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# The Evolving Drug Trade in Guinea-Bissau and West Africa

Has Guinea-Bissau become Africa's first narco-state or is it actually losing its importance as a transshipment center? For Davin O'Regan, such an either-or question is too local. Drug trafficking, if it is to be analyzed properly, must be treated as a regional rather than national-level phenomenon.

By Davin O'Regan for ISN

For nearly a decade, Guinea-Bissau has regularly been referred to as "[Africa's first narco-state](#)." The country has been called a "[drug trafficker's dream](#)", a "[pusher's paradise](#)," and a "[drug hub](#)" where huge quantities of cocaine from Latin America pass through on their way to consumers in Europe. Profits from these drug flows have fueled the corruption of state institutions and officials as well as coups d'état, violence, and instability.

Others have challenged this view. Guinea-Bissau's depiction as a narco-state has been called "[nonsense](#)" by senior officials in the UN mission in Guinea-Bissau, who attribute the country's instability to weak civil-military relations. Periodic reports have described a fall in the drug trade. In 2009, UN officials said the country was "[losing importance](#)" as a drug transshipment center. The trade also "[reduced considerably](#)" after a 2013 U.S. drug sting operation led to the arrests and convictions of several Bissau-Guineans, including senior navy officer [Rear Admiral Jose Americo Bubo Na Tchuto](#).

Such differences of opinion are understandable. There was a series of dramatic arrests of Colombian and Venezuelan nationals along with seizures of large quantities of cocaine in [2006](#), [2007](#), and [2008](#) in Guinea-Bissau. Since then, however, evidence of the drug trade has been less conspicuous. Aside from the [arrests of individuals carrying a few kilograms of cocaine and other small drug incidents](#), there have been no large-scale shipments (100 kilos or more) of cocaine interdicted in Guinea-Bissau for nearly 6 years.

Probing slightly beneath the surface indicates that complacency about the drug trade in Guinea-Bissau should be avoided. Past incidents suggest that traffickers may have deeply rooted connections in the country, and most traffickers have been able to operate without fear of consequences, giving them little reason to move on from such a low-risk business environment. The lack of large-scale seizures may simply reflect advancement in the techniques of local groups and their more thorough co-optation of key organs of the state.

Moreover, the drug trade is a regional phenomenon that operates through a diversity of routes and networks. Drugs flow through a variety of African states, including Guinea-Bissau and its neighbors.

Rather than falling, the extent and impact of the drug trade in West Africa [may actually be underestimated](#).

### **Not just facilitators, but wholesalers**

A common refrain regarding the cocaine trade in Guinea-Bissau is that [“Latin American cartels”](#) use the country as a reliable waypoint for drug shipments bound for Europe. Local African “middlemen” coordinate the temporary storage of drugs or liaise with officials to deflect the scrutiny of law enforcement. These middlemen are paid for their services, but they are not involved in drug dealing *per se*. According to this view, drug trafficking is essentially a foreign-driven and foreign-controlled phenomenon and can shift in and out of the country as opportunities or obstacles present themselves.

Some past incidents reinforce this depiction. The 2013 [U.S. indictment](#) of Rear Admiral Bubo Na Tchuto suggests that he was merely a facilitator of the trade. In recordings made by sources working with U.S. authorities, Na Tchuto agreed to receive and store cocaine for Colombian drug traffickers at a fixed fee of \$1 million per ton, but he did not initiate the transaction, played a minimal role in transportation, and did not buy or sell any of the product.

Other incidents paint a far more complex picture of drug trafficking in the country. In a sting operation that ran parallel to the one targeting Na Tchuto, [Manuel Mamadi Mane and Saliu Sisse](#) were arrested in April 2013 by U.S. authorities for drug trafficking. [General Antonio Indjai](#), Guinea-Bissau’s Chief of Staff of the Armed Forces, was also indicted as part of this investigation but was not apprehended.

This sting involved a much more complex negotiation process in which Mane traveled to Brazil to meet with Colombian traffickers, who in actuality were informants working with U.S. authorities. Mane and Sisse agreed to *buy* cocaine for 14,000 euros per kilogram and stipulated that Bissau-Guinean government officials would also have to be compensated for their assistance—not in cash but with 13 percent of any cocaine shipment. Early on in their recorded conversations, Mane provided the Colombians with phone numbers for an individual in Amsterdam to whom they would need to send 20,000 euros at the request of General Indjai as a gesture of goodwill.

The details of the negotiation suggest that Mane and Sisse held deeper ties to the wholesale cocaine trade, were able to access significant funds to purchase the product, and may have had contacts that stretched from Latin America to Europe. Mane and his cohort were not temps or mere middlemen who served as freelance “lookouts” for international drug dealers. They were more experienced and held equity in the “business.”

These equities represent stronger linkages between Guinea-Bissau and the international drug trade. Even if foreign traffickers were driven away from Guinea-Bissau, there appear to be local operators who are still deeply tied to the narcotics trade and who would have the contacts and capabilities to maintain its momentum.

### **Few deterrents for perpetrators**

The arrests of Bubo Na Tchuto, Manuel Mane, and Saliu Sisse represent a rarity in Guinea-Bissau. Few high-level drug traffickers operating in Guinea-Bissau have been apprehended, and, among those who have, many were able to flee or disappear. The risk of arrest or prosecution appears to be so low that some individuals with numerous questionable links to past drug trafficking incidents in Guinea-Bissau do not even bother to maintain a low profile.

Take for instance Ibrahima Gueye, a Senegalese businessman whose name and companies have been linked to several high-profile drug trafficking incidents in the region. [In November 2009](#), a Boeing 727

was found destroyed in the desert near the northern Malian city of Gao. An investigation was opened as evidence emerged that it may have been carrying up to 10 tons of cocaine. According to reports, Gueye was [a sought-after suspect](#) in the investigation as the [registration documents](#) for the 727 were linked [to his business, Africa Air Assistance](#), which had offices in Senegal and Guinea-Bissau.

This was the second time that Africa Air Assistance had emerged in connection with the delivery of cocaine in West Africa. In July 2008 a small executive jet landed at the main airport in Bissau. Customs and police were forbidden from inspecting the aircraft, and the military allegedly unloaded more than 500 kilograms of cocaine. The plane, however, encountered engine difficulty and was forced to stay at the airport. Who was called to help rescue and repair the plane? [A team from Africa Air Assistance](#) arrived from Dakar two days later to fix the stranded jet.

As it happened, Africa Air Assistance owned a small fleet of planes operating in and out of Guinea-Bissau. In addition to the 727 found in Mali, Africa Air Assistance had [6 aircraft](#) registered in Guinea-Bissau. Some of these planes have been spotted in [Portugal and Spain](#), where a company called [West Africa Aviation Services](#), which is also linked to Gueye, is based. “Iba” Gueye, as he is sometimes called, has also registered and operates [a number](#) of [aircraft in Senegal](#). There is a building with an “Aeroclub d’Iba Gueye” sign painted across its walls adjacent to the international terminal at the main airport in Dakar where his planes are stored.

Gueye’s aviation businesses, his fleet of aircraft across West Africa and Europe, and his connections to two separate high-profile drug trafficking incidents could all be coincidental, but they would also seem to warrant further investigation. Yet there is no indication that he has been questioned by authorities in Guinea-Bissau, Senegal, or elsewhere. This lack of follow-up despite multiple circumstantial ties between Gueye and drug trafficking is an indication of how accommodating the environment in Guinea-Bissau and West Africa is for trafficking networks. Such lax enforcement does little to dissuade a trafficker from altering his modus operandi.

Gueye, as fate would have it, is finally facing serious legal consequences, though not for any ties to the drug trade. Charges of fraud have been brought against him in Senegal following a civil suit filed by a Tunisian businessman that alleges Gueye [failed to deliver gems and minerals purchased for roughly \\$500,000](#). Gueye remains free on bail while the trial proceeds.

### **A region in the grips of the drug trade**

As the case of Ibrahima Gueye suggests, traffickers in the region rarely operate in just one country but spread their business across multiple states. Their international ties are what make them good at their jobs. Another example of this is Francisco Barros, who was born in Cabo Verde, travels frequently to Conakry in neighboring Guinea, but lives in Bissau and holds Bissau-Guinean citizenship. Francisco was designated a [“drug kingpin” by the U.S. government in June 2014](#).

Ultimately, the drug trade courses through regions, not individual states. This can contribute to a misperception that flows are shifting between countries when in fact the flow should be understood as part of a regional network.

For example, in September 2008, reports suggested that the [drug trade in Guinea had eclipsed that of neighboring Guinea-Bissau](#) after drug traffickers were driven out of Bissau due to “[increased government scrutiny](#).” Not 18 months later, however, [several military officers in Guinea-Bissau were designated drug kingpins by the U.S. government and reports of drug deliveries were coinciding with violent infighting among the top two generals in the country](#). The drug trade appeared to be alive and well in Bissau.

In an eerie echo of reports from 2008, a “[surge](#)” in drug trafficking in Guinea was reported in 2014. Apparently U.S. counternarcotics operations in Guinea-Bissau in 2013 were “ [prompting traffickers to seek sanctuary in Conakry.](#)”

Were flows actually shifting back and forth between Guinea and Guinea-Bissau? Or do the two countries represent an interconnected trafficking waypoint favored because of their generally accommodating environment? I would say the latter. Drug flows may appear to shift between countries, but this may be due to the planning vagaries of the trafficking networks rather than a structural change in the drug trade. In fact, separate drug shipments sometimes arrive in different countries at virtually the same time: for instance, one day after the arrival of an executive jet delivering drugs in Bissau in July 2008, [a plane carrying 700 kilograms of cocaine was seized in Freetown, Sierra Leone](#).

The drug trafficking challenge across the region is proving to be an enduring one. States across West Africa, like Guinea-Bissau and Guinea, remain weak, and seizures and other incidents indicate that [Ghana](#) (where seized drugs have had a tendency to [disappear](#)), [Nigeria](#), and their neighboring states are seeing significant levels of narcotics trafficking. The drug trade is also evolving, as local networks become more deeply involved, and may even be fueling corruption in [critical and high-level state institutions](#). This means that reports of its demise in Guinea-Bissau or elsewhere should be considered premature at best.

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