



DRUG TRAFFICKING: AN ALARMING HUMAN SECURITY THREAT

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In recognition of the role and achievements of the West Africa Network for Peacebuilding (WANEP) in Conflict Prevention and Peacebuilding in Africa, particularly in West Africa, the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations at its substantive session of 2006 granted WANEP Special Consultative Status to the UN. WANEP is therefore mandated to designate official representatives to the United Nations in New York, Geneva and Vienna to further its advocacy and outreach strategies for peace and human security.

INTRODUCTION

The rate of drug trafficking in West Africa has assumed an alarming proportion. Almost each day, a major seizure of narcotics is reported in one of the member states of the Economic Community of West African States, despite protocols signed to deal with this criminal, yet highly lucrative trade. On September 4th 2007 the chief of army staff in Guinea Bissau gave orders for the army to shoot any plane that lands in its uncontrolled coastal islands, which have become a transit point for Latin American cocaine destined for European and American markets. On June 29, 2007, Senegalese authorities arrested Latin Americans who are using West African ports as transit routes and seized 1.2 metric tons of cocaine.

Nigerian anti-narcotic immigration officials recently apprehended several drug traffickers using its major international airports and even certain airline officials have been accused of collusion. The highly publicized case of two British teenagers accused of attempting to smuggle £300 worth of cocaine from Ghana into Britain has further underlined the problem of West Africa's growing importance as a hub in the international drug trafficking network. The United Nations International Drug Control Programme (UNDCP) indicates that West Africa is becoming a major springboard for international trafficking by criminal syndicates. West African officials, meeting in Ouagadougou from September 4-6, have raised concern about the growing threat of drug use among its

WEST AFRICA EARLY WARNING & EARLY RESPONSE NETWORK (WARN)

The West Africa Early Warning and Early Response Network (WARN) is an integral part of the West Africa Preventive Peacebuilding Program co-ordinated by the West Africa Network for Peacebuilding (WANEP). Through its WARN Program, WANEP is setting the stage for a civil society-based early warning and response network in Africa with emphasis on human security.

WARN covers the entire Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) sub-region including Cameroon and Chad. Our focus was initially the Mano River Basin countries of Sierra Leone, Guinea, Liberia, and Côte d'Ivoire. We have since expanded to cover the entire West Africa sub-region.

Since 2002, WANEP entered into an agreement with ECOWAS through the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) in the framework of capacity building in Conflict Prevention. One of the goals of this agreement is to interface WARN with the ECOWAS Early Warning Systems to optimize early warning conflict prevention in West Africa. In view of this development, WANEP has been operating a liaison office located at the ECOWAS Secretariat in Abuja, Nigeria since April 2003.

population, as well as the use of the region as a transit point. This policy brief (which is a preliminary alarm-sounding note pending more detailed research) aims at drawing the attention of policy makers and the international community to this threat by focusing on:

- A brief presentation of the drug abuse situation in the sub-region as reported in the media; and why West Africa is becoming a hub;
- The consequences of the illegal trade on human security;
- Some options for response.

Why is West Africa a growing hub for international drug trafficking?

The trafficking problems experienced in West Africa are not the only drug-related issues in the region. Vast fields of marijuana abound in many corners of West Africa. Marijuana is cultivated and consumed in almost every community and in many forms. Drug abuse is not limited to cocaine and cannabis imported from Latin America. However, although domestic cultivation contributes to the harmful effects of drugs in West Africa, this brief focuses mainly in the inter-continental aspect of the drug trade.

In order to understand the magnitude of the illegal trade in hard drugs that has infested West Africa, it is important to recognize why West Africa has suddenly become a serious transit route. The reasons are geographical, socio-economic, and political.

A. The situation in the West African sub-region.

Increasingly stringent monitoring by governmental agencies in Europe and a crackdown on drug traffickers in the Americas has pushed the drug barons to change strategies and routes. The United States Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) states that South American drug trafficking groups have established ties with criminal organizations in Ghana, Nigeria, Guinea-Bissau, Guinea, Togo, and Senegal.¹ Nonetheless, it is highly probable that international drug smuggling groups have penetrated most coastal West African states. The DEA claims that the West Africa sub-region is also becoming the key command and control point for Spanish and Italian drug trafficking organizations.² The UN World Drug Report 2007, released in June, 2007 indicates that while drug production, trafficking, and consumption have remained constant world wide, they have increased dramatically in West Africa.³

The worst affected state, according to the UN World Drug Report 2007, is Guinea-Bissau, where in April 2007, 635 kilograms of cocaine were seized in one raid. Due to lack of equipment and manpower the traffickers were able to escape with approximately two metric tons of cocaine.⁴ The previous month 674 kilograms of cocaine were seized in Guinea-Bissau and two Colombian nationals were arrested. On August 16, 2007, police in Mauritania announced West Africa's largest ever drug seizure, discovering over 800 kilograms of cocaine while investigating a separate drug smuggling case.⁵ These

¹ U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration. Statement before the House Judiciary Committee. Sept. 21, 2006. <http://www.dea.gov/pubs/cngrtest/ct092106.html>. Aug. 14, 2007.

² U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration. Statement before the House Judiciary Committee. Sept. 21, 2006. <http://www.dea.gov/pubs/cngrtest/ct092106.html>. Aug. 14, 2007.

³ Pham, Peter J. World Defense Review. July 10, 2007. *The Security Challenge of West Africa's New Drug Depots*. <http://worlddefensereview.com/pham071007.shtml>. Aug. 14, 2007.

⁴ Pham, Peter J. World Defense Review. July 10, 2007. *The Security Challenge of West Africa's New Drug Depots*. <http://worlddefensereview.com/pham071007.shtml>. Aug. 14, 2007.

⁵ BBC Online News, Aug. 16, 2007. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/6949104.stm>

examples help highlight the large amount of drugs that are currently being trafficked through the West African sub-region. Nevertheless, there are fears that this may only be the tip of the iceberg, given the highly protected and sophisticated nature of the drug trade. Several factors converge to make the West African sub-region an attractive location for drug traffickers.

B. Factors Facilitating and Abating West Africa's Vulnerability

Geography: Geographically, West Africa is not only ideally situated between Europe and the Americas, but has had historical links between the two continents since the days of the slave trade. The large demand for narcotics in Europe is mainly supplied from South America. West Africa is conveniently located approximately half-way between South America and Europe, with direct routes to each, greatly facilitating the shipment of drugs. Moreover, vast stretches of unprotected coastline and marshy swamp lands provide drug traffickers with ideal locations to transit narcotics clandestinely. Porous land borders also assist the transportation of drugs within the region. Finally, technological improvements in sea and air transport, as well as communications, have further aided this triangular narcotics connection between West Africa, Europe, and the Americas.

Weak or Fragile States: Most West African states fall within the category of weak or fragile states with their attendant characteristics. These states are often overwhelmed with long-running, crucial issues such as poverty, weak institutions, under-development, corruption, poor governance, intra-state conflict, and instable governments. While governments grapple with the above mentioned challenges, little or no time and resources are devoted to addressing problems such as organized crime and drug smuggling.⁶ Therefore, the nearly unimpeded prevalence of drug trafficking is a combination of both insufficient resources and, in some cases, lack of political will. The more pressing issues facing African leaders, therefore, provide greater freedom for transnational criminal organizations to operate.

C. Consequences of the drug trade on West African human security

The consequences of this passive attitude towards the international drug trade are already becoming visible in the West Africa sub-region. Most directly, drug trafficking can lead directly to increased instances of crime, violent crime, and political instability. A recent spate of killings in Ghana have raised concerns that drug trafficking may be involved. Although the rise of "contract killings" in Ghana has been attributed to various factors, the leading factor appears to be the link with the West African drug trade.⁷ The magnitude of wealth derived from the trade allows drug barons to buy almost anything they desire, including "contract killers", according to Ghanaian politician John Atta Mills.⁸ In Senegal in July 2007 suspected drug smugglers were reportedly arrested in

⁶ Mashaba, Mpho. Institute for Security Studies. *Organized Crime And Corruption: Fighting the Problem Within the NEPAD Framework*.

http://www.iss.co.za/index.php?link_id=28&slink_id=1185&link_type=12&slink_type=12&tmpl_id=3. Aug.14, 2007.

⁷ Mills, John Evans Atta. Ghanaweb. *Recent Cases of the Cold-Blooded Murder of Ghanaians*. July 11, 2007. <http://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/pressreleases/artikel.php?ID=126999>. Aug. 17, 2007.

⁸ Mills, John Evans Atta. Ghanaweb. *Recent Cases of the Cold-Blooded Murder of Ghanaians*. July 11, 2007. <http://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/pressreleases/artikel.php?ID=126999>. Aug. 17, 2007.

possession of AK-47s with two ammunition clips each and a 22-caliber submachine gun. On their boat 125 sticks of dynamite were found.

Moreover, the high rates of crime that are often associated with the drug trade, and even the perception of high crime rates, is often enough to scare away highly needed foreign investment, resulting in lower employment opportunities and stunting the economic growth needed to accommodate the growing number of university graduates. This fear has already been voiced in Ghana in the public media.⁹

Third, drug smuggling and organized crime indirectly damage the welfare of a society through illicit practices that create victims, while simultaneously generating large amounts of wealth for the criminals. Unchecked crime undermines the rule of law, thus creating an environment where the government does not appear capable of providing security to its citizens.¹⁰ This phenomenon is becoming endemic in West Africa. Governments are increasingly helpless in the face of security challenges and have proven incapable of arresting identified drug barons who, in certain cases, patronize the regimes in place. The UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) states that transnational crime, and in particular drug smuggling, is considered “one of the major threats to human security, impeding the social, economic, political, and cultural development of societies worldwide.”¹¹

Fourth, the drug trade has been linked directly and indirectly to international terrorism. The US National Security Strategy of 2002 (NSS) affirms that weak or failed states can pose problems to the international order and stronger states by providing safe havens for terrorists and drug traffickers.¹² Drug trafficking has been linked to the Madrid bombings in 2004 where explosives used for the attack were allegedly bought with the revenue from the sale of hashish.¹³ While the link between terrorism and the drug trade is less well documented in West Africa, it is very possible that it does exist, according to security and West Africa specialist Peter Pham.¹⁴ In the Sahel region, rebel movements are often accused of using the proceeds from drug smuggling to buy arms. Although not necessarily terrorist groups, these rebel movements can, nonetheless, have harmful consequences on the stability of the region.

Finally, closely linked with drug smuggling is small arms smuggling. Small arms proliferation has been recognized as one of the leading factors contributing to political

⁹ “Ghana: B/A Police and Bar War”. *Ghanaian Chronicle*. August 31, 2007. <http://allafrica.com/stories/200708310796.html>. Sept. 11, 2007.

¹⁰ Mashaba, Mpho. Institute for Security Studies. *Organized Crime And Corruption: Fighting the Problem Within the NEPAD Framework*. http://www.iss.co.za/index.php?link_id=28&slink_id=1185&link_type=12&slink_type=12&tmpl_id=3. Aug. 14, 2007.

¹¹ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) online publication. http://www.unodc.org/unodc/organized_crime.html. Aug. 15, 2007.

¹² National Security Strategy 2002. <http://www.whitehouse.gov/nsc/nssintro.html>. Sept. 8, 2007.

¹³ Pham, Peter J. World Defense Review. July 10, 2007. *The Security Challenge of West Africa's New Drug Depots*. <http://worlddefensereview.com/pham071007.shtml>. Aug. 14, 2007.

¹⁴ Pham, Peter J. World Defense Review. July 10, 2007. *The Security Challenge of West Africa's New Drug Depots*. <http://worlddefensereview.com/pham071007.shtml>. Aug. 14, 2007.

instability in West Africa.¹⁵ A UN Security Council Press Release in February of 2005 described illicit cross border activities, such as drug trafficking, as an underlying threat to sub-regional stability.¹⁶ Drug and arms smuggling also often go hand-in-hand with other forms of international crime such as human smuggling, corruption, and money laundering. All these illicit activities help to diminish human security and prospects for development in West Africa.

Possible Steps in the combat against drug trafficking in West Africa

- *Legal Frameworks at national and sub-regional levels:* The first step towards combating international drug smuggling and organized crime is the creation of a legal framework of prevention. Fortunately, West Africa has already begun this process. The 1996 Political Declaration and Drug Control Action Plan on the Control of Drug Abuse and Illicit Drug Trafficking in Africa was drafted and reviewed in 2002 at the 38th Ordinary Session of the Organization of Africa States (OAU), during which time a revised action plan for 2002 -2006 was adopted.¹⁷ On September 6th, 2007 ECOWAS adopted a new framework, replacing the 1997 plan adopted at Praia, Cape Verde, aimed at combating money laundering, drug trafficking, and their related crimes.¹⁸ Further declarations complete this list.¹⁹
- *Domesticating sub-regional Frameworks:* At the national level governments can combat the proliferation of drug trafficking by stiffening penalties associated with the practice. Countries that have weak laws against drug trafficking often experience increased drug trafficking.²⁰ Fines and limited jail sentences prove insufficient in dissuading the multi-billion dollar-a-year trade. Increased emphasis on policing and border control is also a positive step, although this is often difficult to implement due to funding shortfalls.
- *A regional problem, a regional approach:* A regional approach is needed to complement the national initiatives taken by governments. Drug trafficking is cross-

¹⁵ Institute for Security Studies. Editorial. *Small Arms Proliferation and Africa*. <http://www.iss.org.za/Pubs/Newsletters/OAU/OAUISS1.html>. Aug. 17, 2007.

¹⁶ Security Council Press Release. SC/8321. Feb. 25, 2005. <http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2005/sc8321.doc.htm>. Aug. 14, 2007.

¹⁷ Mashaba, Mpho. Institute for Security Studies. *Organized Crime And Corruption: Fighting the Problem Within the NEPAD Framework*. http://www.iss.co.za/index.php?link_id=28&slink_id=1185&link_type=12&slink_type=12&tmpl_id=3. Aug.14, 2007.

¹⁸ ECOWAS Press Release. N°87/2007. "Regional Experts Agree on Framework for Plan of Action to Combat Upsurge in Illicit Drugs Trafficking." Sept.11th, 2007.

¹⁹ 1) The Declaration on the Prevention and Control of Organised Transnational Crime and Corruption, adopted on 21 July 1997 in Dakar, Senegal ; 2) The OAU's 2000 Bamako Declaration on the Common African Position on the Illicit Proliferation, Circulation and Trafficking of Small Arms and Light Weapons; 3)The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) Political Declaration against Trafficking in Human Beings, and Sub-Regional Plan of Action, Regional Level, adopted on 20–21 December 2001, at the 25th Summit held in Dakar, Senegal; 4)The ECOWAS Declaration on the Fight against the Illegal Traffic in Persons and Action Plan for 2002/03.

²⁰ Mutume, Gumisai. *Africa: Oranized Crime Targets Weak States*. Africa Renewal. United Nations. <http://allafrica.com/stories/200707231860.html?viewall=1>. Aug. 14, 2007

border by nature. Consequently, the stability of neighboring states is also threatened. Recognizing the regional threat to stability posed by money laundering and drug smuggling, in 1999 ECOWAS established the Intergovernmental action group Against Money Laundering in West Africa (GIABA). Although focusing on money laundering, the intergovernmental group was recently mandated to fight against drug smuggling as well.²¹ Finally, the ECOWAS Strategic Vision, adopted on June 15, 2007 by the ECOWAS heads of state, affirms that drug trafficking is a menace to the region and pledges to “work concertedly in the fight against drug trafficking and to provide support to Member States facing the scourge.”²²

- *International dimension of the crime:* West African states cannot accomplish such a large task on their own. The inter-continental aspect of the drug trade requires the response of the whole international community, especially those most directly affected by the trade. The UN is currently aiding Guinea-Bissau in its security sector reforms aimed at strengthening the police.²³ However, finding adequate funding remains problematic. The UNODC Executive Director Antonio Maria Costa states that if support is not forthcoming from the international community, police officers may become discouraged and resort to taking bribes from drug traffickers.²⁴ This is already occurring in West African states such as Guinea Bissau and Ghana.
- *Support to Conflict Prevention Initiatives:* If the struggle against illegal drugs is to be won, the international community must be seen to be serious in preventing violent conflicts in West Africa by addressing fundamental structural problems immediately. Drug dealers have taken advantage of the weakness of states, continuing to transit their drugs through the air and sea ports through bribery and the corruption of leaders, customs agents, and security officials. The established frameworks for Conflict Prevention in West Africa and ECOWAS’ initiatives must be supported and fortified before the traffic of illicit drugs becomes too firmly entrenched to dislodge.

Conclusion

Declarations, conventions, and protocols of regional governments and international institutions aimed at combating drug smuggling and organized crime provide a useful framework. Unfortunately, their implementation remains elusive, due to lack of infrastructure, human resources, funding, and, at times, political will. In many West African states policing issues have a much lower priority than more pressing issues such as conflict resolution, democracy building, and alleviating poverty. Nevertheless, eliminating or greatly reducing drug smuggling and organized crime is an important factor in achieving peace and security. Achieving this should be an integral goal within

²¹ Groupe Inter-gouvernemental d’Action Contre le Blanchissement d’Argent et le Financement du Terrorisme en l’Afrique de l’Ouest. “The Expert Group Meeting on Drug Control in West Africa” http://www.giaba-westafrica.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=65&Itemid=1

²² ECOWAS Press Release. N°:57/2007. Abuja, 15 June 2007. *ECOWAS Leaders Adopt Strategic Vision for Regional Development*. <http://news.ecowas.int/en/presseshow.php?nb=57&lang=en&annee=2007>. Aug. 14, 2007.

²³ Mutume, Gumisai. *Africa: Organized Crime Targets Weak States*. Africa Renewal. United Nations <http://allafrica.com/stories/200707231860.html?viewall=1>. Aug. 14, 2007

²⁴ Mutume, Gumisai. *Africa: Organized Crime Targets Weak States*. Africa Renewal. United Nations <http://allafrica.com/stories/200707231860.html?viewall=1>. Aug. 14, 2007.

an overall strategy of building peaceful, stable states and economies.²⁵ The link between the drug trade and underdevelopment, crime, violence, and social decay cannot be ignored. It is, therefore, in the interest of the international community, and West African states in particular, to address this issue before its effects on West African security grow any worse. It is an international issue and a collective responsibility.



²⁵ Mashaba, Mpho. Institute for Security Studies. Organized Crime And Corruption: Fighting the Problem Within the NEPAD Framework. http://www.iss.co.za/index.php?link_id=28&slink_id=1185&link_type=12&slink_type=12&tmpl_id=3. Aug.14, 2007.