

Cute, but deadly: law enforcement seize over €16 million worth of fake toys



Police and customs authorities worldwide are warning the public to be vigilant with their gift-giving after they have seized over €16 million worth of fake toys during the recent festive period.

Close to 5 million counterfeit toys have been confiscated as a result of Operation LUDUS organised by Europol with the support of OLAF and the EUIPO.

Over 4 700 inspections were carried out across 24 countries between 19 October 2020 and 31 January 2021 in order to detect the illegal shipment and storage of counterfeit toys. So far, 11 fraudsters have been arrested, with investigations ongoing in a number of countries to dismantle the criminal networks putting child safety at risk. This is the first operation ever organised on such a scale targeting the sale of counterfeit toys.

Results of the operational phase

- Close to 5 million toys seized for a total value exceeding €16 million;
- 4 768 inspections carried out;
- 44 127 samples tested in laboratories;
- 125 judicial cases opened;
- 11 individuals arrested so far.

Participating countries

Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Czechia, Denmark, France, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Romania, Slovak Republic, Slovenia, Spain, United Kingdom, United States.

Fake toys putting child safety at risk

Toy cars, board games and dolls from popular children TV shows feature among the most seized items.

The confiscated pieces were almost exact copies of the real products and were extremely hard to distinguish. However, in almost all of the cases, the seized toys posed a serious health risk for children. These fake toys had not been subjected to the rigorous safety tests required by law and had no warnings or advice on the packaging.

Examples include 2 800 dolls seized in Italy and 8 000 toy cars seized in Belgium which posed a choking hazard, more than 5 000 plastic toys seized in Spain which contained a toxic chemical that could damage children health and several other electronic devices confiscated in various countries which exceeded legal decibel limits for toys which could permanently damage a child's hearing. A total of 1 175 toys destined for infants were also confiscated in Romania after failing to include essential information on the packaging to prevent a child getting injured, such as an age label, instructions for use and a list of materials they contain.

Commenting on this operation, Europol's Executive Director Catherine de Bolle said: "This operation shows yet again that criminals will take advantage of any and every opportunity open to them to make a profit. During the festive period, criminals cash in on the surge in demand of certain toys by selling dangerous toys to unsuspecting shoppers. Thanks to Operation LUDUS, we have successfully taken out of circulation millions of toys which were not only unsafe but ripped off legitimate brands."

Europol and its partners urge consumers to resist cheap offers that look too good to be true, particularly if certain toys are sold out in well-known retailers, as this could be a sign that they are fake, unsafe or of poor quality. It is just not worth the risk.

Europol's involvement

Europol's Intellectual Property Crime Coordinated Coalition (IPC3), co-funded by the EUIPO, was instrumental in the success of this operation:

- It brought all the involved countries around one table and coordinated the operational activities across the globe;

- It developed risk indicators which were shared with law enforcement and customs authorities to help them prioritise checks;
- During the operational phase, it provided a platform for real-time information sharing and cross-checking of intelligence, creating a communication network involving both police and custom authorities.

Information collected and shared during the action will be processed and analysed to inform further hits against toy counterfeiters in Europe and beyond.