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No Cure For Fake Drugs. The Middle East Struggles with an Influx of Counterfeit Medicines

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DAMASCUS -- A recent seizure of counterfeit drugs and the shutdown of the ring that provided them shows how Syria is stepping up its response to a problem that remains widespread in the Middle East.

Piled up in huge plastic bags, the haul netted millions of dollars worth of breast cancer, leukemia and other medicines, along with tens of thousands of anticoagulant pills that purported to treat heart attacks and other diseases. At least 65 people were detained; it couldn't be learned if they were charged. A trial date hasn't yet been set.

All were fakes with no medicinal value, copies of legitimate medicines made by **Novartis AG**, **Sanofi-Aventis SA**, **Bristol-Myers Squibb Co.**, **Roche Holding AG** and **Pfizer Inc.**

The bust, which also seized equipment used to make and package fake drugs, stopped one ring's lucrative trade of counterfeits to Iraq, Turkey, Lebanon, Iran and Egypt, according to pharmaceutical-company managers and a Syrian official familiar with the investigation. Pfizer, Bristol-Myers, Novartis and Sanofi-Aventis confirmed the Syrian seizures. A spokeswoman for Roche confirmed cases of counterfeiting in the Middle East but didn't provide further details.

Smuggling of drugs remains a widespread and dangerous problem. Figures from the World Health Organization show it can reach 35% of all drugs in the Middle East, compared to less than 1% in the U.S. and Western Europe. One confiscated shipment by the Syrian ring to Egypt contained counterfeit copies of one brand of a leukemia drugs with a street value of over \$4 million -- equivalent to 50% of the annual sales of the brand.

Distributors not only sold the fake life-saving drugs to private pharmacies but also moved deep into the public health-care system, particularly in Iraq. A huge plastic bag seen amid the Damascus counterfeit haul contained hundreds of boxes of a treatment for mouth ulcers, all bearing the logo of the Iraqi health ministry, witnesses say.

Authorities claim that the ring busted in Syria was the main one operating in that country. A pharmaceutical-company manager said it was the main network for Egypt as well, but others are still operating in other Middle-Eastern countries.

One reason why drug counterfeiting has thrived in the Middle East is that authorities were unprepared for the sheer scale and sophistication of counterfeits and had neither the appropriate law enforcement framework nor the legislation to tackle them.

"When we started the investigation, we had no idea of the scale of these counterfeit networks," the Syrian official said.

Syria stepped up its response, with Syrian president Bechar Al-Assad -- a trained medical doctor - asking to be informed, a person familiar with the probe said.

But despite arresting 65 suspects in various raids between April and October, 2009 -- including smugglers and pharmacists - Syria lacked the legislation to effectively prosecute them, a problem that has also arisen in neighboring states. Since the arrests, the Syrian president has approved a law that will carry heavy penalties for distributors of fake medicine, Syrian Health Minister Reda Saed said.

A great proportion of the fake drugs smuggled by the network to Egypt and Syria came from China, according to Syrian Health Minister Reda Saed, Some time around 2007, the ring started making its own fake drugs, using technology mostly imported from China, the Syrian officials and the pharmaceutical-company managers said. Many of the ingredients--such as huge drums of generic painkiller paracetamol (known as acetaminophen in the U.S.) --also came from China.

In China, a spokesman for the State Food and Drug Administration declined to comment, but the agency has previously said China has taken a series of measures to crack down on the manufacture and sale of counterfeit pharmaceuticals, including strengthening international cooperation. Spokespersons for the Ministry of Public Security and the Customs Department declined to comment