



Policy Brief

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LEADERSHIP REQUIRED: DRUG TRAFFICKING AND THE CRISIS OF STATEHOOD IN WEST AFRICA

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SUMMARY

Beginning in the middle of the last decade, the international community was alerted to the fact that drug trafficking in West Africa was in danger of spawning a series of near 'narco-states': countries whose economies, politics and social structures were being infiltrated and distorted by the drug trade.²

Some seven years later, after an inadequate and uncoordinated response to that call to arms, the inevitable has happened. Where previously cocaine trafficking was one of the most important challenges the subregion faced, this has compounded exponentially, deepening a crisis of statehood that may be difficult to reverse.

The Institute for Security Studies (ISS) has just started the first phase of a year-long research project funded by the National Endowment for Democracy on the relationship between statehood and illicit trafficking in West Africa. Recent interviews conducted on the ground in the subregion highlight unequivocally that current attempts at solving drug trafficking throughout West Africa have not achieved their stated objectives.³ Of more importance, however, is that they bring to the fore the seeming absence of political will – either nationally or internationally – to address the problem.

This policy brief aims to remind any actor or institution that is serious about democracy, sustainable development and human security that a 'business as usual' approach to the problem of trafficking in West Africa should not be accepted. This is no longer an issue of crime, law enforcement, or security, but strikes at the core of the human rights, democratic and humanitarian foundations upon which global governance rests.

PLUS ÇA CHANGE, PLUS C'EST LA MÊME CHOSE

Like missing teeth in a broken comb, West Africa is characterised by a plethora of small states ranged along its coastline. From Gambia in the west to Equatorial Guinea in the east, the subregion is like no other on the continent, or indeed globally (with the possible exception of Central America), where small states with fragile economic and political prospects are present in such numbers. There are several such countries in the West African subregion: Gambia, Guinea Bissau, Guinea Conakry, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Togo, Benin and the islands of Cape Verde.

In the post-Cold War period, these states have experienced almost constant crisis: Sierra Leone, Liberia, Guinea Bissau and Côte d'Ivoire have seen brutal civil wars. Almost without exception the other states have been characterised by authoritarian regimes, military coups, political and economic instability, and corrupt politicians who have left their populations to languish impoverished and without basic services, infrastructure or opportunities at the bottom of the world's human development indicators. And, since 2006, all have to varying degrees been affected by drug trafficking.

But the impact in the subregion is much wider than the small and vulnerable coastal countries. Most recently, Mali, once considered a model democracy by donors in the region, has been exposed as a weak state undermined by the penetration of organised crime and drug trafficking. The processes of consolidating democracy in the subregion's bigger states, most notably in Ghana and Nigeria, which hold out the prospect for a step forward, are also showing their fragility and vulnerability to the seepage of criminal money and influence. Nigeria has made important progress in strengthening its democracy,

but Nigerian criminal networks continue to dominate regional illicit markets.

An honest assessment of progress against drug trafficking in the subregion would have to conclude that this round has been won by the traffickers. They have established a bridgehead on the coast, most notably through the open door of Guinea Bissau, but also elsewhere, and drugs have poured through the gap, moving north, north-west and eastwards.⁴ Because they were not stopped at the coast, the impact is now being felt inland.

Why is it now the time to sit up and take action against this longstanding crisis of statehood in West Africa? The prevalence of weak states in the subregion is not new and neither is drug trafficking. Why is this narco-regime any worse than what went before?

THE NEW END GAME

Action is required now in West Africa because the window of opportunity is almost closed. Already the subregion has changed substantially in the past decade or so: states have changed hands, borders have weakened further and criminal actors have been allowed to operate with impunity and legitimacy as they contributed to overthrowing governments and holding the principles of democratic governance hostage in order to maintain and grow their vested (illicit) economic interests. Two very current examples of this development are provided below.

A coup in Guinea Bissau in April this year was openly recognised as partly a reflection of one criminal network's efforts to direct state resources so as to ensure its continued control over drug trafficking. When the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) chose to recognise the new administration put in place as a result of the coup it thus recognised both the coup itself, and the legitimacy of its origins. As others, including the United States, France and South Africa, slowly shift their positions to work with Guinea Bissau's new government, a tacit seal of approval is placed on regime change bought with drug money. A foreign diplomat in Guinea Bissau recently explained: 'Look, it's too late now, we should have acted earlier, and so this is who we have to deal with.' Another acknowledged with a shrug that 'there are gangsters on both sides so the choice is one of degree'. Foreign observers seem to doubt the possibility that an election will be conducted in the near future, despite a commitment to do so, and the status quo will benefit those who have seized power and have now arguably secured a greater hold on the drug trade.

The failure to stem the inflow of drugs from the coast increased the vulnerability of Guinea Bissau's inland neighbours, such that the military coup that occurred in Mali in March 2012 removed a democratic state – albeit one already weakened by the influence of corruption and drug money – only to find there were few better alternatives. As a recent independent assessment concluded: 'Up until Mali's military coup of March 2012, state complicity in organised crime was the main factor involved in AQIM's⁵ growth and driver of conflict in the north of the country. Actors involved in organised crime currently wield decisive political and military influence in northern Mali.'⁶ The International Crisis Group (ICG) similarly observed recently that 'none of the pillars of the Malian state [have been able] to give a clear direction to the political transition and to formulate a precise and coherent demand for assistance to the international community to regain control of the north, which represents more than two-thirds of the territory'.⁷ The political system in Mali has in part become reliant on criminal proceeds, thereby creating an impenetrable barrier to entry for legitimate democratic processes.

These two cases may well prove to be decisive turning points in a newly emerging trend, and it is possible that every future political crisis in the subregion will be tainted in some way with the imprint of drug money. One of the perverse ironies of this state of affairs is that the advent of democracy in the subregion has provided new openings for this influence. Democratic politics needs money to oil its wheels: winning elections and securing power means paying for campaigns and ensuring wide networks of political patronage. While the international community sought to transition these post-conflict and fragile states towards democracy, it neglected to acknowledge that an independent source of resources in the subregion over the last decade has been the proceeds of drug trafficking. The continued failure to address the problem makes those behind the trafficking bolder and more aggressive in seizing new opportunities across a broader geographic area.

The argument also has economic dimensions. When the support of Cold War patrons was removed and weak states were subjected to prolonged periods of structural adjustment, the international community failed to introduce measures that would reinforce livelihoods, governance and the rule of law. Instead, what remained were poorly capacitated governments openly seeking new resources from any source. Drug money was not imposed but welcomed: a Colombian trafficker interviewed in prison reported how in Guinea Bissau they received so

much support that a fully-fledged trafficking operation was in place within weeks.⁸

There has also been some (quiet) talk in West Africa on the issue of legalisation of drugs, most notably among civil society groups. This is a debate that should be had, but legalisation is unlikely to be achieved in the short or even medium term. There is no global policy consensus on the issue and West African governments (even if they could go it alone) are mostly opposed to legalisation. Moreover, decriminalising use in Europe (Portugal for example has already taken that step) will not end the requirement to fight organised crime. As the recently published high-level Commission on Drug Policy concluded, countries should 'focus their repressive actions on violent organised crime and drug traffickers to reduce the harm associated with the illicit drug market'.⁹ That harm is palpable in West Africa, given the weak resilience of local states.

Furthermore, the organised crime problem won't stop at drugs. Some of the crimes now prevalent in the region have taken on new forms that may have a longer-term impact. Criminal networks are exploiting these halcyon days to traffic a range of products through the subregion, from cigarettes to people, toxic waste, natural resources and weapons and ammunition. Three West African states – Nigeria, Ghana and Cameroon – are ranked among the top countries in the world where cybercrime is most prevalent, contributing to a global flow of some US\$600 million per year.¹⁰

Organised criminal actors have already proven their ability to secure new footholds across the globe, and to prey upon any vulnerability to extend their influence. They have a long-standing ability to forge allegiances of convenience, and to cooperate to manage their global supply chains. How long will it take before those acting with impunity in West Africa ally with groups in Eastern Europe, or capacitate nascent criminal networks in North Africa and the Middle East? While difficult to verify at this stage of the project, interviews on the ground suggest that a new generation of Lebanese settlers – who are less well integrated than those from previous generations and who always played a valuable economic role in the region – have links to drug trafficking and to terrorist groups like Hezbollah. This is now a different game.

POINTING FINGERS

There are a number of red herrings which capture the debate on 'what now?' for combatting drug trafficking and organised crime in West Africa, and which are

preventing (or obfuscating) the move towards consolidated action.

The first is trying to estimate the scale of the problem and the volume of flows, and thus debating to what extent the West African route is pivotal to global drug flows rather than addressing the fact that, regardless of the extent of the flow, its impact on the politics, security and development of the region is not in doubt.

It is true that it is a perennial challenge with all criminal activity to accurately ascertain what is going on. Each and every report that is issued – and all sources would suggest that the forthcoming October 2012 report of the UN Secretary-General will be no different – speaks of seizure data, the number of tons and the monetary value of flows to encapsulate the scale of the problem. In fact, despite considerable investment into intelligence and operations and law enforcement, seizures have declined since 2007. On the one hand this decline provides some space to say that drugs are not the problem: 'Until I see hard evidence to the contrary I am assuming that this is an issue that is being over-talked,' said a representative of a prominent embassy in a recent interview. He then acknowledged, however, that drug money 'had an important influence on local politics'. On the other hand, based on interviews for this study, it seems more than likely that in Guinea Bissau at least, but also presumably further afield, the drop in seizures is a result of such endemic corruption that there is little chance of any information being provided by local law enforcement as to the whereabouts of drug deliveries. Astounding as it may sound, the last big seizures in Guinea Bissau were in 2006 and 2007 (674 and 635 kg of cocaine respectively) and they disappeared from the public treasury in circumstances that have never been made clear.

Moreover, this study has found that the nature of the market has been changing: the buyers and sellers are now meeting in West Africa. Rather than being just a place of transit, the subregion has increasingly become the preferred place of transaction. It is a mutually beneficial relationship: it shields the Latin American traffickers from the risks associated with onward transport and it provides greater profits (and power) to locally emerging groups who are eager for a place in the market. Stated in simple terms: West Africans are doing it for themselves. The subregion is no longer simply a drive-through zone, it is now the location of increasingly powerful criminal groups with an overwhelming interest in ensuring that drugs are still delivered to the coastline and that states there struggle to respond effectively.

The Organised Crime Threat Assessment by Europol identified that the transit of cocaine trafficked through West Africa was diversifying entry routes to the European Union (EU). It noted evidence of trafficking via Mali and Libya, as well as the involvement of West African groups in trafficking via Turkey. Cocaine is routed through the Sahel with increasing links to terrorist groups. The threat assessment also states that criminals of West African origin have assumed a prominent role in the organisation of cocaine trafficking to the EU by air courier, including through the recruitment of EU nationals to serve as couriers both from West Africa and from Latin America.¹¹

In contrast, the UNODC World Drug Report of 2012 indicates that the West African route has become less, not more, important since 2007;¹² a fact that has been questioned informally by some Western law enforcement agencies, and on the basis of qualitative interviews conducted on the ground for this study does not ring true. But what this discrepancy does illustrate is the importance of ensuring an agreed-upon assessment as to what is going on – with a focus on the political and security impact of illicit drug money as much as on the volume of the flows.

A second popular red herring that allows the prolonging of a debate without leadership is the finger-pointing over whose mess it is to clear up. The West African states are quick to note that they had not brought cocaine to the region – the problem stemmed from Europe’s insatiable demand for recreational drugs. The international community, in its turn, prefers to preach the doctrine of national ownership and regionally led responses, without providing the impetus and resources that might catalyse a genuine cross-regional cooperation.

Frankly, both positions are short-sighted. In the longer term – although it is not generally viewed that way by the West African political elite – cocaine trafficking in the subregion will do much more political damage at home than in Europe, which is the drugs’ end market. And the international community should never underestimate the power of organised crime to spread instability, corruption and violence. The reverberations from West Africa are already being felt in the Sahel. The overthrow of the former regime in Libya has created a vulnerability to the north, which is a hop, skip and a jump to the countries on Europe’s periphery.

The time has passed for questions like ‘how much?’ and ‘whose fault is it?’. It is now time to seriously analyse what can be done, and to shift from talk to action.

WALKING THE TALK

There is no question that drug trafficking in West Africa has been on the international community’s radar screen for the last five years. A UN sponsored plan was adopted by ECOWAS in 2009 at Praia in Cape Verde, but with little evidence of a concerted phase of implementation leading to a sustainable response. Similarly, the AU Plan of Action approved in 2007, with its expansive thematic and regional scope, provided a broad rubric under which any number of issues could be included, without promoting the kind of coordinated action needed to generate results.

Part of the problem with both these strategies was that on the one hand they were broadly imposed from the outside and tried to do too many things, and on the other, were not systematically or sufficiently resourced. Regional governments signed on to the strategies enthusiastically, but did nothing about the lack of external resources. It is true that an ECOWAS Heads of State meeting in June 2012 in Yamoussoukro agreed to ‘urgently reactivate’ the 2009 Praia Plan. But an observer reported that it appeared that this was ‘the first time that several heads of state had even heard of it’ and strong lobbying was required to get it included.

A joint initiative of several UN bodies and INTERPOL – the West African Coastal Initiative (WACI) – has established several specialised and vetted units in four countries where there is a UN peacekeeping presence. But progress has been slow and the lack of political will in some countries ensures there is little chance of actual investigations and prosecutions. The unit in Guinea Bissau, which only has eight members, cannot operate for fear of retaliation from other actors within the government and military. This in a country where huge sums of drug money are being funnelled into politics, and through which an estimated 10 per cent of Europe’s cocaine traverses; according to some estimates that is about 35 tons since January 2012.

The US has recently presented its own plan: the West Africa Collaborative Security Initiative (WACSI). In name, the plan is ironically similar to the UN initiative and many of its goals are shared with the Praia Plan, but without an apparent linkage to either.¹³ While the US initiative is welcome, the US\$60 million in ‘new and existing’ resources identified to support the implementation of the plan over an unspecified period and in an unspecified number of countries is unlikely to be enough. More financial and other resources will be required, and innovative solutions will need to be found at least in those states where even the best law enforcement will be

confounded by weak leadership and corruption. Where success has been achieved, such as in Sierra Leone and Liberia, it seems the key has been a heavy international presence that has bolstered local efforts and protected those committed to the fight. There is still a long way to go, but that may well turn out to be a critical lesson for the future.

BUILDING A FUTURE – TOGETHER

What then is the way forward? There have been some suggestions about an International Contact Group to oversee the response. This is well and good, but if it only means more speeches in New York outlining how grave the problem is and how serious everyone is about tackling it, then it will be of little consequence. There has been enough of this already. Some concrete actions should be considered. The plan needs to be simple, contain a list of key priorities, and not be burdened with multiple objectives and indicators of success.

Simply continuing to train law enforcement officials across the region is also not enough. The requirement must be to build political commitment and send a message that impunity will not last forever. A prominent UN official in Guinea Bissau has suggested that even a hint that senior politicians may find themselves (‘like Charles Taylor’) in front of the International Criminal Court (ICC) may be enough to give them pause. There is undoubtedly a link between building political commitment and showing that an end to impunity is in sight. It should not be forgotten that the impetus for the birth of the ICC was lobbying by Trinidad and Tobago, who sought a mechanism that would provide recourse in the fight against the drug traffickers who were overwhelming their small island states some decades ago.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In conclusion, three things are essential:

- **Absolute and clear political will, particularly in the subregion but also further afield in those countries and regions where the drugs are consumed.** This must be accompanied by an effective mechanism to ensure that where drug money is being used by politicians they can be ‘named and shamed’. If subregional politicians claim that they are not connected to drug money then they should not fear such an agreement. If

the EU is politically committed to solving the problem, then it should also be committed to adequately funding a viable response.

- **A way to prosecute traffickers and their supporters outside of current legal processes in the subregion’s weak states.** One of the real challenges is that drug traffickers in several states in the subregion, led by Guinea Bissau, operate with virtual impunity. As has already been said, training and equipping law enforcement and judicial entities is not enough. Some innovation is needed here, and there are important recent examples to draw on. In the absence of effective justice systems in affected countries, piracy cases in East Africa have been tried by neighbouring states in the region. Granted, piracy is a crime of universal jurisdiction, but a regional agreement on drug trafficking among ECOWAS members could conceivably be negotiated.
- **A joint and continuous assessment of the state of the problem.** This does not mean seizures or intelligence, but an integrated and nuanced analysis of what is going on and the impact that it is having, including on politics and wider security. The response of the international community, including the AU and ECOWAS, needs to move from a reactive to proactive one. This cannot be done without a strong basis of cooperation, information sharing, strategy and analysis. One of the problems is that this has too long been left to law enforcement officials, many from outside the subregion itself, who analyse the problem using a case-by-case approach.

The response to piracy in the Horn of Africa has proven what the international community, in partnership with governments in the region, can achieve if motivated to do so. If we are serious about tackling weak governance in West Africa, and care about the impact that this is having on the dignity and security of the subregion’s people, then now is the time to walk the talk.

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NOTES

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² Admittedly this is a fairly broad definition and not accepted by everybody. An African ambassador to Guinea Bissau, for example, argues that the country is not in fact a narco-state given that the trafficking of drugs is not 'official state policy'. Nevertheless, in this particular case, the level of penetration of the state, economy and society of money generated through the drug trade is so significant that it is hard to argue that there is no impact, whatever definition used.

³ An initial round of interviews was conducted in September 2012 with, among others, political and community leaders, UN staff, diplomats, law enforcement officials, businessmen and journalists in Dakar and Bissau. Apart from qualitative interviews, later work under the project will also include the conducting of focus groups in several countries across the region.

⁴ South African readers should not assume that they are immune either. There is evidence that at least some of the haul moving through West Africa also moves southwards.

⁵ AQIM: Al-Qaeda in the Islamist Maghreb.

⁶ Wolfram Lacher, *Organized Crime and Conflict in the Sahel-Sahara Region*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, September 2012, 1.

⁷ International Crisis Group, *Mali: The Need for Determined and Coordinated International Action*, Africa Briefing, 90, 24 September 2012.

⁸ Interview with UNODC analyst, Dakar, September 2012.

⁹ *Report of the Global Commission on Drug Policy*, June 2011, 14.

¹⁰ UNODC, *The Globalisation of Crime: A Transnational Organised Crime Threat Assessment*, Vienna, 2010.

¹¹ Europol, *OCTA 2011*, Brussels, 2011.

¹² United Nations, *World Drug Report*, 2012, 38.

¹³ See <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/166329.pdf>.

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