The WCO is recognised as the major player in coordinating Customs around the world in protecting society and security at borders

Kunio Mikuriya has been Secretary-General of the World Customs Organization (WCO) since 1 January 2009. The WCO provides leadership, guidance and support to Customs administrations to secure and facilitate legitimate trade, realise revenue, protect society and build capacity.

What would you consider your greatest achievement to-date as Secretary-General of the WCO?

Upon my nomination as Secretary-General of the WCO, I encouraged Members – 180 Customs administrations as of today – to embark on a journey to achieve a new vision: Borders Divide, Customs Connects. Enhancing connectivity would lead to a significant improvement in the Customs service, in close partnership with trade, and thereby improve economic competitiveness. This is what is meant by the term ‘facilitation’, and it is something that I continue to promote through the development of standards and sharing best practices, leading to the acceptance by the international community in the form of the World Trade Organization’s Trade Facilitation Agreement, adopted in 2013. Now the WCO is recognised as the major implementation agency of this WTO Agreement through its capacity building initiative, launched in 2014, known as the Mercator Programme. Of course, Customs facilitate only legitimate trade, the protection of society from illicit trade including narcotics, fake medicines, and wildlife trade is another core mission of Customs. Security of the supply chain is an integral part of economic competitiveness. I guided the WCO toward the development of risk management tools, communication platforms and coordinated global operations to build Customs capacity and enhance collaboration with other law enforcement agencies. Now the WCO is recognised as the major player in coordinating Customs around the world in protecting society and security at borders.

How has your experience prepared you for your role?
The role of Secretary-General of the World Customs Organization is to inspire Members and execute the mission of Customs. Security of the supply chain is an integral part of economic competitiveness. I guided the WCO toward the development of risk management tools, communication platforms and coordinated global operations to build Customs capacity and enhance collaboration with other law enforcement agencies. Now the WCO is recognised as the major player in coordinating Customs around the world in protecting society and security at borders.

How do the WCO facilitate international shipping trade?
The WCO works with our Members towards the realisation of a number of programmes and tools which, once implemented, can lead to an improved facilitation of international shipping trade. Chief amongst these is one of our most renowned Conventions - the Revised Kyoto Convention - which has become the blueprint of a modern and streamlined Customs administration. To date, 101 Members have deposited their instrument of accession and consequently made significant strides towards improved facilitation of international shipping trade.

Your memorable shipping experience: There are too many to choose from, but I always appreciate trips on Customs boats. They give me an opportunity to appreciate Customs in action on the sea. When I was given the responsibility of overseeing Japan Customs enforcement activities in the Ministry of Finance, I had to develop a policy on how to use a large-sized Customs boat that was introduced for the first time for border enforcement activities in the Ministry of Finance of Japan, with a broad portfolio including revenue collection, policy-making and implementation. The Ministry sent me to France to embark on a study programme in order to broaden my perspective through encountering a different way of thinking. My stint as a trade negotiator in Geneva at the time GATT (now evolved to the WTO) stimulated my interest in trade and international relations. This led to my specialising in the Customs and trade back in the Ministry of Finance as well as acquiring a PhD in international relations at a UK university. My experience both at home and abroad around the world was very enriching.

What challenges does the WCO have in the current international environment?
One of the key challenges faced by the WCO is the rapid expansion of e-commerce whereby a large amount of small packages arrive at borders on account of online shopping. As e-commerce represents empowerment for consumers and Micro Small And Medium-sized Enterprises, Customs should support its development, but these new participants to trade are usually unknown to Customs, which poses a challenge from a risk management perspective. Moreover, organised crime and terrorist groups could exploit e-commerce and occupy the supply chain to send illicit goods and security-sensitive goods. We often hear the expression ‘darknet’, which has arisen as a direct result of threats to cyber security.

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