

Guinea Bissau as an emerging narco state in West Africa

Implications for security and development

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THE UNITED Nations (UN) Security Council has warned that Guinea-Bissau is being 'undermined' by prolific drug trafficking, making the situation in that country a threat to West Africa's stability. Recently capturing some attention from the international community, the UN's Peace Building Commission (PBC) marked Guinea-Bissau as a 'threat to the national democratic processes and a threat to stability and development in West Africa.' Guinea-Bissau, one of the poorest countries in the world, is ranked 175 out of 178 countries on the UN Development Programme's Human Development Index. Against this poverty backdrop, it is feared that the former Portuguese colony will become the first narco state in West Africa, with negative consequences for the region's stability.¹ According to the United Nations Office of Drugs and Crime (UNODC), one tonne of pure Colombian cocaine leaves the country daily for Europe. Adding to these fears is that the drug trade could potentially transform the former Gold Coast into a Narco Coast, should responses fail to address this problem. Cocaine consignments are carried by ships and planes from South America to West Africa where they are unloaded at abandoned airstrips in the islands off Guinea-Bissau or dropped at sea and picked up by small boats en route to Guinea-Bissau. The trafficking of cocaine through the West African region indicates a new pivot point in the trafficking route to Europe, marking a shift from using traditional routes such as the Iberian Peninsula (extreme south - west of Europe that includes Spain, Portugal, and a small part of France) and the Caribbean, to Europe and America. With direct routes from South America increasingly under scrutiny and the growing demand for cocaine in Europe, Guinea-Bissau provides an alternative route in the trafficking of cocaine to booming European markets.

Within this context, this policy brief examines the reasons why Guinea-Bissau has become the main transit point for drug trafficking in West Africa. It also analyses the impact of the drug trade on the country's economic, social and political arenas. The brief highlights the magnitude of the threat; identifies the threat to human security posed by the drug trade in Guinea Bissau; and analyses the responses thus far. In so doing, the brief looks at some of the shortcomings of these responses and how they could be addressed.

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Drug trafficking in West Africa

In understanding the challenges faced by Guinea-Bissau, it is important to consider the broader West African regional context, especially with regards to the region's geographical location, its integration into the global economic system, its political history and the impact of these changes on society. West Africa is easily accessible by sea, and is strategically located between suppliers in South America, South East Asia and their European markets. Over



the years, this region has become an attractive location for foreign criminal networks. Because of its location and weak governance structures this has bred a particular criminal network model, with West Africans as partners. Several reasons explain this criminal dynamic and why this region is highly vulnerable to international developments in illicit drug trafficking. Firstly, the legal drug trade (officially authorized distribution of legalised drugs) and drug trafficking both operate within the same international capitalist system. Central to this system is the movement of goods and commodities through broad global landscapes, with the goal to make profits and accumulate wealth. Secondly, the incorporation of Africa into the trade in drugs partly arose from aspects of globalisation, including the changes in communications and accessibility, as well as the ease and speed with which capital can be moved. As West Africa became more integrated into the global economic system, informal and often covert forms of economic activity began to emerge. With Africa's entry into the global drug trade in the 1980's, illegal drug trade syndicates began to flourish, guided by the same profit rationale as legitimate businesses.²

Most importantly, the region's history of conflict, poverty and political weakness has led to socio-economic decline, failing national administrations, and widespread corruption. This instability has led to the development of criminal practices in the West Africa. Years of civil war have devastated

the economic infrastructure and markets in the region. Most countries experienced negative economic growth rates, and shrinking public budgets. They were therefore unable to effectively address some of the social imperatives created by the civil wars, which include high population growth rates, urban migration, as well as population displacements. These demographic pressures fuelled economic inequalities and poverty, resulting in an increased demand for jobs.³ Due to the region's economic contraction, the formal enterprise sector was unable to meet this demand, which resulted in the emergence of the rapidly growing informal sector over subsequent years.

The informal sector in West Africa employs 65 per cent of the population and accounts for 60 per cent of the gross domestic product (GDP) of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) countries. In addition, it makes up 50 per cent of all intra-regional trade. The informal internal and cross - border trade, has produced informal credit systems, effectively blurring the lines between formal and informal legal trade and criminal sector activities.⁴ Moreover, it is through these conditions that the sale and transit of drugs becomes easier. The informal sector has come to represent the 'only escape' from poverty in the region. Drug trafficking activities are generally perceived to provide 'quick cash' injections and have become more acceptable in the informal sector thus creating a 'moral economy' of unlawful activities

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Acronyms

ECOWAS	Economic Community of West African States
FDI	Foreign Direct Investment
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GIABA	Inter-Governmental Action Group against Money Laundering in West Africa
PAIGC	Partido Africano da Independência da Guiné e Cabo Verde/the African Party for the Independence of Guinea and Cape Verde
PBC	(United Nations) Peace Building Commission
UNODC	United Nations Office of Drugs and Crime
WAPCCO	West African Police Chiefs Committee

and corruption, which helps drug traffickers to operate with fewer constraints.

Critically, West African countries delayed their response to drug trafficking for a number of reasons. Prior to the 1980's, the magnitude of illegal drug trade was not perceived as alarming due to weak law enforcement mechanisms in West Africa and the fact that countries were ill equipped to conduct effective surveillance on these operations. Additionally, as civil wars, arbitrary rule, and economic collapse characterised much of the region at this time, drug trafficking was not at the top of the region's security concerns. By the late 1980's, however, there were clear signs that drug trafficking operations were on the increase. In addition to the delayed response, there was the legacy of military governments in the region. As many West African states emerged from authoritarian rule, the remnants of military authoritarianism were evident. One aspect of this was in the security apparatus where the security agencies and the courts had previously been used to undermine justice and repress opposition.⁵ The consequence of this has been a failure to systematically enforce the rule of law under current regimes, thereby creating prospect for impunity where drug trafficking is concerned.

The last decade has seen an increase in the number of transnational criminal networks in the region due to the persistent trend of civil conflicts in West Africa, which has resulted in rapid social change, population displacements

and distortion of national borders. Between 1998 and 2005, more than 35 armed groups have been active in ten West African countries: Cote d'Ivoire, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Senegal and the Gambia. Although some of the armed groups have been immobilised, the threat of an underlying insurgency remains due to the volatility of the region's political environment, and the fact that the proliferation of small arms in the region is very high. Protracted political crises in the Republic of Guinea, and peace consolidation processes in Liberia and Sierra Leone paint a grim picture about the prospects for a sustainable peace in West Africa. The uncertainties regarding long-term stability have also encouraged citizens and some state authorities to appropriate public resources through corrupt and illegal means.⁶ Post-civil war challenges remain but so do the vicious cycles of state frailty, social underdevelopment, weak administration of institutions, and the growing culture of impunity. This further heightens the vulnerability of West Africa to the international drug trafficking enterprise. As long as this social and political instability exists, West Africa, given its strategic coastal location, is fertile ground for potential corrupt partnerships between locals and transnational crime syndicates.

The link between drug trafficking, transnational crime and security

The UN defines drug trafficking as a 'new' threat to both state and individual security. It is therefore critical to establish the link between drug trafficking and security. Drawing from the *UN Convention against Transnational Crime*, drug trafficking is a form of transnational organised crime. According to this definition, transnational crime encompasses a multitude of different organisational forms and activities, directed by groups with an established modus operandi, and involving transnational cooperation or collaboration.⁷ As a transnational organised crime, drug trafficking poses a threat to:

- *Political sovereignty of the state*: In the pursuit of illicit profits, criminals challenge the state's exclusive right to taxation practices and over the exercise of violence. This undermines the aim of good governance, which includes the protection of the rights, property, welfare and security of citizens. The growing intrusion of transnational crime on domestic security affects the way security is conceived. In some cases, the state's responses to transnational criminal networks have been through military deployments as opposed to law enforcement. In this instance, the tradi-

tional concerns of the state have been changed.

- *Economic security of the state:* Criminal erosion of political sovereignty has an effect on economic security. By undermining and violating the rule of law, criminals work outside the regulatory economic environment of the state. In addition, coercive power attributed to organised crime can weaken the norms and institutions that underpin the political and economic environment, which negatively affects normal economic activity and interrupts investments.
- *Human security:* As drug trafficking impedes economic and political security, it hampers the social development of a society. The drug trade is also a catalyst for violence as it stimulates other forms of crimes such as small arms and human trafficking. In addition, proceeds from the drug trade can be used to finance rebel movements and insurgencies, which threaten stability and personal securities. This could also result in terrorist activities that directly violate human security freedoms from fear and violence associated with terrorism.⁸

Guinea-Bissau's vulnerability

In addition to the mainland, the Republic of Guinea-Bissau includes 18 islands off its Atlantic Ocean coastline including those known as the Bijagós (Bissagos) Archipelago. Its post-colonial history is a story of conflict and military rule where a change in government has often been the result of a coup, rather than a democratic process. Guinea-Bissau gained its hard-won independence from Portugal in 1974. In contrast to other colonial powers that were negotiating decolonisation at the time, Portugal had rejected demands to grant the country independence. Under the command of Prime Minister Antonio de Oliveira Salazar, Portugal increased efforts to suppress political activities in its colonies, which forced the country to fight for self-rule and independence through armed force. In the first four years of independence under President Luis Cabral, the country was run along communist lines. Cabral was overthrown by his army chief in 1980, João Bernardo 'Nino' Vieira, who led the country towards a market economy and a multiparty system. The first coup d'état was a direct result of nepotism and a client-based power structure created by the sole political party, the Partido Africano da Independência da Guiné e Cabo Verde/the African Party for the Independence of Guinea and Cape Verde (PAIGC). This remained the model of reference for future leaders.

Vieira was elected into power in 1992, in Guinea-Bissau's

first democratic election, but was ousted in 1999, after dismissing his army chief. This triggered a crippling civil war that ended in 2000, with foreign mediation and regional peacekeepers creating secure conditions for elections the same year. The promise of peace and stability after the elections was short-lived. Vieira's elected successor, Kumba Yala, was overthrown in 2003 in a bloodless coup. He returned to office in 2005, but the parliament's vote of no-confidence in his administration led to a change in political leadership. As part of a national pact for political stability, Vieira appointed Martinho N'Dafa Cabi as the country's Prime Minister.⁹ The vote of no-confidence and the historic peaceful change in government has demonstrated commitment to a democratic process in Guinea-Bissau. However, in light of parliamentary elections scheduled for November 2008, the social and economic consequences of numerous years of political instability remain. Consistent with the nature of political instability and uncertainties in Guinea Bissau, is a history of weak institutional arrangements. Regarding the threat posed by drug trafficking, the following are highlighted:

- A weak criminal justice system that makes the country attractive to perpetrators as it minimises the risk of apprehension and detention;
- An inoperative correctional system where the remaining detention facilities are poorly maintained and ill equipped. The defunct state of the correctional system therefore negatively affects other supporting justice structures.
- Lack of capacity of internal security clusters which can be witnessed in an under-trained and poorly equipped judicial police in charge of drug control. The paradox in this case is that Guinea-Bissau has a relatively large armed force and is one of the most militarised countries in West Africa; and
- A growing culture of impunity which leads to unfettered narcotic-related corruption, involving government officials. Proposals for the government to set up commissions of enquiry into allegations of complicity by politicians and officials have not been endorsed.¹⁰

The sociology of the drug trade

Because Guinea-Bissau's armed forces and some politicians are thought to be deeply involved in the trafficking of cocaine through the country, the UN Support Office in Guinea-Bissau has expressed concerns that drug traffickers might 'buy the country's politicians' in the next elections. The



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risk is that 'dirty' money will penetrate political structures and could be used to overturn electoral outcomes. In addition, Guinea-Bissau has sold some of its islands, raising fears that Colombian drug lords could also purchase them. It is reported that they have bought local businesses, including factories and warehouses in the country. The traffickers are increasingly entrenching themselves within Guinea-Bissau society, gaining leverage over the political elite and government institutions.

Guinea-Bissau has so far escaped the violence common in Mexico and other drug transshipment countries. However, with the potential for enormous profits to be made from Colombian partnerships, disputes over control of the trade could break out. Another consequence of being a transit centre for drugs is that not all drug shipments intended to go through the country actually do. Some of the cocaine trafficked through Guinea-Bissau, remains in the country while other shipments remain by default when they are seized or as payment for services. The cocaine that remains in the country is sold domestically and has increased drug addiction within communities. In this case, a 'new' social pathology has been created, which will require government to set up and finance rehabilitation facilities. Funds allocated to existing development initiatives would need to be redirected to rehabilitation services, negatively affecting social development.

The increasing involvement of government officials and civilians in the drug trade, as well as the competition to secure deals with drug lords, has entrenched cocaine trafficking within society. These relations have eroded the trust between citizens, government, and rule of law institutions, thereby weakening the existing levels of social capital. The absence of the rule of law has additionally discouraged cooperation between the state and its citizens. In fact, there is a national taboo about openly discussing or exposing the threat posed by drug trafficking in Guinea-Bissau. Instances of police harassment and intimidation of journalists investigating the illegal drug trade have been reported. The result has been a growing distrust between citizens and the government, weakening the collective 'sense of society', as well as disintegrating the social networks that would enable a collective approach to combat drug trafficking. A recent UNDOC survey conducted in Guinea Bissau has indicated that many people are not aware of the threat posed by the drug trade to their communities and the country as a whole. This has largely been attributed to the government's muted response, its clamp down on the media and the lack of strong anti-narcotic measures. To this extent, prospects for government-community cooperation in rooting out drug trafficking is undermined. A high level of

social capital in Guinea Bissau is, therefore, critical in rooting out drug trafficking and crimes associated with it.

Economic impact of drug trafficking

Guinea-Bissau's descent into a narco state is particularly worrying given its turbulent political history. Years of political instability have led to gross economic mismanagement, which has resulted in a fragile economy, saddled with large debts and an over-reliance on foreign aid. As one of the highly indebted economies in the world, the country suffers from static growth, deteriorating social indicators and widespread poverty. Its fiscal situation has steadily declined over the years, due to a combination of weak revenues and high wage bills. Among the most pressing consequences of this are outstanding arrears in government employees' salaries, which have had an impact on the effectiveness of national institutions. The government introduced an economic reform programme for 2004–2008¹¹ that was aimed at addressing economic challenges, primarily through structural reforms to boost growth and reduce poverty. As the programme reaches its end, it is clear that these challenges are deeply rooted. With the economy in such dire straits, the need to restore fiscal discipline, improve economic diversification and investment climate is of utmost importance.

A lack of sufficient data on drug trafficking has serious implications for Guinea-Bissau's economy. Given the illegal nature of the industry, direct measurement of statistical data has proved to be a major challenge. Adequate measures would include estimates made of the revenues generated from each stage of transaction of the drug trafficking business, as well as the direct and indirect employment generated by the illegal drug industry. So far, the evidence provided by narcotics seizures is useful in highlighting the scale of the drug trade and potential effects to the economy. Reflecting on the state of the economy, its national budget of US\$125 million is about the same value of 2.5 tonnes of cocaine that is routed to Europe. This means that the street value of the drugs trafficked through Guinea-Bissau so far exceeds its gross national product. This has negatively distorted the country's legitimate exports of timber and agricultural produce, such as palm kernels and cashew nuts.

Furthermore, the drug trade as an illegal enterprise suggests that activities of money laundering and tax evasion are taking place. These negatively affect national revenue and compromise the integrity of the financial and commercial sectors. The drug trade has discouraged the growth of for-

eign direct investment (FDI), as well as legitimate domestic business enterprises. This poses a number of challenges to restoring fiscal stability, building capacity for implementing economic policies and regularising relations with donors.

RESPONSES

The government of Guinea-Bissau

Guinea-Bissau illustrates the considerable costs borne by transit countries in the drug trafficking trade, especially when government reaction has been delayed. Drug trafficking activities were observed as early as 2004, yet it was only in 2007 that concrete responses were initiated. Since December 2007, the PBC has been at the forefront of highlighting Guinea-Bissau's peace building challenges, including drug trafficking and organized crime. The government has since adopted the Emergency Plan to Combat Drug Trafficking and Organized Crime, which is supplemented by the UNODOC led programme that supports security sector reform.¹² Guinea-Bissau has additionally ratified the UN Convention against Transnational Organized Crime and the UN Convention against Corruption, which shows some commitment to addressing drug trafficking, although implementation of the requisite reforms will illustrate the extent of this commitment. While the PBC's involvement provides added value in the fight against drug trafficking, what remains key is the response from continental and regional bodies.

The African Union and ECOWAS

According to the African Union (AU) drug trafficking is a 'threat that poses a danger to the common defense and security interests of the continent, and undermines the promotion of peace and security.'¹³ In this regard, the most comprehensive multilateral response to drug trafficking and challenges posed by narcotics is encapsulated in the AU's *Plan of Action on Drug Control and Crime Prevention (2007-2012)* document. *The Plan of Action* was first adopted in 1996 and builds on the African Union's Ministerial Conferences on Drug Control in 2002 and 2004 consecutively.¹⁴ Other sub regional instruments to combat drug trafficking include the *West African Police Chiefs Committee (WAPCCO)* which was formed to address cross border crime, particularly the illegal trafficking of persons, arms and narcotics. The recent ECOWAS anti-narcotics initiative outlines the region's com-

mitments in combating a growing illicit drug trade. Notably, ECOWAS has mandated the *Inter Governmental Group against Money Laundering in West Africa (GIABA)* to stem the tide of drug trafficking in the region, and provide a means to counter money laundering.¹⁵ Whereas regional commitments and declarations provide the framework to combat drug trafficking, the real measure lies in the concrete action that follows. Notwithstanding these declarations, implementation of the reforms and recommendations has been lethargic. Compounding this has been a lack of political will and financial focus on drug trafficking as a regional multi-dimensional security threat.

The international community

Although cooperation between African anti-corruption agencies has not been extensive, South Africa has initiated bilateral assistance to Guinea-Bissau. With the endorsement of a bilateral military agreement under the *2007 Agreement on Defense Cooperation*, Guinea-Bissau effectively strengthens its security sector reforms. These initiatives attempt to heavily engage the military in combating drug trafficking. They involve the training of military personnel, exchange of military information and military health services.¹⁶ The European Commission, signed a Memorandum of Understanding with Guinea-Bissau in August 2007, to fight drug trafficking in the country. The Memorandum recommends, 'the adoption of the appropriate institutional and operational means' to fight drug trafficking, and the mobilisation of actions from the international community. This has seen Germany, Italy, Portugal, the United Kingdom and the United States pledge extensive financial contributions to fund the government's Operational Plan for 2008.

Challenges in implementing reforms

Institutional capacity

The pre-requisites for implementing anti-drug strategies and drug control mechanisms lie in a country's institutional capacity. In their design, the mechanisms should also aim to address the nascent factors that boost drug trafficking activities in the country. Moreover, political will to drive the implementation of reforms is crucial. In Guinea-Bissau, institutions are deficient in addressing the problem of drug trafficking. In essence, some of the institutions that have been subjected to corruption by drug traffickers can be regarded

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as part of the problem. The most crucial are law enforcement agencies including the police, customs, and judicial institutions. The fact that officials have denied complicity in the drug trade is a stumbling block in addressing institutional capacity. Furthermore, with the scale of financial resources pledged by international partners, the capacity of the government's public administration to absorb and appropriate funds is another concern. How mobilized resources are in fact utilized will determine future financial commitments from partners and the international community.

Domestication of Reforms

At the national level, regional instruments and international protocols signed seem to not make a tangible difference in criminalizing drug trafficking in Guinea-Bissau. This is because these instruments are not adequately implemented. Some punitive measures are not commensurate with the crime.

Political leadership

The government's commitment to reforms has been weak. National authorities have failed to take the lead in addressing the corruption of law enforcement and the rule of law. Transparent and accountable agencies to evaluate reforms, particularly in the security sectors, have not been established.

Conclusion

The problem of illicit drug trade in Guinea-Bissau is not a recent one. It has evolved because of defunct government institutions, and the unstable geo-political environment of West Africa. Notably, drug trafficking is one concern in a myriad of transnational criminal activities in the region. In the absence of national and regional counter-measures, the correlation between drug trafficking and other forms of transnational crime becomes even more apparent. Weak border and territorial controls, and deficient legal frameworks and enforcement mechanisms have contributed to human trafficking, proliferation of small arms and light weapons, e-fraud, and the illegal dumping of toxic waste (green crimes). The problem is therefore a regional one and the approaches and solutions should be of a holistic nature and include (collective) regional operational and legal mechanisms. Having said that, the government of Guinea-Bissau should be pro-active in addressing domestic challenges. Particular focus must be given to the internal reconstruction

of state capacity. Ultimately, policy can only be effective if it is evidence based, and in the case of Guinea-Bissau, evidence asserts that securing the rule of law, improving justice and transparency mechanisms are essential to achieving state control and authority over its institutions. In the absence of robust state institutions, the steps taken by the international community, regional bodies and bilateral partners will fail to make significant strides in combating transitional criminal ventures in the region.

Recommendations

- **To the government of Guinea-Bissau:** Provide leadership and oversight of reforms; strengthen security sector reforms to prevent further drug trafficking activities; strengthen the rule of law institutions and improve legislative instruments that deal with drug trafficking; and improve the capacity of the public sector systems.
- **To bilateral partners:** Increase support to Guinea-Bissau's human security sector; increase financial support to development initiatives; and enhance economic cooperation with the government to explore possibilities of driving local economic enterprise.
- **To ECOWAS:** Address the growing problem of underdevelopment in the region; strengthen coordination and collaboration of police operations in the region; provide legal assistance to the justice sector by implementing the Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice Centre recommendations; strengthen cross border controls; and strengthen the implementation of declarations to combat drug trafficking.
- **To the African Union:** Improve the harmonization of drug controls and crime prevention programmes in the region; enhance the exchange of information and intelligence by strengthening institutional networks of Interpol; and strengthen operational capacity of the *Plan of Action on Drug Control and Crime Prevention*.
- **To the international community:** Increase financial support to the government's 2008 Operational Plan; and reinvigorate support for established frameworks for conflict prevention in West Africa.

Endnotes

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