

Bhutan emerges favourite route for international gold smuggling syndicates

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NEW DELHI: Porous Indo-Bhutan border has become major problem area for Indian security agencies as the Buddhist kingdom has left behind Nepal in becoming the favourite route for international gold smuggling syndicates.

In a multi-city crackdown on Friday, the Directorate of Revenue Intelligence (DRI) seized 66 kg of gold worth Rs 21 crore smuggled from Bhutan. The seizures were made in separate operations in Lucknow, Kolkata and Siliguri.

This was not the first time that DRI had seized such large quantity of golds allegedly smuggled from Bhutan. In October last week, DRI officials confiscated 89 kg gold bars, each weighing 1 kg, from Siliguri and New Delhi Railway station. All the consignments had originated from Bhutan.

The gold bars, with 99.99% purity, had Chinese, Swiss and Australian origin markings and were supposed to be delivered to dealers in Delhi and Mumbai. The origin marks are indicative of the country from where such consignments have originated, said a senior DRI official.

The agency has in the past one year arrested about a dozen Bhutani nationals engaged in smuggling of the yellow metal through the land borders. Surprisingly, the impression of a crime-free Bhutanese society is changing with more Bhutan nationals being found involved in smuggling. In 2017-18, DRI had seized more than 3,200 kg smuggled gold worth over Rs 970 crore, a major part of this was smuggled from neighbouring Bhutan and Myanmar.

On Friday, the DRI officials seized 33 kg of gold worth around Rs 10.57 crore in Lucknow. "A specific information was received

by DRI that an international syndicate is actively engaged in smuggling of huge quantity of foreign origin gold from Bhutan into India through Indo-Bhutan border in West Bengal and sending it to different parts of India,” the official said.

In another related operation, DRI officials seized 33 kg smuggled gold valued at Rs 10.57 crore from Kolkata and Rs 3.5 lakh in cash at siliguri. “The smuggled gold was concealed in a specially built box fixed behind the dash board of a car and also in a specially built cavity near the gearbox,” the officer said.

What is worrying for the officials, there have been evidence of strong linkages of gold smuggling with organized crime and international criminal syndicates. Initially, it may be gold that is being smuggled, but gradually these international syndicates use the same network to smuggle in arms and ammunitions.