



The Challenge of Drug Trafficking to Democratic Governance and Human Security in West Africa: A Historical Reflection

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Abstract

We argue that West Africa has come into the spotlight as an increasingly important site and destination in the global drug trafficking system. Evidence of the growing role of the sub-region in the global strategy and operations of international drug cartels is broad and varied, comprising a complex admixture of both direct, traceable facts from official and non-official sources, and more indirect information of an indicative, associative and anecdotal nature. Initially targeted as a re-distribution centre and transit point for the trafficking of drugs to end-use destinations around the world, most notably Europe and North America, the sub-region has gradually become a market destination in its own right for global drug cartels mainly, though not exclusively, originating from Latin America. Evidence also points to the emergence of West Africa as an increasingly significant production site for some types of drugs, including amphetamine-type stimulants. The analysis presented in this article points to the history and context of the governance and human security challenges faced by West African countries and the ways in which drug trafficking cartels have both taken advantage of them and, simultaneously, contributed to the exacerbation of the problems. The article concludes that in responding to the governance challenges posed by or associated with drug trafficking, West African countries, working together with one another and in concert with Western countries, civic groups/movements and the private sector will need a much more coherent and coordinated approach, anchored on the idea of the ultimate indivisibility of governance and human security in the sub-region.

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Résumé

Nous soutenons que l'Afrique de l'Ouest est devenue une destination et un site de plus en plus importants dans le système mondial du trafic de drogue. Les preuves du rôle croissant de la sous-région dans la stratégie et les opérations mondiales des cartels internationaux de la drogue sont nombreuses et variées, avec un complexe mélange de faits directs provenant de sources officielles et non officielles, ainsi que d'informations indirectes plus indicatives, de nature associative et anecdotique. Initialement ciblée comme centre de redistribution et de transit du trafic de drogue vers d'autres destinations dans le monde, notamment l'Europe et l'Amérique du Nord, la sous-région est progressivement devenue une destination commerciale pour les cartels mondiaux de la drogue, principalement mais non exclusivement originaire d'Amérique latine. Les données montrent également que l'Afrique de l'Ouest est un site de production de plus en plus important de certains types de drogues, notamment les stimulants de type amphétamine. L'analyse présentée dans cet article met en évidence l'historique et le contexte des défis de gouvernance et de sécurité humaine auxquels sont confrontés les pays de l'Afrique de l'Ouest, et la manière dont les cartels de drogue en ont profité tout en contribuant à exacerber les problèmes. L'article conclut que, pour faire face aux problèmes de gouvernance posés par ou associés au trafic de drogue, les pays d'Afrique de l'Ouest, travaillant ensemble et de concert avec les pays occidentaux, les groupes/mouvements civiques et le secteur privé, auront besoin d'une approche beaucoup plus cohérente et coordonnée, ancrée dans l'idée de l'indivisibilité ultime de la gouvernance et de la sécurité humaine dans la sous-région.

Introduction

West Africa is under attack from international criminal networks that are using the sub-region as a key global hub for the distribution, wholesale, and increasing production of illicit drugs. Most of the drug trade in West Africa involves cocaine sold in Europe, although heroin is also trafficked to the United States (US). The sub-region is becoming an export base for amphetamines and their precursors, mainly for East Asian markets and increasingly to the U.S. At least nine top-tier Latin American drugs cartels have already established bases in at least 11 out of the 16 West African nations in recent years. West Africa has grown exponentially from a minor trafficking route for cocaine exports to a major hub. It was not until 2004 that large scale cocaine trafficking through West Africa was first detected. Prior to this, annual cocaine seizure levels in West Africa had rarely exceeded one metric ton per year, but by 2008, cocaine trans-shipments rivalled stolen crude oil as the most valuable smuggled commodity in West

Africa (UNODC 2008). Estimates of 2015 annual cocaine trans-shipments through West Africa ranged widely between 46 and 300 tons, yielding wholesale revenues of US\$3 billion to US\$14 billion (UNODC 2016). The hiding of drugs in containers on commercial vessels, for example, is a new strategy whose use has probably expanded. In July 2010, a container with 450 kilos of cocaine was seized in Lagos, Nigeria, on a vessel arriving from Chile. In January 2011 and March 2015, nine other vessels seized in Nigeria had a total of 275 kilos of cocaine, one of which contained 110 kilos arriving from Bolivia (Wylter and Cook 2009).

Another tactic was to route an increasing number of containers through Argentina and Uruguay towards West Africa. In November 2012, authorities in Guyana seized 350 kilos of cocaine hidden in a shipping container filled with soap powder destined for Nigeria. West Africa's emergence as a trafficking nexus was also symptomatic of a shift in the centre of gravity of the global market for cocaine from the US to Europe (Wylter and Cook 2009). This shift occurred due to structural factors, including a declining and saturated US cocaine market, heightened European demand for cocaine, the stronger euro making sales of this drug more lucrative in Europe, the existence of well-developed West African smuggling networks as ready-made partners, and successful interdiction efforts, including anti-money laundering measures that drove drug traffickers away from traditional trafficking routes into North America and Europe, including via the Caribbean and Spain (Harrigan 2012).

West Africa's geographical location between Latin America and Europe made it an ideal transit zone for exploitation by powerful drugs cartels and terrorist organisations. In this sense, many West African countries are now suffering the adverse effects of the geographical accident of lying between the sites of drug production and the most lucrative consumption markets – much as the Caribbean and Central America had long suffered from being placed between South America's cocaine producers as well as North America's cocaine users. Dakar in Senegal, for example, is roughly a midway point between Latin America and Europe, and is actually 700 miles closer to Recife in Brazil than it is to Paris in France. West Africa's primary operational allure to traffickers is not actually geography, but rather its low standards of governance, low levels of law enforcement capacity, and high rates of corruption.

Traffickers gain competitive advantages by operating in West African states with the weakest rule of law. Powerful cartels and terrorist organisations both thrive in West Africa's permissive environment and vast ungoverned sea, land and air spaces. West Africa's borders – including its

maritime domain – are largely unguarded. The region boasts more than 2,600 miles of coastline. West Africa's governance, law enforcement and corruption challenges are linked to the sub-region's underdevelopment. All but three of the 16 nations in West Africa are on the UN's list of 'least developed countries', while five are countries with the very lowest levels of human development. Ten of the top 41 countries in the '2016 Failed States Index' were in West Africa (and 25 of the top 41 were in sub-Saharan Africa) (UNODC 2016). Against this background, this article sets out to interrogate the challenge of drug trafficking to democratic governance and human security in West Africa.

History of drug trafficking in West Africa

Drug trafficking is not a new phenomenon in West Africa, but a consideration of this history is important to illuminate the entrenched nature of the drugs trade in the sub-region, and its negative implications for democratic development. The historical reality is that trade routes for illicit (and licit) goods have existed for hundreds of years in West Africa and are ensconced in local traditions, especially in the Sahel–Saharan region. Consistent with this, the pre-independence economies of West Africa were characterised by a variety of illicit, shadow economies. Cannabis trafficking in West Africa was documented almost a century ago, in the 1920s, and is still widespread today. Annual cannabis production in West Africa is about 3,500 tons/year (Regan 2010; Felbab-Brown 2010). There were seizures in September 2011, February 2012, July 2014 and October 2016 of five and one ton respectively of cannabis resin being transported to Europe via northern Niger in Toyota 4X4s (UNODC 2016).

The first documented use of West Africa as a staging post for international heroin smuggling was in 1952, when US officials noted that parcels of the drug were being transported by a Lebanese syndicate from Beirut to New York, via Kano in Nigeria and Accra in Ghana. While cocaine trafficking has become a recent focal point of international attention on West Africa, the sub-region actually has a longer history of trafficking and organised crime (Feinstein 2012). West Africa has received less notoriety, however, because the sub-region, and indeed all of sub-Saharan Africa, generally only played a peripheral role in global drug trafficking prior to the mid 2000s. Generally speaking, the roots of West Africa's transformation into a major international trade hub in illegal drugs may be traced to the 1960s. It was then that the first reports emerged of locally grown cannabis being exported from Nigeria to Europe in significant quantities. By the 1970s, Ghanaian smugglers had joined Nigerians in exporting African-grown cannabis to Europe on a scale

large enough to attract sustained official attention. Starting from the 1980s, production, distribution and consumption of cannabis provided pathways for the incorporation of heroin and cocaine into West Africa's drugs trade. At that time, Nigerian smugglers started sending heroin by air courier from Pakistan to Nigeria, where it was repackaged and re-exported to the US (Feinstein 2012; Champin 2012).

By the 1990s, Ghana had become an early transit point for the international cocaine trade, and in Accra it was public knowledge that houses were built with cocaine money and flashy cars were cocaine cars. Nigeria still plays a huge role in the international heroin trade, with intercepted stocks amounting to about 70 kilos seized in the country per year (Champin 2012). Besides Nigerian and Ghanaian global networks, major new ones have developed, involving Ivorian and Senegalese nationals. By the 1990s, Nigerian drug traders had largely finished the process of 'internationalising' their business. Nigerian drug traffickers had not only developed the means to make bulk shipments of narcotics, but had also become fully global, having a 'headquarters' (home) country, business associates in both producing and consuming countries, and facilities in countries outside Nigeria. Part of the reason why Nigerian drug traffickers have been so successful is that their home country has provided them with a relatively permissive environment. Perhaps the most important local partner of Nigerian drug traders in the 1990s was the Nigerian military, which by then had developed a high degree of impunity after being in power almost continuously for many years.

Within West Africa, Nigerians established operational centres in Cotonou in Benin Republic, and Abidjan in Côte d'Ivoire. Outside the continent, they established sales networks in major US, European and post-Soviet Union cities, including Geneva in Switzerland, where people are active in cocaine trafficking, and in Moscow in Russia, where they have taken over heroin retailing. In Asia, there are large networks of Nigerian air couriers, some bringing heroin and transiting or stopping in West Africa, and others transporting cocaine and methamphetamines, ecstasy and ketamine from West Africa towards Asia (and Australia). These often transit via Malaysia or Indonesia, to Japan, Korea, China, Thailand and Singapore. Since 2009, Nigerian and Ghanaian drug trafficking organisations (DTOs) have diversified into trafficking crystalline methamphetamine through links with other West African countries such as Benin, Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea and Senegal.

Latin American drug dealers partner with West African criminals

One typical way that the Latin American drug cartels operate is to send their lieutenants to open legitimate businesses in West African nations in

order to obtain legal residency papers, and then start the process of setting up local illegal networks and front-companies to facilitate drug trafficking (Champin 2012). Once installed, the Latin Americans partner with transnational organised crime groups (TOCs) in West Africa, particularly Nigerians, for their smuggling and trafficking expertise, safe houses, storage space, banking, and a host of other services (Ellis 2009). This is analogous to how Colombian cartels established links with Mexican syndicates after the US significantly choked off the old Caribbean drug transportation corridor and forced the Colombians to start moving their drug loads across the southwest border of the US (*ibid.*). Mexican DTOs, including the Sinaloa cartel, are also present in West Africa (Farah 2014). There have also been reports of Venezuelans, Surinamese and European organisations, including Italian TOCs, operating in the same territory (*ibid.*).

The degree to which Latin American traffickers rely on West African partners, and the nature of these partnerships, depends heavily on the quality of law enforcement in each African country. In countries such as Guinea-Bissau, which has extremely weak governance, Latin American cartels merely need to bribe the only institution with real power – the military – to be able to enjoy *de facto* freedom from prosecution. In other countries, such as Ghana, which has an emerging democratic tradition and stronger state institutions, Latin American cartels rely more on local partners, thus insulating themselves from possible arrest by local authorities. Not surprisingly, while law enforcement authorities continue to arrest low-level narcotics traffickers, Ghana has had relatively limited success in pursuing Latin American partners and their Ghanaian drug baron partners.

Structure of West African DTOs

The general structure of most West African criminal networks has distinctive characteristics typical of lineage-based societies (Akyeampong 2005). Criminal enterprises in West Africa use techniques similar to those of legitimate traders and business people, whereby a successful individual entrepreneur invites one or more junior relatives or dependents to join him or her in a business deal (Amado 2008). West African criminal networks, in general, have certain prime characteristics, including: being small, compartmentalised cells of between two and 10 members; comprising mostly kinsmen from the same ethnic group; the ability to communicate mostly in indigenous, African languages; making deals and then dispersing, and regrouping at a later date as needed; adopting false identities for their members, including changing their nationalities; and refraining from the use of violence in order not to attract the attention of law enforcement officials (Williams and Haacke 2008).

Some observers have juxtaposed so-called 'horizontally' structured African criminal gangs with the so-called 'vertically' structured Latin American cartels. This is a flawed analogy, however, as West African societies remain relatively traditional and hierarchical. The West African modus operandi closely resembles an 'adhocracy', which is able to fuse experts drawn from different disciplines into smoothly functioning, yet ad hoc, project teams (*ibid.*). This stands in contrast to the more corporate-style relations of classic American mafias. Moreover, 'informal' or 'ad hoc' is not intended to imply that West African traffickers are not capable. A senior US anti-drug official once described Nigerian drug networks as 'one of the most sophisticated and finely tuned trans-shipment, money-moving and document-forging organizations in the world' (Ellis 2009).

West African trafficking groups have shown a high degree of flexibility in their amphetamine-type stimulants (ATS) trafficking routes by using couriers from countries outside the region, e.g., from Eastern Europe or Asia, and by diversifying their routes, which are mostly by air (UNODC 2012). Nigerian drug traffickers are also 'decentralised and diversified' into TOC lines of business, including 'illicit drugs, prostitution, and scams'. Consistent with this, Nigerians dominate the markets for cocaine and prostitution in Rome, Milan, Naples, Genoa and other Italian cities, in collaboration with the Calabrese and Camorra mafia, and may be more accurately considered to be TOC members than merely DTOs. This being said, most indigenous organised crime groups in West Africa, with Nigerians and Ghanaians being exceptions, have historically lacked the sophistication of global drug trafficking cartels. Unfortunately, West Africans are catching up by partnering and learning from the Latin American drug cartels (International Narcotics Control Strategy Report 2012).

Global drug trafficking routes via West Africa

Global drug trafficking routes that pass through or originate in West Africa vary by the type of drug involved. The first is heroin. This drug is principally smuggled by West African criminal groups from Afghanistan and Pakistan, through Iran and other Middle Eastern countries, on to East or Southern Africa, then to West Africa before being transported to the US and Europe. Nigeria and Ghana are the principal transit zones in West Africa, with Côte d'Ivoire as another key transit country. By contrast, heroin coming from South America, especially Colombia, often traverses the Atlantic to West Africa, only to cross back to North American markets (Harrigan 2012). In both routes, heroin is transported from the source zone by a variety of means, including maritime containers, go-fast boats,

small wooden fishing vessels called dhows, air drops at sea, air cargo, and in luggage and body carried by couriers or 'mules' (Harrigan 2012). Nigerian nationals accounted for 32 percent of drug trafficking arrests in Pakistan from 2000 to 2008, with Ghanaian, Guineans and Ivoirians accounting for 1 percent each (Harrigan 2012). During July 2011, the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) Office in Accra, in coordination with the Ghana Sensitive Investigative Unit, concluded an investigation targeting a Ghana based organisation responsible for shipping multi-kilogram quantities of heroin from West Africa to the US. Smaller countries in West Africa are also touched by the international heroin trade. In May 2011, the DEA Office in Lagos, Nigeria, in coordination with the DEA Islamabad and the Benin judicial police intercepted 200 kilos of heroin from Pakistan that was in transit in Cotonou, Benin. This undercover operation resulted in the single largest heroin seizure in Benin's history, and the arrest of three Beninese and one Togolese in Benin and several arrests in Pakistan (Harrigan 2012).

The second drug is methamphetamine. Illicit manufacture of methamphetamine is not entirely new to the African continent. Since 2004, regular reports of illicit manufacture of the substance have been received from South Africa. Since 2007, the DEA has assisted with the seizure of several other multi-ton pseudoephedrine and ephedrine shipments in Africa that have been linked to Mexican DTOs (Harrigan 2012) in Nigeria, Ghana, Kenya, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Mozambique (Pena 2012). Mexican cartels are gaining a foothold in West Africa, where their traffickers are being used as advisors and possibly being recruited as chemists in the illicit manufacture of methamphetamine (UNODC 2012). West Africa has been a trans-shipment area for precursor chemicals diverted for methamphetamine production since at least 2009, with large increases in shipments through Benin, Côte d'Ivoire and Senegal (Champin 2012) and with Nigeria and Ghana as likely production hubs, based on increased precursor shipments. The added danger with ATS is that, unlike cocaine and heroin, illicit ATS manufacture does not rely on the cultivation of naturally occurring plants such as the coca leaf or opium poppy and, as such, is not limited to certain geographic locations – leaving the possibility that West Africa could be transformed not only into a key transit point for ATS, but into a manufacturing hub as well (UNODC 2012). The DEA has already documented the emergence of West Africa as a significant production point of origin for multi-kilogram methamphetamine shipments to the Far East.

Evidence was uncovered in July 2009 of intended ATS manufacture in Guinea, with precursor chemicals sufficient to manufacture ecstasy worth over US\$100million (*ibid.*). In April 2010, 36 kilos of crystal

methamphetamine destined for Japan and five kilos of methamphetamine destined for the US via South Africa were seized on cargo planes in Nigeria (Champin 2012). In June 2010, Côte d'Ivoire officials seized precursor chemicals acetone destined for Benin and methylethylketone destined for Guinea (UNODC 2012). In 2010, the International Narcotics Control Board reportedly stopped shipments of 500 kilos and 200 kilos of ephedrine headed for Guinea and Niger respectively (*ibid.*). In 2010, the US Government indicted members of a large international cocaine trafficking organisation for, inter alia, the intent to establish a clandestine laboratory in Liberia for the large scale manufacture of methamphetamine that would have been destined for Japan and the US (*ibid.*). Because of limited reporting to the UNODC by West African countries, the best measure of the escalating situation appears to be reports coming from countries in East and Southeast Asia of the increasing involvement of West African nationals. While China and Taiwan have traditionally been the source countries for methamphetamine smuggled into Japan, the proportion of seized methamphetamine trafficked into Japan from Africa rose from 7.4 percent in 2009 to 36 percent in the first half of 2010, mostly from Nigeria (*ibid.*).

The most common destinations for methamphetamine trafficked through Africa have been Japan, followed by Korea. Since March 2010, numerous arrests of couriers in Asia attempting to smuggle methamphetamine from Africa indicates that African drugs syndicates are producing the drug for export throughout the Asia Pacific region, with most of the Africa sourced methamphetamine destined for sale in Japan following trans-shipment through countries such as Malaysia (Champin 2012) and Thailand. In May 2011, there were two seizures in Nigeria of 63 kilos of methamphetamines, and 14 and 26 kilos of amphetamines destined for Japan, and a seizure in Senegal of one kilo of methamphetamine from a courier from Togo heading to Japan. According to a European police official based in Africa, Nigerian criminal networks were building links to Japan's *yakuza* criminal gangs (Champin 2012). French anti-drug officials agree that most methamphetamine production in West Africa is destined for East and Southeast Asia, including also China, Cambodia, Vietnam and the Philippines (Champin 2012).

Since 2010, West African groups, particularly Nigerians, have trafficked methamphetamine to New Zealand (UNODC 2012) and likely to Australia as well. In 2011, the DEA and Nigeria's drug law enforcement agency jointly initiated two additional investigations, targeting clandestine methamphetamine operators either based in Nigeria or selling their labs'

illicit production in Nigeria. These operators are actively seeking organised criminal group assistance in legally importing and then diverting large-scale quantities of precursor chemicals into Nigeria to increase their methamphetamine production capacity (International Narcotics Control Strategy Report 2012). An operating methamphetamine laboratory was discovered in Lagos in June 2011; it was estimated to be capable of producing 150–200 kilos per week (UNODC 2012). A second operational lab was seized in February 2012, with one Nigerian and three Bolivians arrested – suggesting possible cooperation with Latin American criminal syndicates (UNODC 2012).

Methamphetamine and other illegal drugs produced in Africa could very well make their way to US markets one day. Some methamphetamine currently produced in Africa is being shipped all the way to Southeast Asia. There is no reason to believe that methamphetamine produced in Africa could not make it into the US in the future (Feinstein 2012). Senator Feinstein's concerns are well-placed. Most countries in West Africa do not have the legislative and institutional frameworks necessary to control precursor trafficking. As has been the case with heroin and cocaine, traffickers are taking advantage of the sub-region's permissive environment to import chemical precursors and, increasingly, use these locally in the illicit manufacturing of ATS drugs (Feinstein 2012).

The third drug is cocaine. Colombia produces about 54 percent of the refined cocaine on the world market, with the rest coming from Bolivia and Peru (Farah 2014). Prior to about 2004, cocaine destined for Europe had followed a northerly route from South America, through the eastern Caribbean to Spain's Canary Islands and Portugal's Azores Islands, to clandestine landing zones on the coast of Spain, Portugal and the Netherlands or to commercial ports such as Barcelona, Rotterdam and Antwerp (Rotella and Kraul 2007). Besides Spain, Portugal and the Netherlands, other major European entry points for cocaine included France and Italy (Wyler and Cook 2009).

However, heightened US anti-drug and counter-terrorism law enforcement and border control efforts, coupled with US and European interdiction, have forced smuggling further south to destinations in West Africa, from Mauritania to as far south and east as Nigeria (Wyler and Cook 2009). Around 2004, West Africans began to provide logistical assistance to South American cocaine traffickers in organising their West African maritime shipments to Europe from at least two sub-regions: one centred on Guinea-Bissau and Guinea in the western Gulf of Guinea, and the other centred on the Bight of Benin, including Ghana, Togo, Benin and Nigeria

(World Drug Report 2010). This first sub-region was along Latitude 10 North between northern South America and the western part of Africa's coast, and became so important that law enforcement agencies dubbed it 'Highway 10' (Wyler and Cook 2009).

Europol has recently confirmed that former hashish smuggling routes are also being used by cocaine traffickers (Rotella and Kraul 2007). These routes may involve Moroccan nationals who have gained smuggling expertise through years of trafficking hashish across the Mediterranean (Rotella and Kraul 2007). Algeria is also an important hub for drugs of all kinds, with numerous reports of arrests of couriers (Champin 2012). In 2007, US and international authorities estimated that approximately 80 percent of cocaine travelling from Latin America to Africa moved by sea and 20 percent by air (*ibid.*). There may be as many as 100 ships that cross the Atlantic every year, transporting drugs to West Africa (*ibid.*).

Anecdotal evidence suggests cartels have even used submarines (BBC News 2011). The largest known loads of cocaine en route to Europe via West Africa have been transported by large commercial fishing or freight 'mother ships' that hand off shipments to smaller, faster boats outside territorial waters (including fishing boats, sailing yachts and speedboats) (Wyler and Cook 2009). According to Europol, the crews of these smaller vessels are often West African, with Spanish or South American 'controllers' (UNODC 2008). In addition to ships, about 60 illicit aircraft regularly make the trans-Atlantic journey, benefiting from an abundance of landing strips and limited air traffic control (Champin 2012). After arriving in West Africa, the cocaine is transported in small quantities by couriers on commercial flights, and sometimes by air freight or by smugglers across the Sahara to North Africa and then Europe (Champin 2012). A 2008 Department of Homeland Security report warned of a growing fleet of rogue aircraft criss crossing the Atlantic – at least 10 aircraft, including executive jets, twin-engine turboprops and ageing Boeing 727s (Scott 2010).

UNODC reported in 2010 that a number of modified aircraft had taken off from Venezuela toward West Africa, 'notably to Cape Verde, Guinea-Bissau, Mali, Mauritania, and Sierra Leone' (Champin 2012). Some smaller aircraft are modified for the trans-Atlantic voyage by the inclusion of additional fuel tanks (UNODC 2008). Some airports or landing strips are also in the Sahara-Sahel (Wyler and Cook 2009). In November 2009, a burned Boeing 727 was found in the desert of northern Mali after having served to transport several tons of cocaine from Venezuela (Champin 2012). One affluent area of Gao, in north-eastern Mali, had been known as 'Cocainebouyou' – at least until the March 2012 Al-Qaeda in the Islamic

Maghreb/Tuareg take-over of that city (Melly 2012). Much of Colombia's cocaine exports to Europe are now passing through Venezuela and Brazil and then transiting through West Africa via air and ship. A significant portion of the Bolivian (and, to a lesser degree, Peruvian) cocaine shipments are also moving by air via Venezuela, in part because of the 'Bolivarian Revolutionary' alliance between Bolivian President Evo Morales, himself a coca farmer before rising to power, and Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez (Farah 2014). Several of the largest cocaine busts in West Africa have come aboard aircraft that departed from Venezuela (*ibid.*).

The majority of the Bolivian and Peruvian cocaine is moved through Brazil and then onward to Africa. There are linguistic as well as geographical reasons for the Brazil connection. Guinea-Bissau and Cape Verde, two of the most active trans-shipment hubs, are former Portuguese colonies, like Brazil (International Narcotics Control Strategy Report 2012). This Brazil connection was facilitated by increased air transport links between Brazil and Africa. Consistent with this, in November 2011, there were two seizures at the Lagos airport from passengers on a Qatar Airlines flight from São Paulo, Brazil (Champin 2012). Brazil is now rivalling Venezuela as the number one point of departure for cocaine transported to Africa.

Impact on good governance and human security

Some analysts believe that the damage done to governance in West Africa due to the drugs trade has already reached the point that some governments in the sub-region are 'dominated by criminal networks' (Reyskens 2012), and that their sovereignty and even viability as independent rule-of-law-based entities is in jeopardy (Wyler and Cook 2009). In short, these violent non-state actors may represent, over time, an existential threat to the viability of West African states and thus the greatest challenge to human security in the sub-region since resource conflicts rocked several countries, starting in the early-1990s. There is little doubt that the proceeds of drug trafficking are indeed fuelling a dramatic increase in narco-corruption in West Africa. UNODC indicated in a 2010 report that the drugs trade in West Africa appears to be controlled by national figures so powerful that little opposition is possible, and where disputes over illicit markets 'can lead to the toppling of governments'.

With the presence of large amounts of money, drug traffickers can stage coups d'état, hijack elections and buy political power. In Guinea-Bissau, at least the last two coups d'état have been directly or indirectly linked to a fight for control of the drugs trade. In drug trafficking hubs such as Ghana and Nigeria, members of parliament, police officials and government ministers

have been implicated in drug smuggling over the past years (Champin 2012). The largest seizure of heroin in New York in 2006 was made from a shipment originating from Ghana and belonging to a Ghanaian member of parliament who was not subsequently suspended from his position in government (Champin 2012). In January 2011, then Ghanaian President Atta-Mills called in Western diplomats for a private meeting at which he reassured them of Ghana's resolve in the fight against illicit drugs, in order to dissipate doubts following revelations that Ghana's national drug bureau had actively collaborated with drug traffickers to torpedo a United Kingdom (UK) anti-drug operation involving cocaine and heroin transiting Ghana en route to the UK (*ibid.*).

Drug trafficking is a major problem for the government of Sierra Leone – a recovering failed state at risk of regression because of illicit drugs. In Sierra Leone, the Minister of Transportation resigned after his brother was implicated in the country's largest cocaine seizure, but was rehired despite this scandal. In Mauritania, the son of former President Ould Haidalla was arrested on cocaine trafficking charges. These elites have also kept their law enforcement and justice systems underdeveloped and corrupt, with police chiefs in many West African countries being appointed directly by the president and dependent on the head of state's support and patronage for resources, promotion, and the job itself (Felbab-Brown 2010). Drug traffickers are able to offer law enforcement officials in West Africa more than they could earn in a lifetime, simply to look the other way. Some ruling elites are even tempted to use anti-drug campaigns as a mechanism to weaken political opposition (Felbab-Brown 2010). Anti-corruption bodies have also been very weak, often serving as yet another mechanism for purging domestic opposition, instead of cleaning up deficient institutions.

Weakness of the judicial system in fighting drug money

UNODC's current Representative for West Africa said in June 2011 that a big part of the problem is a weakness in the sub-region of the judicial and penal systems, where there remains a 'culture of impunity'. Up to then, he added, no country in West Africa had ever brought up a case in its judicial system for laundering drug money. This Representative asserted that the international community had focused its efforts on law enforcement, and had done little to strengthen the judicial systems (Champin 2012). Consistent with this, a French national was convicted in Nouakchott, Mauritania, in February 2010, along with a police commissioner, a former International Criminal Police Organization (INTERPOL) representative, and a local businessman, of transporting 760 kilos of cocaine in a minibus

in August 2007. In August 2011, however, the Court of Appeals reversed the convictions and freed the accused. In September 2011, the Mauritania Supreme Court reversed the appeals court decision, fired the head of the appeals court, and punished four other judges for their decision to reverse the convictions (Champin 2012). Even when officials are not corrupt, state-paid prosecutors are usually no match for the best defence lawyers that drug money can buy (*ibid.*). Unsurprisingly, when drug trafficking surges, the legal system becomes overburdened with court cases related to drugs in one way or another, even when there are applicable laws in place to indict individuals, or to prosecute and incarcerate them.

Drugs – anew form of resource conflict?

In the post-independence period in West Africa, much political conflict focused on gaining access to the state in order to control rents from various legal, semi-illegal or outright illegal resource economies such as diamonds, gold and other precious metals, stones and timber (Liberia and Sierra Leone), oil (Nigeria) and fishing. The latter is often conducted illegally and destructively by international fleets from outside West Africa (Felbab-Brown 2010). From the early-1990s, this conflict in West Africa devolved into protracted violent clashes and civil wars that centred on natural resources, particularly diamonds, timber, oil and gold. Profits from these resource wars fuelled the rise of the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) in Sierra Leone, for example; fed the wars sustained by Liberia's Charles Taylor, and contributed to the rampant corruption and weak or failed institutions in almost every country of the sub-region. At the same time, these kinds of natural resources, while valuable, pale in comparison to the money now generated by the cocaine trade in West Africa. For example, at its peak, the total annual value of the 'blood diamond' trade smuggled out of Sierra Leone and Liberia was less than US\$200 million. The potential to fuel conflicts over the cocaine pipeline, the most lucrative commodity so far, and one whose profits are several orders of magnitude larger than diamonds, is truly frightening. Just as the 'blood diamond' trade and illicit timber deals allowed groups like the RUF to purchase advanced weapons on the international market, the influx of cocaine cash will allow the criminal and militia groups in the region to acquire ever more sophisticated armaments, training and communications (Farah 2014). Separatists in Senegal's Casamance region are already using the drugs trade to finance their rebellion, and while they have historically used the sale of cannabis to do so, it is logical to assume that cocaine revenues will eventually contribute to this ongoing instability, if they have not already.

Even if West Africa does not see a return of civil wars or rebellions, diplomats and other international officials worry that some West African countries could develop 'along similar lines to Mexico, where drug gangs have a symbiotic relationship with political parties and with the state and drug-related violence resulting in thousands of deaths every year' (Ellis 2009). The current UNODC Representative for Mexico, Antonio Mazzitelli, who was also previously its Representative for West Africa, believes that West Africa could see far greater violence, much like 'small gangs in Jamaica', such as those of the drug kingpin Christopher 'Dudus' Coke, who was extradited to the US in 2010 (Mazzitelli 2017; Champin 2012). One scholar has hypothesised that where there is political sponsorship of drug trafficking, violence can be relatively low, but that where sponsorship is contested, violence results. In January 2011, for example, a major battle was fought between Berabiche Arabs running drugs to Libya, and Tuaregs who demanded a fee for passing through their territory (Champin 2012).

Latin American drug gangs themselves could also be the source of killings and other violence in West Africa, adding to the region's instability. Many of the Mexican cartel wars are, in essence, resource wars, with the merchandise in dispute being not only the trafficked drugs but the physical trafficking hubs through which the illicit goods must pass. In other words, the criminal pipeline itself can become a resource in dispute, and one of the primary sources of violence (Farah 2014). There is also a risk that rivalries between various African networks of corrupt politicians or military officials could lead to violence, something some analysts believe has already occurred in Guinea-Bissau. Whether similar cartel wars could break out in Africa is uncertain. Some skeptics assert that such violence would not be consistent with the way disputes are handled in West Africa; it may also be the case that governance is so weak that there are multiple channels or pipelines to traffic through the sub-region's 16 countries, and therefore little reason to fight over them. One exception, however, could involve fighting for control of choice island landing strips in Guinea-Bissau, which, with the collusion of a weak host government, are particularly valuable pipelines.

Civil society can also be intimidated and muzzled by the drugs trade. There have been significant instances of interference with the freedom of the press by some officials in Guinea-Bissau, related to media reports on drug trafficking and alleged related corruption in the military. Human rights can also become a casualty when drug traffickers are calling the shots (UNODC 2008).

Is the drugs trade not a threat to political stability?

One scholar has written that, ‘To the extent that a governing elite captures rents from the drug trade, a symbiosis between foreign (and national) drug traffickers and the ruling elites may develop’ (UNODC 2008), which is analogous to what has occurred in Jamaica. In this view, drug traffickers enjoy a sponsored safe haven, and the stability of the existing political status quo is reinforced, making it harder to root out these entrenched interests. The fundamental problem with this view, however, is that the short-term stability of having undemocratic ruling elites enter into ‘symbiotic’ relationships with drug traffickers will, in the long run, choke off democratic evolution in West Africa. The stability of this alliance lasts only until the next group of wannabe leaders acts to mount a coup or launch an insurgency, thereby perpetuating a new form of resource conflict in West Africa.

Military leaders have since been designated ‘drug kingpins’ by the US Government. Ex-Naval Chief of Staff Jose Americo Bubo Na Tchuto, for example, was listed as a drug kingpin in April 2010 by the U.S. Department of the Treasury, and then reinstated by the Guinea-Bissau Government as the head of the navy a few months later. Armed Forces Chief Antonio Injai reportedly had been competing with Tchuto for a larger share of drug profits, with the former controlling airports, and the latter maritime shipments (Champin 2012). Ibrahima Camara, the head of Guinea-Bissau’s air force, is also involved in drug trafficking. One observer believes that the involvement of the Guinea-Bissau armed forces in the drugs trade is so entrenched that there exists a generational tension between an old guard that has access to drug revenues and a younger generation of officers that wants its share (*ibid.*).

Impact on society

Historically, the societies of transit countries have never been able to remain immune from the negative impacts of drug trafficking. Inevitably, local consumption of drugs increases, which has cascading negative effects on the social fabric, stability and security of any transit country (Farah 2014). For example, no country in Latin America has suffered as much as Brazil for becoming a key transit country, where payment is often made with drugs. It has become the second largest consumer of cocaine in the world, after the US (Farah 2014). Already, West Africa is proving that it is no exception. There is often a lack of appreciation by leaders in West Africa of how serious this problem is, and of how rapidly it can metastasize. An estimated US\$800 million was spent on drug use in 2009 alone in West Africa, which has become a huge local consumption market (UNODC

2012). Drug consumption in West and Central Africa is growing quickly, with up to an estimated 2.5 million drug users now in these areas, a UN official reported in February.

There are roughly 1.1 million cocaine consumers in West Africa, according to UNODC, which indicates that 8 percent of the world's 14 Million cocaine users are from the sub-region (UNODC 2012). Of the 35 tons of cocaine that transited West Africa en route to Europe in 2010, 13 tons were consumed locally, and somewhat less than one ton seized. Trafficking has also fuelled increasing consumption of methamphetamine in the sub-region (International Narcotics Control Strategy Report 2012). ATS are transported mainly from Nigeria to several countries in West Africa, with traffickers using land routes due to the free movement policy of ECOWAS. The use of amphetamines has already been reported in several West African countries, including Burkina Faso, Niger, Senegal and Sierra Leone, even among school-aged children. UNODC has established an annual prevalence rate of amphetamines at 1.4 percent in Nigeria, based on a 2008 household survey. This rate is higher than in South Africa, currently thought of as the most established ATS market in Africa; higher than in most European countries; and comparable to use levels in Asia, where ATS use has a long tradition (International Narcotics Control Strategy Report 2012). Ghana is one example of a West African nation with a growing illicit drugs problem. Cannabis is the most abused illicit drug, but the use of hard drugs is on the rise. Cocaine and heroin are the upper-middle-class drugs of choice, while poorer Ghanaians get hooked on crack cocaine.

It is safe to assume that those seeking treatment at psychiatric hospitals are but a small fraction of local users. Nigeria already has a large number of heroin addicts, who number at least in the tens of thousands. Throughout West Africa, the presence of drugs is engendering a growing user population and straining already weak health systems, with no real mechanisms to cope. Due to the lack of hard data on consumption, it is too early to tell how bad the long-term health implications of drug trafficking through West Africa will be. Despite this, experiences of other transit states tell us they will be serious (Bybee 2011). To give one example, governments in the sub-region, compromised by drug trafficking, have less to invest in health or education because those resources have been diverted to address the insecurity resulting from trafficking-related violence. Besides drug-related violence and the damage to the health of West Africans, drugs and easy money are also having a corrosive effect on societal norms and values. Drugs devalue traditional values, which have kept African societies cohesive and united. Unemployed and desperate youths are vulnerable to being recruited as foot soldiers for criminal groups.

Impact on the economy

A few observers do not see the net economic impact of the drugs trade on West Africa as all bad. Some say that illicit drug trafficking in West Africa – by far the most lucrative transnational criminal activity (Farah 2014) – has become institutionalised and so entrenched that it is essentially a part of each country's economy, making a huge, though unofficial, contribution to national income (Reyskens 2012). Indeed, trafficking in heroin, cocaine and amphetamines has expanded dramatically across Africa as a whole, growing into a roughly US\$6–7 billion annual illicit industry, according to conservative estimates. Estimates vary widely as to the amount of drugs money flowing specifically into the sub-region of West Africa. In 2007, UNODC conservatively estimated that 40–50 tons of cocaine, with an estimated value of US\$1.8 billion, passed through West Africa (UNODC 2008). By contrast, it is estimated that the amount of cocaine transiting West Africa was at least five times the UNODC figure (Kurtzleben 2009).

The only non-oil legal export from the region of greater value than cocaine is cocoa, primarily from Côte d'Ivoire. The value of cocaine transiting West Africa surpasses even gold exports from Ghana and bauxite exports from Guinea (*ibid.*). Besides oil-rich Nigeria, criminal proceeds from drug trafficking in West Africa probably average about 10 percent of typical government revenues – which indicates how under-resourced most West African governments are, compared to TOC groups. The worst case is Guinea-Bissau, whose status as the region's leading cocaine hub means that the value of its trafficking economy exceeds its tiny formal economy (Bybee 2011). Drug trafficking may be the most important variable that explains empirical data suggesting that cash remittances from Europe have increased dramatically in recent years in a number of West African countries. In Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Nigeria and Senegal, as examples, there has been a doubling or tripling of remittances (Akyeampong 2005). While all these countries have large expatriate populations, this sudden growth is difficult to explain without reference to the illicit drugs trade. The currency of one small West African nation, the Gambia, experienced a rapid appreciation of its value starting at the end of July 2007. The dalasi appreciated 25.9 percent in value against the dollar in one single day on 27 September 2007, likely due to money laundering related to a new hub for the cocaine trade that was reportedly set up in the Gambia after (temporary) disruptions in Guinea-Bissau and Guinea.

In June 2010, concrete evidence of the link to Guinea-Bissau and money flooding the economy came in the form of the arrest in the Gambia of five Venezuelans – one of whom confessed to having moved from Guinea-Bissau

– and in the seizure of 2,196 kilos of cocaine with a street value of US\$ 1 billion, about half of Gambia's annual Gross National Product in 2010. The Gambian authorities, with the help of UK anti-drug officials, also arrested a Dutch national of Lebanese origin (Bybee 2011). Because the scale of the illicit drugs trade in West Africa is unknown, its exact contribution to each country's GDP is unknown. Most analysts, however, conclude that being a drug transit state is, in net terms, very detrimental to a country's development.

Economically, the influx of drug and other dirty monies into the local market can seem like a balm on poverty in the short term. There may be a building boom, with construction providing needed jobs and better quality accommodation. Over time, however, much of this money begins to leave the country. Eventually, the tourism and business sectors start to suffer too. Investors are less inclined to do business in drug transit countries because unstable environments are risky and operating in higher-crime areas entails higher business costs. Drug money investments also risk exacerbating inflation and may contribute to high property prices that disadvantage those engaged in illicit economic activities. TOCs also hinder development in other ways by undermining the rule of law, governance, the environment and health.

Efforts to combat drug trafficking

Given West Africa's underdevelopment and the global nature of drug trafficking, it is clear that the governments of the sub-region cannot respond to this problem – and illicit trafficking in general – without the help and cooperation of regional organisations and the international community. West African nations, for the most part, welcome the aid and cooperation of the international community. Ongoing programmes by the UN, European Union (EU) and the US to aid West Africa's anti-narcotics efforts include the following: (i) UN/EU assistance; (ii) the West Africa Coast Initiative (WACI), officially launched in December 2009; (iii) AFRICOM; and (iv) USAID. These agencies address some of the key governance considerations related to TOCs, including justice sector strengthening and anti-corruption efforts. USAID has also commissioned analytical research to better understand the relationship between development and drug trafficking.

Conclusion

This article has sketched out the context and history of drug trafficking in the West African sub-region; analysed the ways DTOs are structured and the evolving patterns in trafficking; exposed the negative impact of drugs on West

Africa's governance, society and economy; and highlighted international and US counter-narcotics efforts. It is hoped that all the parties involved can rise up and tackle the illicit financial flows that undermine democratic governance and security in West African sub-region, and Africa as a whole.

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