

Field Report from Ghana

Adapted from the broadcast audio segment; use the audio player to listen to the story in its entirety.

Ghana is one of Africa's success stories. The country is stable, democratic and has been experiencing economic growth. Foreign direct investment has grown by about 70% for each of the last two years but the country is also awash in counterfeit clothes, textiles, car parts and pharmaceuticals. The problem is so pronounced that it threatens local economies, the overall growth of the country, and even people's lives.

Golden Jubilee is one of several terminals at Tema, Ghana's largest port. Customs officials hurry about processing paperwork and inspecting suspicious containers from the thousands stacked up in the terminal.

"Our present location is beside a container which is coming from China. Consignment was described as computer accessories but we suspected it to contain some counterfeit goods," says Edward Terry, a customs official.

According to Terry, the customs officials have an important job. It's hard for everyday people to distinguish between a product that's real or counterfeit.

"For the officers who have been trained in detecting counterfeits, we are able to do that. But on the general market, people are unable to detect and that is the issue."

Over the last few years the government increased its profiling in screening activities as well as training customs agents. Manufacturers themselves often conduct workshops to help customs personnel better identify what's real and what isn't. U.S. Officials have been pleased to see the uptake in Ghana's enforcement efforts.

Heather Byrnes is the Commercial Counselor at the U.S. Embassy in Accra. She says she has seen a transformation in Ghanaian attitudes since she started her job.

"In the three years that I have been in Ghana, I have seen a shift. I think that there was always some awareness of the problem. But in the last three years there's more and more awareness on the part of Ghanaians about how this is an issue for them as well."

As a result of changing awareness and growing self-interest, Byrnes says she has been seeing a growth in seizure raids and other enforcement activities.

Of all the goods seized by customs officials, perhaps the most troubling are the boxes of suspicious drugs and medicine. Ghana is ground zero for malaria which is why there is such a focus on screening for fake malaria meds. The presence of fake pharmaceuticals is contributing to Ghana's inability to fight the disease.

"Malaria is very much a very serious disease. It's the number one disease spread in this country. Almost 30% to 40% of all outpatients' cases are malaria. An uncomplicated malaria can transform into a complicated one and it kills. The implication is gravely serious," says Eric Kwai Kwai Boyton, head of the Food and Drug Board lab in Accra.

Over the last few years, the government stepped up its efforts to stem the tide of counterfeit pharmaceuticals coming into the country. When customs officials find suspicious medicine they send samples to the Food and Drugs Board laboratory for analysis.

It's not just fake drugs that are threatening Ghana. Fake foods, car parts and electrical equipment are all threatening lives in the country. Ghana's once thriving textile industry is under attack from the proliferation of pirated prints. Ghana is known across Africa for its printed fabric. Over the last few years, counterfeit versions from China have been flooding the market and that's putting thousands of local jobs on the line. Other industries are hit hard as well.

"We have Ghanaian artists and musicians who are forced to make a living purely on live performance because there is no way for them to get significant revenue from selling their DVDs, because they're so easily copied," Byrnes explains.

Kofi Essuman is the Quality Assurance Manager for UNILIVER West Africa and the member of the Coalition Against Counterfeit and Illicit Trade in Ghana. It's a coalition of business law enforcement and government agencies working together to combat the trafficking and sale of counterfeit goods. Essuman believes enforcement by the Ghanaian government can only go so far.

"So long as there is no education and so long as people are not convinced that by buying counterfeit goods and creating unemployment and creating a problem in my country, they will go for it. People are caught in a vicious cycle. I think strongly that it is a very difficult situation for people from this part of the world where poverty is really rife."

It's ultimately a tall order to get someone in a remote village who can barely support her family to stop and think that buying a fake product could cost the job of a Ghanaian worker somewhere else in the country. For the foreseeable future, the economics in Ghana provide an incentive for counterfeiters to continue to do business here.

—Reported by Sean Carberry for America Abroad