

UNTAXED TOBACCO PRODUCTS SEIZED AT FOUR AREA STORES

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An investigation by enforcement agents of the Arkansas Tobacco Control Board Tuesday resulted in the arrest of three men who were allegedly selling tobacco products that were bought from dealers not licensed to sell the products in Arkansas and on which the state taxes had not been paid.

Deputy Prosecutor Rik Ramsey said the agents conducted inspections Tuesday at three stores in Pine Bluff and one in Altheimer and found invoices showing that products had been bought from out-of-state distributors, primarily from a company called Governor's Distributors, located in Miami, Fla.

Store owners

The stores were E & N Express at 1519 S. Cherry St., E & N Express at 1313 E. Harding Ave., both owned by Mohammad Alam, 39; M & R Petroleum, 3100 S. Hazel St., and M & R Petroleum, 201 Edline in Altheimer, both owned by Mohammad Rahman, 36.

Alam, Rahman and Sydul Khokon, 43, who was identified as the manager of the store at Altheimer, were arrested during the investigation, Ramsey said.

He said agents found invoices indicating the store on Hazel Street had purchased more than \$34,000 in tobacco products, the store in Altheimer more than \$1,500, and the stores on Cherry Street and East Harding Avenue more than \$2,500, with the products being shipped to the stores by Federal Express.

In addition to making the arrests, tobacco control board agents also seized a large quantity of untaxed products during the investigation.

Probable cause

Circuit Judge Jodi Dennis ruled Wednesday that prosecutors had probable cause to charge Alam and Rahman with possession of untaxed tobacco, and buying from an unlicensed dealer, but said no to charges on Khokon, questioning whether the law applied to him because he did not own the business.

"I would talk to an attorney because that doesn't mean that they're not going to file charges against you," the judge told Khokon after telling him that he would be released.

Explaining that the men had ties to foreign countries, primarily Bangladesh, Ramsey asked for a \$25,000 bond, but the judge reduced that to \$10,000 after both Alam and Rahman said they had lived in the United States for 14 years. They also told the court they would hire their own attorneys.

Ramsey said possession of untaxed tobacco products is a Class C felony, punishable by three to 10 years in prison, while buying from an unlicensed dealer is a Class D misdemeanor, for which a fine can be imposed.

In addition to conducting compliance checks and inspections, Arkansas Tobacco Control Board agents are also responsible for enforcing state laws against selling tobacco products to minors, according to its website.