

Presidency denies role in scandal

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Presidential Office spokesman Alex Huang speaks to reporters at the Presidential Office Building in Taipei yesterday.

Photo: Liu Hsin-de, Taipei Times

Following new developments in a duty-free cigarette smuggling scandal, President Tsai Ing-wen (蔡英文) yesterday said that it is time to root out illicit practices that have long been a part of the nation's bureaucracy, while the Presidential Office said that a preliminary investigation has produced no evidence of wrongdoing by mid to high-level officials.

Tsai said that she has entrusted the judiciary and new National Security Bureau (NSB) Director-General Chiu Kuo-cheng (邱國正) to investigate the case, and demanded that mismanagement and disciplinary problems found at China Airlines (華航), the Airport Police Bureau and national security agencies be corrected.

"We will respect the results of the investigation and all infractions found must be rectified," Tsai said.

"We have to face these illicit practices that have accumulated within the bureaucracy for many years," she said. "Now that they have been exposed, they must be fixed."

Presidential Office spokesman Alex Huang (黃alex) told a media briefing that five trucks dispatched to transport items from Taiwan Taoyuan International Airport were controlled by NSB units.

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“Two of the trucks were borrowed from the Presidential Office by the NSB’s presidential security units. They contained no illegal items, only luggage and transport equipment,” Huang said. “The large cache of cigarette cartons was transported on the three other trucks.”

A preliminary investigation found no involvement by mid to high-level officials at the Presidential Office or the National Security Council, he said, but added that “disciplinary measures are being assessed for the presidential security units implicated in the case.”

“An internal investigation has found that presidential security units under the NSB made large purchases of foreign duty-free goods to take advantage of the president’s overseas state visits,” Huang said.

The Taipei District Prosecutors’ Office, in coordination with the Ministry of Justice Investigation Bureau, yesterday searched five China Airlines offices, including those of its subsidiary, China Pacific Catering Services (中航餐食), and its in-flight service supply division, corporate communications office, and cargo services and logistics division.

The raids began in the morning and ended at about 7pm, with investigators taking several cartons of materials.

Prosecutors also summoned for questioning NSB officers Wu Tsung-hsien (吳宗憲) and Chang Heng-chia (張恆嘉), who have been held with restricted communications.

On Thursday, prosecutors had searched their rooms at an NSB dormitory at the president’s residence.

Prosecutors yesterday also responded to a report by the *China Times*, saying that they did not enter the president’s official residence and that prior notice was given to Presidential Office staff.

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Meanwhile, China Airlines handed out a first wave of punishments, demoting senior vice president Lo Ya-mei (呂雅梅) to special assistant to the chairman and chartered flight division vice president Chiu Chang-hsin (邱昌新) to coordinator at the office of the airline's president.

Lo and Chiu were responsible for arranging the chartered flights for Tsai's visit to the nation's four Caribbean allies, as well as previous trips in March and August last year to allies in the South Pacific and Latin America respectively.

The demotions are to take effect on Thursday next week, the airline said.

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