

Pharmaceutical crime: first INTERPOL-AFRIPOL front-line operation sees arrests and seizures across Africa

COVID-19 crisis heightens threat of global trade in counterfeit pharmaceutical products.

A pan-African police operation jointly coordinated by INTERPOL and AFRIPOL has identified hundreds of suspects and resulted in seizures of more than 12 million illicit health products.

Codenamed “Flash-IPPA” (Illicit Pharmaceutical Products in Africa), the two-month operation, which ended in December, brought together law enforcement and drug regulatory agencies from 20 African countries to dismantle the organized crime networks behind regional pharmaceutical crime.

Ahead of the operation, using globally sourced regional data shared via INTERPOL’s secure global police communications network, I-24/7, countries were able to target crime networks producing and distributing illegal pharmaceuticals across Africa.

Frontline officers conducted inspections at roadblocks, open markets, pharmacies, warehouses and other locations suspected of producing, smuggling, storing or distributing fake pharmaceuticals.

Flash-IPPA seizures at a glance:

- 2 million illicit anti convulsing tablets
- 300 000 other epilepsy treatment tablets
- 1,600 rapid COVID tests
- More than 208,000 COVID-19 protection masks

The operation’s most commonly seized illicit medicines included antibiotics, anti-inflammatories, analgesics and medication used to correct erectile dysfunction, rheumatism and epilepsy.

With the pandemic creating unique crime opportunities for organized crime networks to introduce fake medical products into legal markets, officers were on the lookout in particular for COVID-related vaccines, medicines and medical devices.

West African operations revealed the use of counterfeit COVID-19 vaccination certificates in several countries, whilst East African operations saw the use of unregulated and unlawful distribution and sale of genuine COVID-19 vaccines.

“COVID-19 has created a parallel crime pandemic and this operation shows how criminals are continuing to take advantage of this health crisis in order to maximize their illicit profits,” said INTERPOL’s Secretary General Jürgen Stock.

“Addressing regional needs is a key part of INTERPOL’s global response to crime and our aim here is clear; to build stronger, meaningful capabilities for African law enforcement through our partnership with AFRIPOL,” added Secretary General Stock.

Benin police authorities seized more than 27 tonnes of a wide range of fake medicines during one raid, triggering regional and global investigations.

Investigations across Libya resulted in the seizure of more than 11.5 million painkiller and infantile epilepsy tablets.

One raid in Niger saw the seizure of more than 300,000 epilepsy tablets.

Zimbabwean police authorities arrested more than 2,000 individuals during its nationwide leg of Operation Flash-IPPA.

Front-line officers in Algeria carried out more than 90 searches and inspections at strategic locations suspected of producing and distributing illicit pharmaceuticals.

Shaping a coordinated response in African law enforcement operations.

“The results of Operation Flash-IPPA are testimony to the strength of AFRIPOL- INTERPOL collaboration, and the importance of INTERPOL support in boosting AFRIPOL’s position as the lead African institution for preventing and combating transnational organized crime, terrorism and cybercrime,” said AFRIPOL’s Executive Director, Dr Tarek Sharif.

“Operation Flash-IPPA will boost AFRIPOL’s intelligence collection for subsequent use in member state investigative collaboration,” added Dr Sharif.

With organized crime groups frequently engaging in multiple crime areas simultaneously, the operation also saw the seizure of cocaine, cannabis, khat, crystal meth, counterfeit foods, oils, beverages, cigarettes and baby accessories.

Ongoing analysis of Flash-IPPA seizures and arrests in Africa is triggering associated investigations in all continents linked to pharmaceutical crime groups operating in Africa.

INTERPOL’s Support Programme for the African Union (ISPA) assists AFRIPOL in developing its strategic framework and operational functions across the continent and in fighting transnational crime in cooperation with INTERPOL and other regional policing bodies.

The results of Operation FLASH-IPPA follow the ISPA programme’s first in-person mission to AFRIPOL Headquarters from 15 February to 1 March 2022.

INTERPOL’s Executive Director of Police Services Stephen Kavanagh co-led the ISPA Steering Committee with AFRIPOL’s Executive Director Dr Tarek Sharif, confirming the importance of cooperation between the two police organizations in boosting security in the African continent.

Following intensive discussions, technical workshops and large-scale planning exercises, the Steering Committee adopted a clear work plan and priorities for the coming months.

AFRIPOL manages a continental communication system called "AFSECOM", with access to a selection of INTERPOL’s criminal databases and its secure police communications network enabling it to work with police forces in 195 member countries.

FLASH-IPPA participating countries included Algeria, Benin, Botswana, Central African Republic, Congo, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Gabon, Ghana, Libya, Kenya, Mauritius, Namibia, Niger, Rwanda, Sudan, Togo, Uganda, South Africa and Zimbabwe.