

Lives at risk as trafficking in faulty masks, other gear surges: UN

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Lives are at risk as the new coronavirus pandemic has led to a surge in the trafficking of substandard masks, sanitisers and other medical

products, the UN warned Wednesday.

Organised [criminal groups](#)—exploiting fears and uncertainties surrounding the virus—are providing such products to cater to a sudden surge in demand and the supply gap, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) said in a report.

UNODC said it expected criminals to shift their focus to vaccine-related trafficking once one was developed.

Fraud and scams as well as cyberattacks targeting [critical infrastructure](#) have followed the spread of the virus, it added.

"Health and lives are at risk with criminals exploiting the COVID-19 crisis to cash in on public anxiety and increased demand for [personal protective equipment](#) and medications," UNODC Executive Director Ghada Waly said in a statement.

"Transnational organised crime groups take advantage of gaps in national regulation and oversight to peddle substandard and falsified [medical products](#)."

An Interpol-coordinated operation to target illegal online sales of medicines and medical products with participation of 90 countries in March led to 121 arrests worldwide and the seizure of substandard and fake face masks, as well as more than \$14 million (12 million euros) worth of potentially dangerous pharmaceutical products, the report said.

Compared to an earlier 2018 operation, Interpol reported an increase of about 18 percent in seizures of unauthorised antiviral medication and a more than 100 percent increase in seizures of unauthorized chloroquine, an anti-malaria drug used to treat coronavirus patients in some countries.

UNODC called for increased international cooperation, strengthened legal frameworks and penalties and more training for those who work in the medical product sector, saying "only a common approach will enable effective responses".

"We need to help countries increase cooperation to close gaps, build law enforcement and criminal justice capacity, and drive public awareness to keep people safe," Waly said.

The UNODC report, which is a "preliminary assessment", builds on information the body has collected from responses submitted by member states, its own field offices and analysis of open sources, official evidence, media and institutional reports.

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