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The impact of drug trafficking on Guinea Bissau

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Guinea Bissau has been caught up in international trafficking of drugs from South America, with onward trafficking into Europe.² It is not the only country in West Africa serving as a hub for transshipment of drugs into Europe. However, its small size (population of about 1.7 million people), weak state institutions and a weak economic base with a mono-cultural economy heavily reliant on export of cashew nuts, combined with its cultural and linguistic connections with South America and the Iberian peninsula, have turned the country into the epitome of a haven for drugs smugglers making the country a potential flash point and source of instability in West Africa.

Explaining Guinea-Bissau's "haven" status

Guinea Bissau is normally too small to grab international headlines in any respect. Despite this fact, or perhaps partly because of this remote isolation, this tiny enclave of a country has suddenly started to feature in international media attention.

The country gained its independence from Portugal through a violent independence struggle against the colonial power that eventually had repercussions for the ousting of the military regime and later democratic development in Portugal itself. Because of this armed struggle and its links with the island state of Cape Verde, the main political party is still today known as the African *Party* for the Independence of Guinea and Cape Verde (PAIGC) and the role of the army is still based on its emergence out of its independence fight.

Guinea-Bissau's state structures have remained weak and incapable of building viable institutions of public service delivery including civil service, army and police. Civil servants, teachers and doctors as well as the army and police personnel frequently go without pay for months. The economy, which as earlier mentioned is based on export of mainly cashew nuts is supported by Diaspora remittances from Portugal, France and Senegal in addition to heavy reliance on foreign aid, which is not always forthcoming.

Today, it is this vulnerable society with its Portuguese roots and links with Hispanic South American countries as well as with Portugal and Spain that have made it the ideal country for drugs cartels from Columbia, Brazil and Venezuela to use as a hub for their drugs smuggling business across the Atlantic into the expanding drugs market of Europe. Added to this new ideal location's attraction is the fact that the North American market has become saturated and the US fight against the drugs smuggling has been somewhat successful in forcing a shift of focus from North America to Europe as the most attractive growing market for cocaine.

Not only have the countries of the European Union seen an ever-increasing growth in their wealth, particularly that of the affluent segments of their population but the Union itself has grown, absorbing new members from former Eastern Europe that themselves are now developing at a rapid pace. All of this coupled with the fact that Spain has recently become the fastest growing market for cocaine in Europe, has added to the pull factors of the shift in the direction of some of the drug trade from America to Europe.

Adding even more impetus to this new development are the open borders and weak customs control of countries of West Africa. That there is an existence of readily available mules desperate enough to risk their lives in smuggling the cocaine into Europe is also a contributing factor.


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So despite the fact that the major flow of drugs still heads north from South America through Central America into the US and Canada, and despite the fact that heavy loads of drugs no doubt are shipped across the Atlantic on freight liners straight into European ports, the huge increase in the indirect trade via West Africa has really started to register on the radars of European customs and drugs combating units. The fact that there is a high increase in seizures both at sea and on land in and around West Africa, means that the volume and value of drugs that slips through into Europe is rising at a level that should worry any law enforcing agencies.

Impact on Guinea-Bissau and West Africa

So what is the impact of this new development on a country like Guinea Bissau? It is clear that the economic incentive of involvement in this drugs trade for operatives in Guinea Bissau is huge. The establishment of drug barons and drug traders in the country will no doubt influence not only the GDP of the country but also lead to their ever increasing influence in that country. Already there are indications that people high up in the Guinean society are either directly or indirectly involved in the drugs trade or at best look the other way when faced with the reality of it. Politicians, officers and soldiers have been implicated – including military personnel both in the navy and the army.

That the huge profits made from the drugs smuggling can buy political influence and power is beyond doubt. It is therefore easy to understand that some members of all sections of the country's elite and beyond have become involved in the business or at least have a stake in it to the extent that it has infested the whole structure of the state and the dynamics of its economic life. This may, as some have observed, gradually lead to further erosion of state structures and the fledgling democratic development of the country and may indeed lead to collapse of state and institutions altogether.

The alleged involvement of key officers and soldiers of the armed forces in the drug trade, combined with this institution's fractured nature threatens to create a fragmented defence force. The officer corps heavily dominated by one ethnic group – the Balante – while the military units operate more as loosely aligned self-reliant militia groups than a structured army. Bands of soldiers and entrepreneurial officers getting increasingly involved in the lucrative drug business may lead the country in the direction of a Somali-like structure with armed gangs and militia, based on various ethnic affinities and with loyalties scattered between a non-salary paying state and a free for all criminal activity with high profit potential.

That the drug trade may represent a rapid route to income generation for a cash-strapped country is one thing but that this state is on the verge of descending into chaos and anarchy is, for the majority of the extremely poor population of Guinea Bissau quite another concern. The effect of the possible disintegration of the country on the region is obviously another concern – especially in a region that has seen more than its fair share of conflict over the last two decades. This is also worrying for the stability of neighbouring countries like Guinea to the south and the troubled neighbouring region of Casamance in Senegal to the north. This would provide opportunities for interaction with the rebel movement in that region, both in terms of manpower, money and weapons proliferation. It would also be worrying for the Gambia with its fledgling tourist industry offering readily available opportunities for laundering of illegally acquired wealth by the drugs smugglers of Guinea Bissau.

Beyond the direct effect of the continued flow of cocaine into Europe, the wider implications of the possible descent into “warlordism” in West Africa is not to be underestimated and could come to represent an even bigger nightmare facing Europe in the years to come. ■

Endnotes

- 1 In writing this paper the author drew on a background discussion with Richard Reeve.
- 2 See, for example, Johansen, Raggie, 'Guinea-Bissau: New hub for cocaine trafficking', in: 'Perspectives', Issue 5 (May 2008) by United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime.

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