

Rwanda Revenue Authority (RRA) on Tuesday seized 1,200 pieces of “ibitenge” clothing worth Rwf 18 million that were being smuggled into the country, officials said, warning that smugglers face severe penalties.

The textiles were hidden in a truck loaded with cement traveling from Rusizi District to Kigali through unauthorized routes.

Jean Paulin Uwitonze, Deputy Commissioner for Taxpayer Services and Communication, said smugglers’ methods are becoming well-known and that authorities are intensifying efforts to intercept illegal trade.

“Some hide goods in compartments within vehicles, others place items on top of cargo or transport them via waterways,” Uwitonze said. “We are working with other agencies to combat these, so legitimate traders can compete fairly without being undercut by illegally imported goods.”

He added that smugglers do not issue official EBM invoices, further disadvantaging compliant businesses.

Uwitonze noted that smuggling often spikes near the end of the year, especially for high-demand goods such as clothing and alcoholic beverages during holidays. Consumers are urged to check that products, particularly alcohol, carry official tax stamps and match the labels on the items.

“These illegal activities allow substandard products into the market, posing health risks,” Uwitonze said.

The public is encouraged to report smuggling or the sale of goods without proper EBM invoices.

Under East African Community law, seized smuggled goods are auctioned, the vehicle used is confiscated, and the driver faces fines up to \$5,000. Rwanda’s 2023 tax law also considers tax evasion, concealing taxable goods, or related assets a criminal offense, punishable by two to five years in prison if convicted.