

Thailand struggles to get rid of reputation for pirated goods

A Museum of counterfeit products in Bangkok drives home the point that Thais will copy anything

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BANGKOK - Viagra pills that don't work, Johnnie Walker Whisky that leaves a hangover, and the latest computer software that sells for a fraction of the market price. These items are among more than 1,500 confiscated fakes exhibited in the Museum of Counterfeit Goods in Bangkok. Set up by law firm Tilleke and Gibbins, the museum, one of three in the world, also displays Gucci and Cartier watches and wallets, Manchester United jerseys, and cosmetics - all fake. Tilleke is among a dozen law firms in the country which service major clients such as Microsoft and Umbro.

The exhibits on display are a grim reminder of the huge problem faced by Thailand despite its efforts against counterfeiting in recent years. Pressure from the United States, its main trading partner, has resulted in tougher legislation on intellectual property protection and increased enforcement.

Between July and October last year, police seized at least 90 million baht (S\$3.8 million) worth of pirated products, mainly video CDs. A few million units of fake goods, ranging from Garfield toys to Armani bags, are destroyed annually by the Economic Crime Investigation Department. But Thailand still finds it difficult to shake off the tag of being among countries in the region with poor record in copyright protection.

Lawyer [Tananya Huyanan](#) told The Straits Times: 'Copying other peoples' products is kind of a second career for Thai people. Each day we get more and more different types of counterfeit goods. 'Anything that can be made by man can be copied in Thailand.' With technology, some of the 'real fakes', such as branded watches and leather bags, can pass off as the original products.

Their buyers are attracted by the low prices. For example, a copy of a Windows software costs less than 200 baht compared to US\$200 (S\$363) for the original.

Ms Tananya said a major problem was the difficulty in catching the real culprits. She added: 'It's a sensitive issue because behind these illegal producers are the mafia and politically connected

persons. 'It's not just Mr A or Mr B because there is Mr C and D behind him. 'Mr A and B are just the scapegoats; this is the primary problem with enforcement in Thailand. It is difficult to get to the root of the problem.'

She said awareness of the problem has increased, thanks to media reports and the recent dispute between Thailand and the US over patent ownership of Jasmine rice. Thailand won sole rights to the Jasmine brand name after warding off an attempt by an American researcher to use the term. 'Thais have become more aware that intellectual property does have value because that case really drove the point home about lack of respect for intellectual property rights,' she said. She added that cooperation from the police has increased.

The government has enacted 'aggressive' laws such as a proposal to control the movement of fake goods and production machines between Thailand and neighbouring countries, she added. Only through strong legislation can Thailand deal with the problem. 'It will improve the image of Thailand and show that we are aware of intellectual property whether it belongs to Thais or foreigners,' she said.