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Customs Officials Tout Corruption Battle

By Rachel Nielsen

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The Federal Customs Service said Thursday that since it started its anti-corruption division it has opened more than 100 criminal cases related to bribery and other corruption.

Of the 133 corruption cases, 110 were brought against customs employees and 23 against people offering bribes, the service said in a fact sheet handed out at a news conference. The customs service launched the anti-corruption unit in August 2011.

Alexander Smelyakov, head of the Federal Customs Service press department, said most bribes don't expedite the movement of goods through the border but instead result in cheaper customs duties, lower weights and changes in customs codes.

The service's internal investigations are aided by citizen complaints. In the third quarter alone, the service received about 180 complaints of corrupt activities.

Smelyakov said each complaint is reviewed and considered. He also pushed the media to ask questions about bribe cases and contact his department.

"We are absolutely open," he said.

The service also is urging businesses to fight bribery when handling imports and exports.

Smelyakov recounted an October meeting between Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev and customs service officials during which Medvedev said the business community must wage its own battle in the anti-corruption war against customs graft.

During "a conversation over a cup of tea," the head of government told customs officials that the anti-bribery effort "has to be a two-way street," Smelyakov said.

The domestic economy loses tens of billions of dollars a year from a combination of customs, tax and financial fraud, Reuters reported earlier this year.

A reminder of the reputation the country is trying to change came Thursday, with the news that a former customs official was using a London court to attempt to reclaim almost $40 million that he had invested overseas when his customs stint ended in 1998.

Anatoly Kruglov, who headed the State Customs Committee from 1992 to 1998, is seeking the return of $37.5 million from real estate magnate Shalva Chigirinsky, Vedomosti reported Thursday.

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