

16 arrests in video tape swoop

HUNDREDS of pirated video tapes were seized in a territory-wide operation by customs officers yesterday and 16 people were arrested for selling or renting the tapes.

The raid, the second largest this year, began just after 9.30 am and centred on 10 districts including Yeun Long, Sha Tin, Kowloon City, Mong Kok and Western.

A total of 775 tapes were seized at the various locations. They had a combined estimated value of about \$200,000.

Most of the tapes were of popular Cantonese films, with a few European titles including *Rambo III*.

The officer in charge of the raid, Senior Inspector Chow Kwong from the Copyright Division of the Customs and Excise Department's Investigation

Bureau, said most of the tapes were of poor quality.

"You can see flickering on the film, and the labels are either handwritten or photocopied and so are very easy to distinguish from the real thing," he said.

He explained the operation had been set up following a complaint from Intercontinental, a video tape distributor, that a number of shops were selling pirated copies of its films.

Further evidence had been provided by the Hongkong, Kowloon and New Territories Motion Picture Association, a local watchdog which had come across several pirated copies.

"Normally the shops selling these tapes will only provide them to regular customers. Some of the association's members had joined these suspect clubs and when they were

offered a pirate tape, usually after a few visits, they sent it to us.

"This gave us the evidence we needed to carry out the raids," explained Senior Inspector Kwong.

He added that action from the Customs and Excise Department had reduced the number of shops dealing in pirated tapes but some still remained.

The normal procedure for obtaining the tapes, he said, was either for a salesman to visit the shops and sell them home-made copies, or for the shop itself to buy an original and then copy it.

The copies would be rented or sold to regular customers allowing some of the shops to make a profit of \$3,000 to \$4,000 a day from rentals, particularly if the film was a new release.

Inspector Kwong said there were no organised syndicates producing the films. Almost all were produced by video rental shops, normally ones that operated on a small scale.

"I would like to point out that we are keeping an eye on all shops and making regular checks. People should avoid making these pirate copies as the penalties are severe," he added.

A person convicted of possessing pirated videos for trade purposes would normally receive a fine of up to \$10,000 or a suspended prison sentence of between one and two years, or both, he said.

He said all 16 people arrested yesterday, which include 10 Chinese men, five Chinese women and a Pakistani man, will be released on bail of between \$1,000 and \$10,000 until the copyright ownership on the seized films had been established.