Unit (ADSU), Forensic Science Laboratory-FSL and MRA Customs participated in the event.



The event was launched by the Prime Minister, Hon. Pravin Kumar Jugnauth on Monday 16 May 2022 and in his keynote address, he emphasised the importance of such exchange programme which will no doubt enhance the capabilities and techniques of investigators as threats emerge. Mrs. M. Madhub-Dassyne, Director, Forensic Science Laboratory, and Mrs. J. E. DeBaere, Chargé d'Affaires of the US Embassy in Mauritius, also gave their remarks during the opening ceremony.

A handing over of certificates ceremony was held on 20 May 2022 in the presence of representatives from US Embassy, PMO, FSL, MPF and MRA.



Capacity Building Mission on Intelligence by French Customs

The French Ambassador, Her Excellency Florence Caussé-Tissier launched a 5-day Training on Intelligence mounted by the MRA Training Academy in collaboration with the French Customs at the Custom House, Mer Rouge, on Monday 23 May 2022. The official launching was done in the presence of Mr. Vivekanand Ramburun, Director, Customs, Mr. Dhoojanaden Maunikum, Director, Human Resources & Training Dept., MRA Senior Officials and participants.

The aim of the training was to enhance the skills of MRA officers in Intelligence Gathering and Informant Handling. This training forms part of the International Regional Co-operation Program, led by the Regional Customs Directorate of Reunion Customs, under the aegis of the Delegation for International Relations of the General Directorate of French Customs, since 2013. It is in this context that the French Customs has accompanied MRA Customs in its proactiveness and dynamism for modernization and adapting to the challenges, in particular in terms of the fight against drug-trafficking and money laundering.



During the past years, drug trafficking has largely evolved in terms of new sources of supply and through new vectors. It is in particular with this in mind that the MRA Customs has sought the assistance of the French Customs for the conduct of the Training on Intelligence. Sixteen Customs officers posted in the Customs Anti-Narcotics Section, Surveillance and Enforcement, and Capacity Building Team were nominated to attend the course.

The training was being held both in class and through experiential learning, i.e., applying the concepts to real situations. Messrs Thierry Atchama Sourama, and Lokhat Faize, Head of Intelligence and Enforcement Unit and his Assistant, respectively were designated by the French Customs for the conduct of the 5-day training. The 5-day training culminated on 27 May 2022 with the handing over of certificates to the sixteen participants upon successful completion of the course.



The MRA hosts its 14th Integrity Advisory Committee Meeting

The Director-General of the Mauritius Revenue Authority, Mr. Sudhamo Lal, chaired the 14th Integrity Advisory Committee (IAC) on Friday May 27, 2022 at its head office, Efram Court, Port Louis. The IAC is a platform where the MRA enters into a dialogue with its stakeholders with a view to enhance its anti-corruption policy and integrity promotion program. The **MRA Whistleblowing Policy**, the **Portable Retirement Gratuity Fund**, and the **OECD Review of Confidentiality of Information** were the main themes on the agenda.

The Committee Members, namely, Mr. Sanjeev Sharma, CEO, Mauritius Institute of Professional Accountants (MIPA), Mr. Allen Sandrazie, President of The Mauritius Taxpayers Association (MTPA), Mr. Ameen Khodabux, M.S.K, Treasurer of Mauritius Council of Social Service (MACOSS), Mrs. Doorga Ram-Gopal, Project & Research Officer, Transparency Mauritius (TM), Mrs. Nafeeza Mulung, Learning and Advocacy Manager, Mauritius Institute of Directors and Mrs. Rooma Narrainen, Head of Advocacy, Mauritius Chamber of Commerce and Industry (MCCI) participated in the IAC meeting.



In his opening address, Mr. Lal highlighted on the impact caused by COVID-19 on the different players of the economy, and the MRA was no exception. However, the MRA adapted and continued to offer its services without any major disruption. For instance, the MRA uses digital transformation and aligned business processes to improve operational efficiency to meet organisational goals. Digitalisation has led to the creation of virtual workplace, which enabled the “Work from Home” scheme at the MRA.



During the lockdowns, the two financial assistance schemes, namely, the Self-Employed Assistance Scheme (SEAS) and the Government Wage Assistance Scheme (GWAS) were fully implemented by officers working remotely and without the need for the beneficiaries of those two schemes to come to the office to make applications and collect payment. Mr. Lal also explained that the MRA's Information System Department has developed the necessary platforms in-house for the processing of SEAS and GWAS applications in a few days just after that the government announced the lockdown, and all transactions, including payment, were effected electronically.

Moreover, a Central Control Room in the Customs Department has been set up with cutting edge technologies to monitor activities in respect of the examination of containers. For example, a Risk Management System may decide which container will be examined and who will conduct the examination. Likewise, it is the Supervisor in the Control Room who gives approval for the release of goods.



Mr. Lal concluded that automation at the MRA not only bring facilitation but also integrity and removes opportunities for corruption to occur.

Furthermore, the Committee took note of the implementation of a new whistle-blowing policy at the MRA for use by all its employees, stakeholders, and members of the public. This policy is in furtherance of the Authority's desire to affirm its commitment to organizational integrity and to intensify the fight against tax crimes, fraud, corruption-related offences, drugs, smuggling of goods, money laundering, and other misconduct or malpractices.

The members of the IAC applauded the work of the MRA and its commitment to delivering its services effectively and efficiently. The Committee was apprised on the implementation at the level of the MRA of the Portable Retirement Gratuity Fund. Its background, mechanism, rates applicable, benchmarking and gratuity payment were the main issues covered. Finally, the global standard on tax transparency and exchange of information to fight against tax evasion, tax base erosion, banking secrecy and opacity in general was shared with the Committee.



Educational campaign

Students are the taxpayers of tomorrow. Making them aware of their tax obligations will inculcate a 'willingness to pay' rather than an 'obligation to pay' attitude.

It is with this in mind that 6 educational sessions were carried out in the month of May 2022. For the financial year 2021/22, almost 50 such sessions were delivered.

Moreover, on 12 May 2022, an education session was organised at Ireland Blyth Limited (IBL) on the Portable Retirement Gratuity Fund (PRGF).

On the other hand, a virtual education session on Solidarity Levy was delivered on 23 May 2022 for the staff of Veling Ltd.

