Thematic Session 3: The criminal misuse of information and communications technologies for illicit drug-related activities is increasing

**Intervention by Leif Villadsen, Deputy Director, at the Commission on Narcotic Drugs**

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*United Nations Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute*
Excellencies, Colleagues, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a pleasure – again - to attend – in person - this important session here today on behalf of the United Nations Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute (UNICRI) and to share UNICRI’s experience on the criminal misuse of information and communications technologies.

As I mentioned the first day, UNICRI’s technical cooperation and activities in the fields of crime prevention, criminal justice, and counter-terrorism are based on the findings of our action-oriented research. This also includes our work on the topic that we are discussing today.

The pandemic has clearly demonstrated the benefits of information and communications technologies. But, as is often acknowledged, we must also remain aware of the growing potential and, indeed, the reality of the misuse of these technologies.

I would like to take a moment of your time to update you on some of the relevant work being carried out by the United Nations Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute (UNICRI) in this regard.

UNICRI, being a research and training institute and mandated to work and focus on new and emerging crime issues and challenges, is of course in particular focusing on identifying and analyzing emerging and future security risks due to technology misuse, and to understand the impact, opportunities but also challenges of technological changes on trends and patterns in crime. Let me give you a few examples.

First of all, in terms of the challenges we face today: For example, we have explored how child sexual exploitation has surged with the development of information and communications technologies and entire new forms of abuse emerged.
We have also analyzed how terrorists and organized criminal groups have exploited these technologies to sow seeds of discord during the COVID-19 pandemic.

And, of most relevance to focus of this forum, we have observed the growth in counterfeit medicines on both the surface and dark web.

Secondly, and perhaps most notably, we are also looking further down the line at new and emerging technologies and the challenges of tomorrow. In that regard, with the support of the Netherlands, we have established a specialized Centre in the Hague focused on analyzing these technologies, in particular artificial intelligence (AI) and robotics, vis-à-vis crime prevention, criminal justice, security, and the rule of law.

We have developed extensive in-house expertise on the role and impact of these technologies and assembled a global network of experts that spans both the public and private sector.

We leverage these assets to carry out action-oriented research and capacity-building activities to support national authorities, in particular law enforcement agencies, to leverage the opportunities of these technologies and navigate the potential pitfalls. This includes the criminal misuse of these technologies.

Through our work, we have seen work how AI can support law enforcement to overcome the challenges of investigating digital narcotics supply chains. For instance, AI can help in carrying out key word searches across dark web forums that promote marketplaces for drugs.

This can greatly boost investigator’s efficiency and precision. AI can also help investigators to identify hidden connections between different pieces of information gathered in online investigations – for example, email addresses, phone numbers, IP addresses, etc.
This can be used to identify individuals involved in drug supply chains or reveal important relationships that can used to interrupt networks.

Of course, realizing the potential of AI is technically challenging and raises many legal, ethical, and societal concerns. In this regard, we will launch a new project in November aimed at developing a practical and operationally oriented guide for law enforcement agencies to help them to develop AI capabilities in a human rights compliant manner and navigate the many challenges its use presents. This guide – The Toolkit for Responsible AI Innovation in Law Enforcement – will be developed by UNICRI together with INTERPOL and with the support of the European Commission.

Returning to the issue of misuse: We have also been active in anticipating the misuse of AI with a view toward preventing and mitigating threats. Our recent report with Europol and Trend Micro is analyzing current and predicted criminal uses of AI and provides law enforcement agencies, policymakers, and other stakeholders with recommendations on how to mitigate these risks.

Together with the United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism, we have also analyzed the potential misuse of AI for terrorist purposes. These reports conclude that the misuse of AI is in infancy, but there is already ample evidence of it and it is poised to be a growing global concern in the years ahead.

To this end, the reports identify concrete actions to be taken to further enhance our understanding of the threats and build capacities to prevent them. This include enhancing the literacy of policymakers on AI technology; the development of regulation and certification processes to ensure AI systems are secured against adversarial use, as well as the formulation of clear policies and practical guidelines on how to respond to AI-enabled attacks.

While these reports do not specifically highlight the misuses of AI in the context of illicit drugs, many of the applications described could conceivably be applied to further or facilitate networking and trafficking.
Should there be interest on the part of Member States and the Commission on Narcotic Drugs, UNICRI stand ready to leverage its experience, expertise and network to carry out further research to build knowledge of the specific risks of the misuse of AI in the context of illicit drug-related activities. We would welcome the opportunity contribute to furthering evidence-based discussions on this at this forum in the future.

I thank you for your attention.