

Organised crime, drug trafficking, terrorism: the new Achilles' heel of West Africa

Amado Philip de Andrés¹
Deputy Regional Representative for West & Central Africa
United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime

Policy Recommendations

- West Africa, currently facing a triple menace in terms of organised crime, drug trafficking and terrorism, needs to prepare and implement an *action plan* tackling increased drug trafficking on the coast with a special tailor-made operational strategy to fight organised crime, and the increased presence of the Al-Qaeda Organisation of the Islamic Maghreb in the Sahelo-Saharan band.
- By fighting the triple menace, West African states will consolidate their *economic development* while securing their democracies and eradicating West African crime syndicates from the region.
- In this context, there is a need for a *holistic security strategy* for West Africa prepared by ECOWAS and concerned member states with the technical assistance of UNODC and other key stakeholders.
- Importance must be given to *transparency* and *accountability* in the use of development assistance to maximise existing resources.
- West African states are better off including the fight against organised crime in their state budgets, in order for the international community to provide *budget support* financial assistance targeted at strengthening the rule of law and their national security structures (as a new mechanism for the provision of development aid to West African States, most of which are Heavily-Indebted Poor Countries).

In recent years, transnational organised crime in West Africa, or crime perpetrated by West Africans elsewhere in the world, has become a matter of major international concern. This has been perhaps most noticeable with regards to drug-trafficking, people-trafficking and fraud. The activities of West African criminals in other parts of the world are increasingly perceived by police forces in the European Union, North America and elsewhere as a serious threat. Criminals in West Africa have developed a presence wherever there are criminal opportunities to be

¹ Amado Philip de Andrés is Deputy Regional Representative for West and Central Africa of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. The author is a former criminal legal counsel at the Office of the Director, UNMIK Department of Justice, and lecturer at the European Studies Centre of Doğus University in Istanbul, Turkey. Mr. de Andrés published a book in Spanish and Serbo-Croatian in 2004 entitled: *The Balkans: Purgatory of Europe*, Spanish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, February 2004.

exploited. West African criminals operate in global illicit markets, sometimes developing working arrangements with other international criminals. Although West African organised crime is less violent than, for example, Russian organised crime, its scale and scope are astonishing.

Additionally, in the last few months, United Nations officials have raised concerns about growing cocaine trafficking in West Africa and its potential impact on stability and development in that fragile region. At the 11th High-Level Meeting of Heads of United Nations Peace Missions in West Africa, in November 2007, the Heads of Missions emphasised: “the crucial importance of addressing drug trafficking and organised crime in the West Africa sub-region. With regard to Guinea-Bissau, the Heads of Mission expressed concern about the alarming increase in drug trafficking and the threat posed to stability both in the country and in the sub-region at large”.²

Cocaine is considered one of the two most dangerous drugs on the world market today (the other being heroin) and commands a market value estimated by UNODC at some US\$18 billion a year at the wholesale level, and US\$70 billion at the retail level.³ Nearly all the world's cocaine comes from just three countries: Colombia, Peru, and Bolivia. Traditionally, Colombian traffickers have dominated transnational trafficking in cocaine, smuggling the drug to the most lucrative markets: via Central America and the Caribbean to the United States and across the Atlantic to Europe (directly from South America or via the Caribbean). Recent seizures indicate a new pivot-point in the trafficking route to Europe: West Africa.

Many countries suffer from the adverse effects of lying between the sites of drug production and the most lucrative consumption markets. For example, Central America and the Caribbean have long suffered for being placed between South America's cocaine producers and the cocaine users in North America. Similarly, southeast Europe has been affected by heroin trafficked from Afghanistan to Western Europe via the so-called “Balkan route”. These countries have had to dedicate substantial resources to combating a problem starting and ending elsewhere.

At first glance, trafficking through West Africa appears to make little market sense. To make use of the region as a way station, traffickers must add kilometers and thus risk, to their traditional smuggling routes. There must be substantial incentives in favour of making this detour.

Most obviously, there is a value in novelty - professional drug traffickers avoid interception by continually shifting operations away from routes known to law enforcement. But these are indications that in some instances, such as Guinea-Bissau, South American traffickers have actually relocated to the west coast of Africa, an unfamiliar territory for them. The investment they have made suggests that this is more than just fleeting slight-of-hand. Trafficking via West Africa apparently offers long-term advantages over the more direct routes and South American traffickers have already established a palpable presence in Lusophone West African States such as Cape Verde and Guinea Bissau because of “compatible idiosyncrasies” between the Latin American traffickers and their West African counterparts.

In the three years between 2005 and 2007, some 33 tons of cocaine has been seized on its way to Europe via West Africa. Prior to that time, seizures for the entire continent had already exceeded one ton annually. Something has shifted, recently and dramatically.

Given the limited law enforcement capacities of many West African states, it is also likely that only a small share of the cocaine trafficked through these countries is detected. In fact, the

² “West African organized crime: New Threats and Solutions”, Fall Working Papers, International Relations Institute of the University of Michigan, December 2007.

³ UNODC, World Drug Reports, 2005, 2006 and 2007, Vienna.

circumstances surrounding the best documented seizures suggest that most are made by chance,⁴ and that, in many instances, the amount seized was much less than the amount trafficked.⁵ But despite this under-capture, seizures were over 60 times higher in the first three quarters of 2007 than they were in 2002. This would appear to be indicative of a dramatic increase in the underlying traffic.

To put these figures in perspective, UNODC estimates that European cocaine demand is currently between 135 and 145 tons per year. Multi-ton seizures therefore represent a significant portion of total annual supply. The total of 13 tons seized off the coast of West Africa and on land in 2006 would be about 100% of cocaine consumed in Europe. Most of this massive amount was intercepted in just seven seizures - five at sea and two on the continent. It is likely that the un-seized flow represents a sizeable portion of Europe's cocaine supply.

While these seizures represent only a small share of the total traffic, their value can easily exceed the entire budgets of the local agencies assigned to interdiction. A kilogram of cocaine typically wholesales at around \$46,700 in many of the key European markets. A ton would therefore be worth just under \$50 million on reaching destination, and double that amount at retail level. The entire GDP of a small country like Guinea-Bissau was only \$304 million in 2006,⁶ or the equivalent of six tons of cocaine at wholesale level in Europe. According to the IMF, the national budget of Guinea-Bissau in 2006 was equal to 41.3 percent of its GDP, or \$125 million, slightly more than the wholesale value of two and half tons of cocaine. Guinea-Bissau is an interesting case in point, because indications are that this country is particularly popular with traffickers. While eight West African countries have seized more than 100kg of cocaine in either of the last two years, Guinea-Bissau has done so in both of them.

Poverty and political weakness as the best recipe for disaster

South American trafficking networks have found opportunities which have impelled them to move a considerable share of their operational platforms to West Africa. These advantages are linked to poverty and political weakness in some of these countries. Drug trafficking can find a particularly favourable environment in under-governed regions, where the state is either too poor to assert authority or where insurgent groups have assumed some degree of control.

West Africa has suffered from the effects of a number of civil conflicts over the last few decades. War and rapid social change have left large populations displaced and borders blurred. Conflict remains a serious threat in the region. Between 1998 and 2005, 35 armed groups have been active in ten West African countries: Côte d'Ivoire, the Gambia, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal and Sierra Leone. While many of these groups have demobilised, a sizeable amount of them could re-emerge if conditions were favourable. Firearm proliferation in the region is considered to be very high, despite weapon destruction efforts. Between 1998 and 2004, personnel successfully collected or seized more than 200,000 small arms region-wide, at least 70,000 of which were subsequently destroyed, but this is believed to represent a small share of weapons in circulation.⁷

Small arms proliferation is an acute problem in Guinea-Bissau, with many veterans of the country's war of independence against Portugal in the 1970s still in possession of their AK-47

⁴ For example, in May 2007, the authorities in Noadhibou, Mauritania noticed a group of people unloading a shipment from a small private airplane. When they approached, the plane took off, leaving behind its load of cocaine. The plane later made an emergency landing on a road and the crew disappeared. In yet another example, in May 2006, the Ghanaian authorities seized 1.9 tons of cocaine after searching a van during a routine traffic stop.

⁵ For example, a consignment of around 635kg of cocaine was intercepted by the Judicial Police of Guinea-Bissau near the capital Bissau in April 2007. However, the traffickers escaped with the remainder of the consignment (believed to total around 2.5 tons) because police did not have the manpower or vehicles to give chase.

⁶ According to the World Bank: <http://devdata.worldbank.org/external/CPProfile.asp?PTYPE=CP&CCODE=GNB>.

⁷ Small Arms Survey, *Armed and aimless: Armed groups, guns and human security in the ECOWAS region*. Geneva: SAS, 2005.

assault rifles. As many as 10,000 small arms were distributed to civilians during the 1998-99 civil war, primarily Kalashnikov assault rifles of Ukrainian and Bulgarian origin, and handguns.⁸ As a result, Guinea-Bissau's territory has often served as a weapons stockpile for the region, including, for example, for the rebels in the Senegalese region of Casamance.

Perhaps most importantly, the fact that governments are under-resourced and that some are unable to properly control their institutions seriously limits the ability of many states to regulate their own territory. Uncertainties about long-term stability may encourage citizens, including public civil servants, to take whatever they can, even if it is illegal. The fact that key security personnel are underpaid, and often irregularly paid, contributes greatly to their vulnerability to corruption. Once a critical mass of law enforcement is taking bribes, it may become difficult, or even dangerous, to remain honest. A vicious cycle is thus created - citizen cooperation declines with each police failure, further undermining the ability of officials to do their jobs.

The destabilising impact of illicit trafficking

The recent appearance of narcotics (hashish and most probably cocaine) among the items (arms, irregular migrants, cigarettes and contraband) smuggled and trafficked through the Sahelo-Saharan band is causing increasing concern in the region because of the destabilising effects the flow of money generated by drug trafficking can have on a region already blighted by rebellions (the Tuareg in Mali and Niger), civil conflicts (Chad, Darfur), and international terrorism (Al-Qaeda in Maghreb).

The seriousness of the issue has been openly acknowledged by the decision taken at the latest Summit of the ECOWAS Heads of State (Ouagadougou, 19 January 2008), where the West African Heads of State agreed to convene a regional summit to discuss instability in the Sahel, particularly the Tuareg uprisings in northern Mali and Niger. The ECOWAS initiative mirrors a parallel initiative launched by the President of Niger in September 2007, which focused almost exclusively on security and trafficking related issues.

In addition to Mali, Mauritania and Niger, the security issue in the Sahelo-Saharan region also involves other important players: the US with its anti-terrorist Pan-Sahelian Initiative (now Trans-Saharan Counter Terrorism Initiative - TSCTI), France because of its mining interests (Areva investments and uranium exploitation in Niger), China (mining in Niger), Libya, Algeria and Morocco.

The western and central part of the Sahelo-Saharan band is also the area of operations of the Groupe Salafiste pour la Predication et le Combat - GSPC (Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat), recently renamed Al-Qaeda Organisation of the Islamic Maghreb.

GSPC was founded in 1988 by a former commander of the Algerian GIA (Groupe Islamique Armé) in protest over the GIA's slaughter of civilians. After an amnesty in 1999, many former GIA fighters laid down their arms, but a few remained active and joined GSPC. Estimates of the number of GSPC members vary widely, from a few hundred to as many as 4,000.

According to several sources including European and West African intelligence reports, GSPC is closely tied to smuggling operations in the Sahel. The main commodity trafficked through the Sahara is cigarettes. As in other well-known scenarios, terrorist (and rebel groups) are not directly engaged in smuggling but rather benefit from it indirectly: indeed, "the GSPC has

⁸ *Ibid.*

made an agreement with drug dealers and tobacco smugglers. The latter give money and fuel to the GSPC, which, in return, guarantees a right of passage, and even recommend[s] ways [for] them to escape from the region's customs services and security forces".⁹ Proceeds from cigarette smuggling are used to purchase weapons. The participation by local communities (and local authorities) in the smuggling activity is a guarantee of impunity for all participants in the smuggling venture.

Kidnappings are also a significant source of revenue for the GSPC. In February 2003, a GSPC group operating in southern Algeria kidnapped 32 European tourists. The GSPC released the hostages only after a reported €5.5 million ransom was paid to the group. Two other kidnappings by GSPC took place in Algeria in 2006. In March 2008, the GSPC kidnapped two Austrian tourists in Tunisia. According to the latest available information, the hostages would be held in the north of Mali.

Allegations of the GSPC's links to Al-Qaeda predate the 11 September 2001 attacks. As followers of a Qutbist strand of jihadist Salafism, the members of the GSPC are thought to share Al-Qaeda's general worldview. After the deposition of the group's founder, Hassan Hattab, in 2003, various leaders of the group have pledged allegiance to Al-Qaeda. Some observers have argued that the GSPC's connection to Al-Qaeda is nominal (ie. opportunistic), not operational.

In search of a holistic approach: are West African states willing to address the new menace?

This emerging organised crime, drug trafficking and terrorism menace in the region is undoubtedly the new Achilles' heel of West Africa. Such a menace has three types of consequences: social (low impact), economic (medium-high) and governmental (high).

Firstly, and according to the opinion of national experts, elicited in the UNODC Annual Reports Questionnaire, cocaine use among the general population was increasing in Senegal and Guinea-Conakry in 2005-2006, whereas the situation was reported as stable in Nigeria and Burkina Faso. The use of crack was reported in Nigeria, Ghana, Côte d'Ivoire and the Gambia.

In any case, if the flow of drug trafficking through the region is highly organised, it is unlikely that much cocaine will be "spilled" into local markets, as there are strong economic incentives to bring as much of the drug as possible to its highest value destination - Western Europe. West African organised crime networks, being very profit-oriented, generally shun drug use, so there may be some protection against the spread of cocaine in the region. If, on the other hand, there is a truly local wholesale market in which a range of players are acting as middlemen and couriers, the risk of a local drug use problem developing is much greater.

Secondly, the routing of cocaine through West Africa is probably too recent an occurrence for any economic impact to be measurable yet. All evidence suggests that the traffic only began to take off in the last few years, and many of the current social indicators are based on data older than that. But there are a number of curious data trends in the region, and projections can be made based on similar experiences. In the short run, drug trafficking could result in an unexplained influx of currency to the region. If parts of the region have become active as open wholesale markets, the influx of money could be considerable. Proceeds of drug sales in Europe would have to be transferred to the region in order to pay for more drugs. This could be done

⁹ Foreign Broadcast Information Service (FBIS) report, "Niger: Commentary Stresses Need to Combat Al-Qa'ida, GSPC Sahel Region Activity," AFP20060528641010, *Niamey L'Evenement*, May 23, 2006. Commentary by Moussa Aksar, "Sahel Region under Al-Qa'ida Threat."

through wire transfers (remittances), through bogus commercial investments and transactions (as in the cases of Cape Verde and Senegal), or through the movement of cash in bulk (Guinea-Bissau, Mauritania). While risky in such a volatile area, genuine investment of illicit money in licit business could occur. Some of this activity is likely to be captured in the recorded economy.

Thirdly, and whatever the macroeconomic effects, drug flows of this magnitude are highly likely to result in a higher incidence of corruption in law enforcement and a consequent undermining of the rule of law. In countries like Guinea-Bissau, there are repeated allegations that high ranking officials in government and the military are complicit in drug trafficking, and there have been a number of questionable judicial and executive decisions that appear to be corruption-related. Corruption of this sort cannot but undermine the already tenuous confidence that many citizens of the region have in their governments.

Based on the international indicators, many of the countries of the region can scarcely afford to suffer a further loss in credibility. The World Bank creates quantified governance ratings for countries throughout the world.¹⁰ Six separate governance indices are compiled, covering Voice and Accountability, Political Stability and the Absence of Violence, Government Effectiveness, Regulatory Quality, Rule of Law and Control of Corruption. Governance ratings for countries in West Africa are generally not high, with few countries scoring about the international average for most indicators.

Under these circumstances, West African states have employed different approaches to fight drug trafficking and organised crime. Cape Verde elaborated an integrated initiative with the United Nations named "CAVE INTECRIN" which was launched in April 2006 and achieved palpable success in the establishment of joint control teams in selected ports and airports in the archipelago, along with state-of-the-art forensic capabilities and a sophisticated anti-money laundering and anti-corruption programme which now serves to strengthen foreign investment in the country.

Anti-corruption measures and policies are becoming the top priority in the political agendas of West African governments (Cape Verde, Liberia and Mauritania), based on the principle that a weak state risks being taken hostage by corruption, which in turn undermines development.

On the other hand, the strengthening of the rule of law is becoming *condition sine qua non* for these countries to attract budget support funding from the international community (Benin, Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Nigeria, Togo, Sierra Leone, etc.) The European Union and the European Commission are fully aware of the corruption challenge in the West African region and count on specialised United Nations bodies such as UNODC to provide appropriate technical assistance to recipient West African countries in their efforts to tackle the problem.

Furthermore, the regional dimension of the Sahelo-Saharan problem is well reflected in the initiatives launched in the last twelve months by both Niger, and ECOWAS following a request from Mali. In August 2007 Niger President Mamadou Tandja publicly announced his intention to call for an international conference aimed at discussing the transnational aspects of the issue and proposing consequent and urgent solutions.¹¹ On 11 September 2007 the Prime Minister of Niger issued decree 000219 establishing, under the Ministry of the Interior, Public Security and Decentralization, an inter-ministerial committee responsible for organising the Niamey "International Conference on Trafficking in Drugs, Arms, Cigarettes and Other Prohibited Items in the Sahelo-Saharan Space".

¹⁰ These are "a statistical compilation of responses on the quality of governance given by a large number of enterprise, citizen and expert survey respondents in industrial and developing countries, as reported by a number of survey institutes, think-tanks, non-governmental organizations, and international organizations." See Kaufmann, D., Kraay, A., and Mastruzzi, M., *Governance Matters VI: Governance Indicators for 1996-2006*. Washington D.C.: World Bank Policy Research, June 2007.

¹¹ Speech delivered at the occasion of the 47th anniversary of the independence of Niger.

Approaches and solutions to the problem of drug trafficking and, more generally, to criminal activities in West Africa must be holistic. Strengthening border and territorial controls, law enforcement agencies' operational capabilities, legal frameworks and enforcement mechanisms against organised crime, money laundering and corruption are all measures required to restore the authority of the state and the rule of law. Sustaining their effects will however require in-depth reforms of the criminal justice sector, and, in the case of post-conflict countries, of the security sector.

Socioeconomic development is also key for rebuilding countries like Guinea-Bissau, but development assistance must reach its intended beneficiaries. Complete transparency and strict accountability is required in the allocation and use of development assistance.

In post-conflict and weakened countries like Guinea-Bissau, reconstruction must start with the security and justice sectors and be accompanied by economic investments. International support is needed to help governments in the region firmly establish justice and security as one of the cornerstones of the countries' development.

FRIDE's Comments provide a brief and concise analysis of current topics in international affairs in the fields of peace and security, democratisation, human rights, and humanitarian action and development. Further information about FRIDE, as well as its publications can be found at www.fride.org

The views expressed by the authors of the documents published on this website do not necessarily reflect the opinion of FRIDE. If you have any comments on the articles or any other suggestions, please email us at comments@fride.org

Fundación para las Relaciones Internacionales y el Diálogo Exterior
C/ Goya, 5-7 pasaje 2ª - 28001 Madrid - Telf: 91 244 47 40 - Fax: 91 244 47 41 - E-mail : fride@fride.org
www.fride.org