

## PRESS RELEASE

### **Sahel and beyond: UNODC sounds the alarm on the increase in trafficking and consumption of tramadol and its security and health implications**

Dakar, 11 December 2017 – The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) warns the international community on the implications of non-medical use of tramadol, a synthetic opioid, on the economies and security of West Africa, notably in the Sahel region, and the Middle East and its broader linkages with the global fight against terrorism and transnational organized crime.

“The rise of tramadol consumption and trafficking in the region is serious, worrying, and needs to be addressed as soon as possible. We cannot let the situation get any further out of control”, says UNODC Regional Representative in West and Central Africa, Mr. Pierre Lapaque.

According to information obtained by UNODC, the non-medical use of tramadol, particularly in northern Mali and Niger, is evolving into a health crisis at an alarming rate.

This mirrors the trend on the wider Middle East region where the misuse of tramadol has also become a major aspect of the wider drug problem over the past years, as it is increasingly unsupervised, and falls far above the recommended dosages when it is prescribed to patients (50mg per tablet). In the region, the dosage frequently reaches 200 or 250mg, which poses a significant health risk and can generate a strong dependence.

#### **Serious security implications**

According to the latest UNODC World Drug Report, yearly seizures of tramadol in Sub-Saharan Africa have risen from 300 kg to over 3 tons since 2013. According to further information obtained by UNODC, there are indications that tramadol, which is mainly produced in South Asia, is smuggled through the Gulf of Guinea by transnational organized crime networks, towards areas of the Sahel partially controlled by armed groups and terrorist organizations.

“About 75% of the 70 million men and women in the Sahel are under the age of 25, making the youth in the Sahel an attractive market for drug traffickers. This means they are unfortunately exposed to the risks linked to abusive use of tramadol and illicit drugs, often sold at a cheap price” stressed Mr. Lapaque.

The problem of abusive consumption and trafficking of tramadol plays a direct role in the destabilization of the region, as not only do groups smuggle tramadol across borders to generate revenues, they also use it for themselves. As stated by Mr. Lapaque, “tramadol is regularly found in the pockets of suspects arrested for terrorism in the Sahel, or who have committed suicidal attacks. This raises the question of who provides the tablets to fighters from Boko Haram and Al Qaeda, including young boys and girls, preparing to commit suicide bombings”.

Even more alarming for the United Nations is the fact that, at the end of September 2017, over 3,000,000 tablets were seized in Niger, packed in boxes bearing the United Nations logo. They were being transported in a pick-up truck driving on a route from Nigeria to Northern Mali.

This seizure is particularly worrying because of the use of the UN logo by transnational organized crime networks, which poses a severe problem not only for the international organization but also for national authorities fighting these networks.

Moreover, in August 2017, Cameroonian customs in the North of the country (on the border with Nigeria) seized over 600,000 tramadol tablets, intended for Boko Haram according to the investigation.

During a recent field mission to Gao, in Northern Mali, representatives of UNODC were able to interact with civil society actors, women's associations and government officials on the subject. During these exchanges, the concerns of UNODC were confirmed.

"We are confronted on a daily basis with the severe increase in tramadol consumption, especially by our children. I very often see girls and boys, barely older than my 10-year-old son, staggering in the street after taking or being given pills in their tea in order to help reduce their feeling of hunger", shared a representative of a women's association, who wishes to remain anonymous.

### **Health concerns**

This high dependence and growing demand are all the more worrying, as stopping or reducing the doses ingested can cause hallucinations, restlessness and anxiety, which directly affect the health, productivity and efficiency of workers.

This lack of productivity, coupled with the substantial losses caused by the existence of parallel economies where drug trafficking takes place, has dire consequences for economic development, especially in rural areas.

At the core of UNODC's economic, health and security concerns is the fact that tramadol remains a legal drug under international law. Its use for medical purposes makes it possible to treat pain in patients who have not shown signs of improvement with less heavier treatments, generally based on a use of paracetamol.

From a medical point of view, the use of tramadol is generally of last resort, before using other opiates like morphine. In the Sahel and in the wider Middle East region, tramadol users generally have a habit of taking it frequently, and in high doses, up to five times higher than usual medical prescriptions. In the Middle East, recreational use is particularly high among youth and adolescents.

The complex pharmacological profile of Tramadol influences both the opioid receptor and serotonin systems, with possible mood and psychotic reactions accompanying the analgesic effect of the substance. While avenues for treatment are still being explored, current research suggests that tramadol use disorder is treatable, through an intensive and well-trained psychosocial treatment, coupled with a winding down of daily consumption. UNODC and World Health Organization (WHO) have developed guidelines on the treatment of psychologically assisted pharmacological treatment of opioid use disorders.

### **A comprehensive response**

UNODC, through its Sahel Programme, supports governmental institutions in the region to strengthen the capacities of law enforcement and justice officials to fight illicit trafficking and terrorism. UNODC also delivers support on border control (land, aerial and maritime borders), and on intelligence gathering and sharing.

In partnership with the G5 Sahel and other international partners, UNODC is providing a comprehensive response to strengthen the criminal justice chain in the region, as a contribution to the UN Integrated Strategy for the Sahel (UNISS). In line with recent developments, UNODC will now support the G5 Sahel Joint Force, and continue to work closely with the MINUSMA in Mali.

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