

Ivory Coast breaks up huge fake drugs market

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Ivory Coast authorities deployed dozens of police Wednesday to break up a fake drugs market in Abidjan estimated to supply nearly a third of all treatments sold in the country.

In an early morning raid, 150 officers descended on the Roxy neighbourhood in the country's economic capital, seizing boxes of fake medicine.

"I applaud the action that took place in the largest street drugs market in west Africa," Dr Parfait Kouassi, who heads an association of pharmaceutical retailers, told AFP.

Often improperly stored, the fake treatments are "toxic cocktails" whose low prices attract illiterate clients, Kouassi added.

He estimates that such "street pharmacies" cost the country's legal pharmaceutical sector 40 to 50 billion CFA francs (\$66-million to \$83-million) each year, including about five billion francs of lost revenue for the government.

One victim of the police operation, the president of a local association, called on people to change jobs "in order to avoid prison".

"We are asking the government to help us reconvert. Many women make a living by selling these drugs, their primary activity," Sita Kone told AFP after her boutique was destroyed.

Two months ago, authorities burned 50 tonnes of fake drugs valued at more than a million euros.

Fake drugs make up around 10 percent of the global pharmaceutical market, according to the International Institute of Research Against Counterfeit Medicines.

In Africa, nearly one drug out of three is illicit or counterfeit, making the continent the world's most vulnerable region to trafficking run by organised crime rings.

Criminals take advantage of the fact that, unlike illegal drug trafficking, selling fake drugs remains largely unpunished around the world, since it is mainly considered a violation of intellectual property rights.

But the drugs are responsible for hundreds of thousands of deaths worldwide, according to IRACM.

Most illicit pharmaceutical products come from India, sometimes authentic but often expired or sold as contraband, whereas most counterfeit drugs are manufactured in China, according to the World Customs Organisation.

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