

OLAF Investigation into Fake COVID-19 Related Products



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News

After the outbreak of the coronavirus in Europe, fraudsters started to benefit from the distress and needs of the population. In March 2020, OLAF opened an investigation into the import of fake products to be used against the COVID-19 infection: masks, medical devices, disinfectants, sanitisers, and test kits. These products proved to be ineffective, non-compliant with EU standards, and even detrimental to health.

OLAF has been collecting intelligence and information on this type of illicit trafficking since the beginning of the pandemic. It provides customs authorities in the EU Member States and third countries with relevant information in real time. The products entered the EU by means of misdeclarations or fake certificates, black market sales, and smuggling.

On 13 May 2020, OLAF informed of the progress made as regards its inquiry into the fake COVID-19 products. The interim results include:

- Identification of over 340 companies acting as intermediaries or traders of counterfeit or substandard products;
- Seizure of millions of substandard medical products with fake EU conformity certificates in several Member States;
- Establishment of an OLAF Cyber Task Force comprised of experts specialised in cyber criminality that trawl the internet with the objective of identifying and taking down illicit websites offering fake products;
- Increased identification of ineffective medicine products (e.g. pills);
- Collection of intelligence in order to determine the true origin of face masks, medical devices, disinfectants, sanitisers, medicines and test kits, which is currently the most pressing challenge in dealing effectively with the fraudulent schemes.

OLAF stressed that close cooperation with all customs and enforcement authorities in the EU and many other countries as well as with international organisations, e.g. Europol, Interpol, the WCO and EUIPO, has been established. This proved essential to target shipments and identify the fraudulent companies. OLAF also warned that small shipments with fake or substandard products due to direct sales online to European customers by companies based in non-EU countries are posing a major challenge.

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