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# **The New Transatlantic Bonanza: Cocaine on Highway 10**

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*The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the United Nations (UN) and the UN Office on Drugs and Crime*

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## Table of Contents

Executive Summary	5
Introduction	6
Highway 10	8
From Sea to Air	15
Foreigners but Increasingly More Africans	22
From Facilitators to Producers	23
Foreign Providers, Rebels, and Terrorist Groups	27
West African Style	33
Conclusions	36
Works Cited	39
About the Author	45
WHEMSAC Publications	46

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The 10<sup>th</sup> Parallel marine and aerial routes linking South America and West Africa harbor a long history of trade between the two continents. More recently, these routes have become one of the preferred routes used by Latin American traffickers for shipping multi-tons of cocaine destined for the growing European market. The Parallel's growing importance in cocaine trafficking has made it known as cocaine "Highway 10" among law enforcement.

Latin American cocaine trafficking organizations, particularly the Colombian ones, have established stable bases in West Africa, controlling and developing the route. West African facilitators, Nigerians as well as an increasing number of nationals from all countries where shipments are stocked, have developed a stronger capacity for taking over a more ambitious and lucrative role in the business as transporters, partners, and final buyers. In one case (Guinea), the West African partner had already started developing his own trafficking and manufacturing capacity, reproducing the patterns that made Colombia the business model of the drug industry. In this reshaped context, of particular concern is the role played by the Colombian FARC (*Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia*) as provider of cocaine shipments to West African cocaine entrepreneurs, as well as the impact of drug trafficking money on the financing of terrorist and rebel groups operating in the Sahel-Saharan belt.

## INTRODUCTION

In February 2005 the United Nations (UN) Secretary General in his *Report on West Africa* presented by his Special Representative, Amb. Mohammed Ould Abdullhahi informed the Security Council (SC) and the international community of a new threat to peace, stability, and development in West Africa:

*The sub-region continues to be confronted by the phenomenon of violent military adventurism to seize power. Within the last 12 months, for instance, several West African countries have had coup attempts: Burkina Faso, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau and Mauritania. Moreover, it has emerged that some members of the security and armed forces are associated with or otherwise involved in such illicit activities as smuggling of arms, drugs and natural resources, human trafficking, extortion at roadblocks and money-laundering.<sup>1</sup>*

From that moment on, analysis of the potential impact of the money and culture of drug trafficking and transnational organized crime became necessary complements to the work of international and regional security bodies and think-tanks involved with West Africa. Attention to the spill-over effects of drug trafficking in Guinea Bissau<sup>2</sup> was then directed to Guinea, Sierra Leone, and the Sahel-Saharan corridor, leading to a shift in the way the international community regarded and approached security issues (and intervention) in this part of the world. The West African case also opened the way to many similar scenarios elsewhere in Africa and globally, where the interests of illicit traffickers and organized crime constitute a considerable obstacle to the resolution of long-lasting political crises. Thus, the special session of the Security Council on

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<sup>1</sup> ArmsNetAfrica, "Progress report of the Secretary-General on ways to combat sub-regional and cross-border problems in West Africa," S/2005/86, 11 February 2005, par. 34, page 9.

<sup>2</sup> On 24 October 2007 the UNSC issued a Presidential Statement expressing deep concern about the threat posed by drug trafficking in Guinea-Bissau, S/PRST/2007/38. For a complete review of UNSC action on drug trafficking in West Africa see "Security Council Report Update", N.1, 4 December 2009, <http://www.securitycouncilreport.org>.

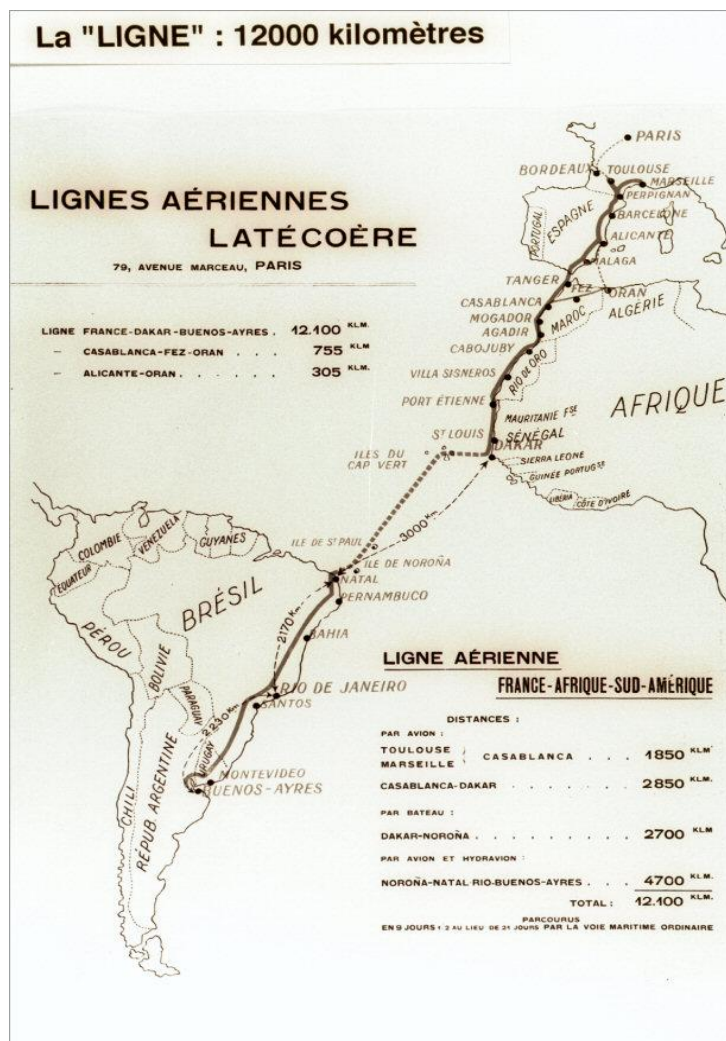
February 2010, devoted to the destabilizing impact of transnational organized crime on fragile states, was the end of an induction phase and the beginning of a new operational approach to security and governance-related problems in fragile states and post conflict countries.

This important progress has not, however, impeded West African countries in danger of falling into the spiral of violence (generated by drug trafficking and organized crime) from experiencing the troubles foreseen in 2005 by the Special Representative of the UN Secretary General for West Africa. Despite close scrutiny by the international community (including the UN, the European Union (EU), and the regional Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the worst scenarios materialized in the region. *Coups d'état* occurred in Guinea Bissau, Guinea, Mauritania, and Niger, together with the murder of prominent political figures, mass violence, kidnapping of foreigners, terrorist attacks in the Sahel-Saharan corridors, and drug trafficking—particularly cocaine trafficking.

This paper thus looks at the emerging actors and features of drug (cocaine) trafficking in West Africa. In particular, it focuses on the consolidation of the West African cocaine route in terms of both operators and modus operandi. It then examines the strengthening of tactical relationships between criminal operators, insurgents, and terrorist groups along the West African cocaine route. Lastly, it compares the current West African situation with similar situations experienced by other drug transit countries and societies.

## Highway 10

Just 2575 kilometers separates Dakar and West Africa from the Brazilian town of Fortaleza along the 10<sup>th</sup> Parallel. The maritime routes through the 10th Parallel were used during the 15<sup>th</sup> through 19<sup>th</sup> centuries for moving millions of enslaved Africans from the Gulf of Guinea to the Americas. During the Second World War the US Army established an aerial bridge along the 10<sup>th</sup> Parallel for flying troops and equipment to the Mediterranean and North African war fronts via Dakar and Casablanca. After the war, the aerial bridge along the 10<sup>th</sup> parallel remained the shortest and most effective route from South America to Europe.





Today the maritime and (increasingly) aerial routes along the 10<sup>th</sup> Parallel have become one of the preferred routes used by Latin American traffickers for shipping multi-tons of cocaine destined for the growing European market. The parallel's growing importance in cocaine trafficking has made it known as cocaine "Highway 10" among law enforcement.<sup>3</sup>

Trans-Atlantic trafficking of narcotics emerged at the beginning of the 1990's when Nigerian criminal networks<sup>4</sup> started using West Africa as transit and redistribution point for Asian heroin destined for North American and European markets. Using the Nigerian diaspora all over the world and capitalizing on well-developed trade skills, Nigerian networks, particularly from the southeast and southwest of the country, specialized in arranging quick delivery of relatively small quantities (from 0.5 to 25 kilos) of narcotics in any market of the world on behalf of larger drug trafficking criminal networks. Well before Colombian networks, and thanks to a series of local "competitive advantages,"<sup>5</sup> Nigerian networks involved in drug trafficking reinvented and refined the *human mules method* to reduce the risk of interception by law enforcement.<sup>6</sup> The skills and capacity of Nigerian criminal networks (disorganized as well as organized) coupled with their unique globalized business orientation not only earned them the nickname of the "express delivery" operators of the drug industry, but also allowed them to develop business relations with different partners all over the main drug producing areas.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Liana Sun Wyler and Nicolas Cook, "Illegal Drug Trade in Africa: Trends and U.S. Policy," 30 September 2009, *CSR Reports*, page 12; Christophe Champin, *Afrique Noire poudre blanche l'Afrique sous la coupe des cartels de la drogue*, (Brussels, Belgium: Andre Versailles Ed, 2010), page 78; Mathew Green "West Africa: Unbroken Line," 4 November 2008, *The Financial Times*. <http://www.matthewgreenjournalism.com/articles/>.

<sup>4</sup> Antonio L. Mazzitelli, "Transnational organized crime in West Africa," *International Affairs*, (Chatham House), Vol. 83 N.6, November 2007, page 1084.

<sup>5</sup> Among them the large availability of (disposable) human resources, the relative facility in avoiding controls on arrival and departure at Lagos airport, the role of Lagos Airport as a major African air transport hub, and the large Nigerian diaspora.

<sup>6</sup> UNODC, "Cocaine Trafficking in West Africa Situation Report," October 2007, page 11, <http://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/Cocaine-trafficking-Africa-en.pdf>.

<sup>7</sup> C. Champin, *opp. Cit*, page 83.

By the mid-1990s, in addition to heroin and home-grown cannabis, Nigerian networks started trading in cocaine. As usual, initial trafficking routes used by West African (mostly Nigerian) networks capitalized on cultural and language commonalities (a result of a shared colonial history) to ease the travel of couriers as well as reduce risk of interception by law enforcement and the likelihood of seizure and arrest. In the absence of direct flights, cocaine routes controlled by West African networks moved first to the Caribbean, where cocaine couriers then boarded flights to North European air hubs (London and Amsterdam) via West Africa. These shipments were re-routed from West Africa to final destinations in Europe, taking advantage of the reduced attention on passengers on flights originating from West Africa by European law enforcement airport check-points. During this period, West African trafficking operators also started establishing direct contacts with cocaine providers in South America. These contacts and the overall “credibility” of West African traffickers were essential later on when the growing market for cocaine from Europe would call for the opening up of a West African cocaine route.

By the end of the 1990s, Colombian trafficking organizations branched out from US wholesale markets and started focusing on developing alternative markets, particularly in Europe. This was based on the establishment of safe trafficking routes for supplying new markets. Spain was the natural gate for opening up European markets to Colombian cocaine entrepreneurs. The worldwide Galician fishing industry offered Colombian networks ideal partners for moving multi-ton cocaine shipments through the Atlantic. Initially, cocaine shipments traveled directly from Latin America to Spain on fishing trawlers or private yachts sailing from the Caribbean. The increased attention of law enforcement on these routes induced trafficking organizations to

look for alternative trafficking methods, including staging transshipment consignments in the middle of the Atlantic or close by West African shores and using commercial containers. In order to run these important operations, Latin American networks needed local West African partners responsible for providing logistical assistance to incoming and outgoing shipments, ensuring overall impunity and in some cases granting protection from the predatory attitude of corrupted local law-enforcement and military agents. Natural partners in this new business venture were the very Nigerian operators with whom they had established business relations in previous years.

Ideal locations for hosting traffickers' stockpiling and redistribution stations were small, stable countries run by weak institutions and often controlled by corruptible elites. Additional considerations like geographical proximity to Nigeria,<sup>8</sup> the cultural commonality of the Yoruba population,<sup>9</sup> and the functioning of an important port served by transatlantic trade routes made Togo the first location for the new cocaine route. The first large-scale consignments of cocaine operated jointly by Latino and European drug trafficking organizations with the assistance of West African networks probably began in Togo around the end of the 1990s. This estimation is based on the extent to which the networks had evolved by the year 2000. According to the records of Operation *Decollo* (take off) conducted by the Italian General Anti-Mafia Prosecutor Office,<sup>10</sup> from 2000 to 2004 the Calabrian Ndrangheta families Mancuso and Pesce shipped several hundred kilos of cocaine from Colombia via Togo to the container port of Gioia Tauro, South of Italy. The first shipment of some 430 kilos of cocaine from Cartagena (Colombia) via

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<sup>8</sup> Lome (Togo) is just three hours from Lagos, the commercial capital of Nigeria, by car (with the normal Lagos car traffic).

<sup>9</sup> The Yoruba is one of the major ethnic groups of the Gulf of Guinea stretching from east Nigeria to Benin and Togo. The Yoruba diaspora is also present in the Caribbean and South America (North of Brazil).

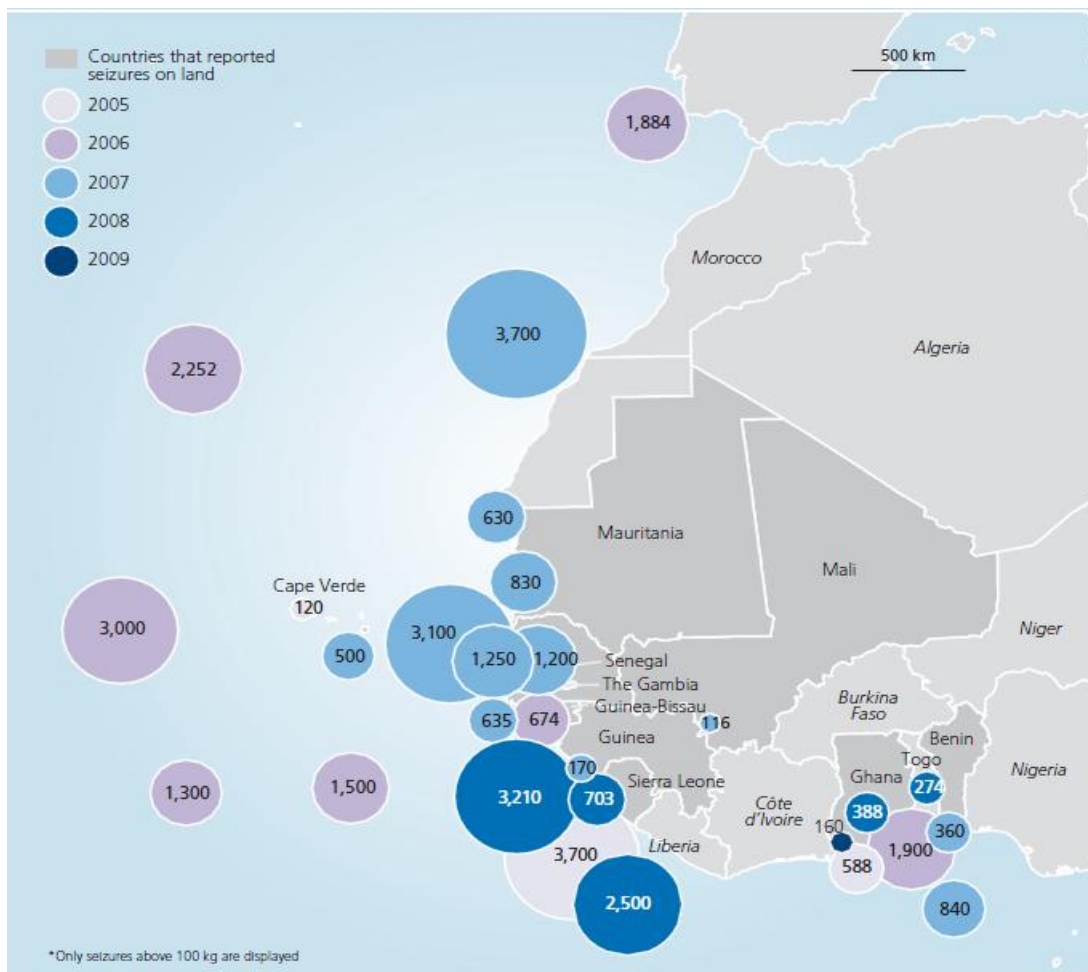
<sup>10</sup> "Commissione Parlamentare d' inchiesta sul fenomeno della criminalita organizzata mafiosa o Similar," *Relazione annuale sulla Ndrangheta*, doc. XXIII. No 5, XV Legislatura. Rome, Camera dei Deputati, 18 February 2008, page 22.

the port of Lomé (Togo) arrived in Italy in March 2000; the last of 250 kilos in January 2004. In this case, the cocaine was concealed in containers containing marbles, leather, plastic, and tuna cans.

These first shipments on containers proved the efficiency of the new route and validated the development of this network in terms of location, modus operandi, and operational capacity. In particular, the strategic location of West Africa as a midway stockpiling and redistribution location for the European market—especially emerging markets in Eastern Europe—and the Middle East, North Africa, and South Africa offered Latino cocaine trafficking networks a number of important advantages, all related to the reduction of the risks involved with the business. First, it reduced risks linked to the seizure of shipments thanks to the reduced control on cargo and other commercial shipments going and coming from West Africa. Second, it operated a fairer redistribution of risk between exporters and importers reflected in the sale/purchase prices of wholesale cocaine in West Africa. Third, it allowed cocaine operators to quickly adjust supply to the demand of the new destination markets by narrowing distances and delivery time between production and destination markets.

This ambitious marketing strategy called for the setting up of stable and efficient logistical stations in West Africa that were responsible for stockpiling the product (drugs) and developing new routes for its arrival and re-routing to Europe. The first incursion by Latinos guided by Nigerian networks in Guinea Bissau can be traced back to 2004 when Latinos opened up a

fictitious fishing processing plant in the Bijagos islands.<sup>11</sup> More than likely, this development was linked to the business contacts of the corrupted entourage of defunct President Lansana Conte in Guinea Conakry prior to 2004. Simultaneously, rumors about large-scale cocaine trafficking via Mauritania involving figures close to PEPs (political exposed persons) began in 2005. By mid-2006, Highway 10 was fully operational as proved by the increasing numbers of cocaine seizures in Europe facilitated by West African nationals and the increasing number of interceptions of large cocaine shipments on the high seas by Spanish, French and UK Naval Forces.



Source: UNODC, World Drug Report 2010

<sup>11</sup> In December 2006 the judicial police of Guinea Bissau raided the said fish factory seizing arms and money. In the same period reliable security sources indicated the presence of a well-functioning Latino cocaine station in the north of Guinea Bissau close by the border with Senegal.

According to the *2010 World Drug Report* of the UN Office on Drugs and Crime, some 25 tons of cocaine worth approximately \$6.8 billion (retail price) in European destination markets were trafficked through West Africa in 2008.<sup>12</sup> Despite a slow-down in the volume of shipments in 2009, due to, in part, external political events which destabilized the cocaine trafficking operational structure, there are substantive indications that an increase in trafficking resumed in 2010 with new operators and methods.

### **From Sea to Air**

The approach adopted by cocaine traffickers in developing the new route is a mix of experienced methodologies applied in innovative ways. Originally, the maritime smuggling method was the preferred one. As large consignments of cocaine were leaving Colombia and Venezuela by speedboat and loaded offshore on fishing trawlers sailing to West African waters, shipments were airdropped at a given location in the Atlantic and collected there by fishing trawlers. Once close to the West African coast, shipments were then moved inland by speedboat. Shipments would generally range from one to four or more tons. The flags and ownership of the fishing vessels varied, including West African, European, and South American naval registrations. Reports from law enforcement operators also indicate the purchasing and reconditioning of semi wrecked fishing vessels in West Africa by Latino operators and their European and African partners for single-shipment operations. Overall management of maritime operations, reconditioning of fishing trawlers, and relations with port and maritime operators were often assigned to Spanish nationals (Galician in particular)

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<sup>12</sup> UNODC, *World Drug Report 2010*, (NY, NY: United Nations), June 2010, page 242.

because of their long experience and presence all over the Atlantic shores. Crewing was generally made up of Latinos and West Africans.

The use of disguised shipping containers played an important role in the development and consolidation of the West African route as demonstrated by the seizures under operation *Decollo* in Cape Verde,<sup>13</sup> Senegal, and Nigeria. The largest ever cocaine seizure in West Africa took place in 2006 when Nigerian authorities seized a container with 14 tons of cocaine mixed with cement.<sup>14</sup> The number of seizures involving shipping containers in West Africa also indicates the capacity of West African drug trafficking organizations to diversify sources of supplies and products, taking full advantage of globalization. In July 2010, Nigerian authorities reported a cocaine seizure (450 kilograms) in a container originating from Chile.<sup>15</sup> In 2006 Senegalese customs seized a container originating in Pakistan with 8 tons of hashish, probably originating in West Asia and destined for Europe.<sup>16</sup> The opening of trafficking routes for drugs originating from East Asia is confirmed by the seizure of a shipment of 130 kilograms of heroin in a container originating from Iran at the Tin Can Port of Lagos in November 2010.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Cape Verde authorities operated two different seizures of cocaine in containers bound to Portugal in 2008: the first of 508 Kg in a refrigerated container; the second of 171 Kg in a container of scraped metal. See “Portuguese, Cape Verdeans sentenced in shipping container drug trafficking case,” *Asemana*, 22 October 2008, <http://www.asemana.publ.cv/spip.php?article36536>.

<sup>14</sup> UNODC, “Cocaine Trafficking in West Africa – The threat to stability and development (with Special reference to Guinea Bissau),” December 2007, page 10, [http://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/west\\_africa\\_cocaine\\_report\\_2007-12\\_en.pdf](http://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/west_africa_cocaine_report_2007-12_en.pdf).

<sup>15</sup> “Nigerian authorities seize 450 kg of cocaine,” *The Huffington Post*, 27 July 2008, <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/huff-wires/20100727/af-nigeria-cocaine-seizure/>.

<sup>16</sup> Cheikh Tidiane Ndiaye, “Saisie au port de Dakar de huit tonnes de haschich d’une valeur de 24 milliards de FCFA,” *APS*, 30 March 2006, <http://www.aps.sn/spip.php?article17519>.

<sup>17</sup> National Drug Law Enforcement Agency (NDLEA), “NDLEA intercepts 130kg heroin worth 99 million destined Europe,” Press Release, Nigeria, 26 November 2010, <http://www.ndlea.gov.ng/v1/?q=content/ndlea-intercepts-130kg-heroin-worth-99-million-destined-europe-us-nigeria-relations-drug-con>.

Starting in 2005, repeated evidence points at the increased use of airplanes for both direct shipment of large cocaine consignments from South America to West Africa and the transferring of smaller cocaine shipments within the West African region. Although undisputed evidence of direct air routes from South America to West Africa only became available in 2007, information collected in Guinea and Guinea Bissau date the opening of the air route back to 2005; and some evidence suggests the air routes opened even prior to 2005. In April 2005, the Judicial Police of Guinea Bissau raided a fictitious fish processing facility in the Bijagos Islands, seizing 18 kilograms of cocaine and a large cache of arms. The authorities of Guinea Bissau also arrested three Spanish, two Venezuelan, and two Colombian nationals. According to information made available by Guinea Bissau, the group used a small airplane to move cocaine shipments from Guinea Bissau via Cap Skirring (Senegal) to Las Palmas (Spain). The operation used a small clandestine airport, located near the bogus facility, to assist in transporting shipments. One year later, after following reports by national and international media of clandestine landings and the seizing of a truck loaded with aviation fuel in the forest close by the border with Guinea, the Army Chief of Staff of Guinea Bissau, General Tagme Na Waye, announced the installation of anti-aircraft artillery in the Bijagos Islands. According to Tagme at the time, “Any plane detected in this zone without authorization will be shot down.”<sup>18</sup>

Beginning in 2007, law enforcement authorities from both sides of the Atlantic started reporting cocaine seizures directed to West Africa involving the use of airplanes. In June 2007 2.5 tons of cocaine on a plane destined for Sierra Leone was seized by Venezuela.<sup>19</sup> On 12 July 2008 a Gulf

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<sup>18</sup> General Tagme Na Waye was killed in a bomb attack on 2 March 2009. See *Africa Aviation Forums*, <http://www.flyafrica.info/forums/showthread.php?7300-G-Bissau-to-shoot-drug-planes>.

<sup>19</sup> World Security Network, “Venezuela, Panama seize cocaine shipments,” 15 June 2007, [http://www.worldsecuritynetwork.com/showArticle3.cfm?article\\_id=14520&topicID=72](http://www.worldsecuritynetwork.com/showArticle3.cfm?article_id=14520&topicID=72).



Streamer jet coming from Venezuela landed at Bissau International Airport.<sup>20</sup> According to a report by the Judicial Police of Guinea Bissau, military personnel surrounded and unloaded the plane, which apparently was carrying medical preparations. Because of technical problems, the Gulf Streamer could not depart and was temporary parked in a military hangar. The unexpected landing of the jet plane and the active involvement of military personnel in unloading and shading the plane attracted the attention of the Judicial Police of Guinea Bissau, which requested an investigation. In the following days, the police arrested three policemen and two air traffic-control agents, as well as the Latino crew of the plane. Among the crew was Mr. Carmelo Vasquez Guerra, a Mexican who was investigated by Mexican Police for piloting a DC-9 jet loaded with 5 tons of cocaine in 2006. On 17 July an inspection team flown into Guinea Bissau by INTERPOL was permitted to search the plane. The inspection team did not find any cocaine onboard; however, drug-sniffing dogs did find cocaine on the plane, and the black box also confirmed suspicions about the actual mission of the plane. The same Gulf Streamer plane, purchased in the US a few months before, was under watch by the DEA because of its likely use in drug trafficking operations. Although evidence was mounting, all arrested Latinos had fled the country due to the “good services” provided by a very influential legal attorney.

The use of jet airplanes for transatlantic operations reached its peak in November 2009, when the wreckage of a burned Boeing 727 was discovered in the middle of the Sahel desert in the Gao region of Mali. According to investigators, the Boeing was registered in Guinea Bissau and belonged to a company called Africa Air. It took off from Panama on 16 October en route to

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<sup>20</sup> Morice, “Coke en stock (VI): avion oublié, pilote connu, les deux Guinées,” 19 October 2010, <http://morice.7duquebec.com/?p=68>. Also see, Tim Gaynor and Tiemoko Diallo, “Al Qaeda linked to rogue aviation network,” *Reuters*, 13 January 2010, <http://www.reuters.com/article/idUSTRE60C3E820100113?pageNumber=3>.

Mali. After a refueling stop in Maracaibo, Venezuela, the airplane disappeared from the radar screens of Venezuelan authorities, reappearing close to the border with Colombia. A few hours later the Venezuelan air control authorities located the plane over the Isla Margaritas, flying toward Africa. Despite the alert by Venezuelan authorities to all West African and international counterparts, no information about the plane was available until 16 November when the Office for West Africa of the United Nations Office for Drug and Crime (UNODC) announced the discovery of the wreckage of the Boeing 727 some 200 km north of Gao, Mali. According to investigators, the plane landed on an improvised sand landing strip. After the cocaine shipment, ranging from 2.5 to 9 tons, was loaded onto a convoy of 4WD vehicles, the plane was torched.<sup>21</sup> The case of the Boeing 727 does not appear to be unique. According to local sources,<sup>22</sup> several large cocaine air shipments had already used the Sahel-Saharan landing facilities, taking advantage of well-established trans-Saharan smuggling routes and the presence of rebels and terrorist groups operating all through the Sahel-Saharan belt (Mauritania, the Northern regions of Mali, Niger, and Chad).<sup>23</sup>

Smaller airplanes were used in the region for breaking down, redistributing, and re-routing large cocaine shipments into smaller consignments (up to 900 kilograms). In May 2007 Mauritanian authorities seized 629 kg of cocaine abandoned on the tarmac of the Nouadhibou Airport by a small Cessna 441 turbo propeller airplane that originated out of Venezuela and was later

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<sup>21</sup> Serge Daniel, "Burnout Boeing, a clue in African drugs trade," *AFP*, 11 December 2009,

<http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5i6w-doyjowoRGhOaaAHVYfrVWONQ>.

<sup>22</sup> Salima Tlemçani, "Au Sahel, narcotrafiquants et terroristes se partagent le terrain", *El Watan*, 1 November 2010, [http://www.elwatan.com/actualite/au-sahel-narcotrafiquants-et-terroristes-se-partagent-le-terrain-01-11-2010-97159\\_109.php](http://www.elwatan.com/actualite/au-sahel-narcotrafiquants-et-terroristes-se-partagent-le-terrain-01-11-2010-97159_109.php).

<sup>23</sup> Morice, "Coke en stock (IV) Boeing, Touaregs... et espions !," 16 October 2010, <http://morice.7duquebec.com/?p=55>.

recovered in the desert some 125 km from the airport.<sup>24</sup> Subsequent investigations led to the seizure of an additional 860 kg of cocaine in Nouakchott,<sup>25</sup> and resulted in the seizure of one additional airplane, one helicopter, and the indictment of twelve people including two French nationals, two Belgians, one Moroccan, and seven Mauritians. Among the indicted Mauritians was Sidi Mohamed Ould Haidalla, son of former Mauritanian President Mohamed Khouna Ould Haidalla.<sup>26</sup> Reliable local sources involved in the investigation of the case indicated that the cocaine most likely had previously arrived by sea, had been stocked in a villa rented by the Mauritanian trafficking group just nearby the Nouadhibou landing strip, and had been ready on the tarmac for loading onto the small Cessna plane for inward dispatching to either Morocco or some location on the Sahel-Saharan belt. Another example of the use of small planes in trafficking occurred in June 2007. A small hydroplane had taken off somewhere in the Sahara desert, close to Mauritania and the Western Sahara. Subsequently, the emergency landing of this small hydroplane on a private airport in the southern part of Gran Canary Island led to a preliminary seizure of a bag with 25 kg of cocaine.<sup>27</sup> An additional 800 kg of cocaine were then recovered by the Spanish Navy in the territorial waters of the Canary Islands, following the information given by the arrested Uruguayan pilot.

The most representative case of the use of small turbo propeller airplanes for regional transshipment of cocaine occurred in Sierra Leone on 13 July 2008. On this occasion, Sierra

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<sup>24</sup> INTERPOL, "INTERPOL issues Red Notice for suspected drug trafficker," 20 June 2007, <http://www.interpol.int/public/icpo/pressreleases/pr2007/pr200724.asp>.

<sup>25</sup> Ibrahima Sylla, "Mauritania seizes 860kg cocaine in biggest seizure," *Reuters*, 14 August 2007, <http://in.reuters.com/article/2007/08/14/idINIndia-28978520070814>.

<sup>26</sup> Morice, "Coke en stock (VII): en Mauritanie, même avion, même procédé," 22 October 2010, <http://www.centpapiers.com/coke-en-stock-vii-en-mauritanie-meme-avion-meme-procede/42672>.

<sup>27</sup> Erena Calvo, "Hallan 800 kilos de cocaína tras el amerizaje forzoso de un hidroavión," *ABC España*, 21 June 2007, [http://www.abc.es/hemeroteca/historico-21-06-2007/abc/Nacional/hallan-800-kilos-de-cocaina-tras-el-amerizaje-forzoso-de-un-hidroavion\\_1633827367526.html](http://www.abc.es/hemeroteca/historico-21-06-2007/abc/Nacional/hallan-800-kilos-de-cocaina-tras-el-amerizaje-forzoso-de-un-hidroavion_1633827367526.html).

Leone authorities seized over 600 kg of cocaine in a twin turbo propeller airplane abandoned on the tarmac of the Freetown Lungi International Airport.<sup>28</sup> After an unauthorized landing, the crew of the plane abandoned the plane, cocaine, AK 47 and AK 48 rifles, and ammunition. The airplane bore false Red Cross logos<sup>29</sup> on the tail and was equipped with additional tanks for extended flying range. Sierra Leone Police eventually arrested eleven foreign nationals including a Colombian, six Venezuelans, one US national, a Nigerian, a national from Guinea Bissau, and a number of Sierra Leoneans, including police officers and one airport control officer. Among the arrested Sierra Leoneans was the brother of the Minister of Transport, who tendered his resignation a few days later. According to Michael Schulenburg, Head of the United Nations Mission in Sierra Leone, “there must be many more flights like this.”<sup>30</sup> In previous years, informants from both Guinea Bissau and Guinea Conakry had reported the landing and taking off of small planes bearing UN and Red Cross logos. Incidentally, the seizure in Sierra Leone occurred just one day after the landing in Bissau of the Gulf Streamer jet from Venezuela.<sup>31</sup>

More mysterious is how West African cocaine shipments reach European markets. Seizures in Europe prove only the continued use of human couriers, which cannot be accountable for the more than the 25-30 tons of narcotics that the UNODC estimated as likely transiting annually via West Africa.<sup>32</sup> If part of the cocaine stocked in West Africa is re-exported via the maritime channel (via fishing vessels and containers, as proved by the seizures of containers in Cape

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<sup>28</sup> “Sierra Leone police seize drugs plane,” *BBC World News*, 14 July 2008, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/7504953.stm>.

<sup>29</sup> The use of fake Red Cross and UN logos on small drug trafficking airplanes seems to be quite common. On 10 August 2010 Panamanian authorities seized a small Cessna 206 plane with UNICEF and Red Cross logos in the province of Santa Ana, Los Santos. According to the investigation, the plane was used for moving drug (heroin, cocaine, and methamphetamine) shipments. See Zenaida Valdés, “Avioneta trasportaba drogas: hay tres detenidos,” *Critica en Línea*, 25 August 2010, <http://www.critica.com.pa/archivo/08252010/suc17.html#axzz19cSeM8qK>.

<sup>30</sup> “Cocaine bust: 3 more arrested,” *AFP*, 17 July 2008, <http://www.news24.com/Africa/News/Cocaine-bust-3-more-arrested-20080717>.

<sup>31</sup> See page 10.

<sup>32</sup> UNODC World Drug Report 2010, (NY, NY: United Nations), June 2010.

Verde in 2008),<sup>33</sup> analysts nowadays are inclined to assign a more prominent role to the rerouting of large shipments (up to 7 tons) via the Sahel-Saharan corridor. Unloaded from planes as large as the Malian 727-200 or as small as the Mauritanian Cessna, shipments are loaded onto convoys of 4WD vehicles which, with the help of Tourag guides and the logistical assistance of terrorist and guerrilla groups operating in the region, cross the Sahel-Saharan belt both from South to North (towards the Mediterranean shores of Algeria, Morocco, and Libya), and from West to East (via the trans-Saharan routes crossing the northern parts of Mali, Niger, Chad, Sudan, and Egypt). Once at Northern Africa Mediterranean shores, cocaine shipments are transferred to European destinations via speedboats equipped with up to 2000 HP engines and supplementary tanks able to reach Spain and Italian shores,<sup>34</sup> or are re-embarked on maritime cargo ships heading toward European ports. According to analysts, likely destinations for North African re-embarked cocaine shipments could be the ports of Balkan and south Eastern European countries.<sup>35</sup>

## **Foreigners but Increasingly More Africans**

As mentioned above, Nigerian criminal entrepreneurs were the first to open up West Africa to the drug trafficking business. Since then, drug trafficking operators in the region have grown considerably, both in term of origin (West African, South American, and European) and capacities (facilitators, transporters, partners, and producers). Based on arrests and investigations carried out in Guinea, Guinea Bissau, Togo, Ghana, and Senegal, Latin American cocaine trafficking organizations, particularly Colombian organizations, have

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<sup>33</sup> See footnote 18 above.

<sup>34</sup> "Tracking down drug smugglers in the Mediterranean," *France 24*, 13 December 2008, <http://www.france24.com/en/20081212-tracking-down-drug-smugglers-mediterranean-mediterranean>; USS Boone FF28, <http://www.uscarriers.net/ffg28history.htm>; Christophe Champin, op. cit. page 117.

<sup>35</sup> Panos A. Kostakos and Jana Arsovska, "Emerging Cocaine Routes in the Balkans," *Standing Group Organized Crime – eNewsletter*, Vol. 6 issue 2, [http://www.essex.ac.uk/ecpr/standinggroups/crime/documents/SGOC\\_Vol6\\_2.pdf](http://www.essex.ac.uk/ecpr/standinggroups/crime/documents/SGOC_Vol6_2.pdf); see also Christophe Champin, op. cit. page 92.

established stable bases in the region, controlling and developing the route. West African facilitators, Nigerian but also and increasingly nationals from all countries where shipments are stocked, have developed a stronger capacity for taking over a more ambitious and lucrative role in the business as transporters, partners, and final buyers. In one case (Guinea), the West African partner had already started developing his own trafficking and manufacturing capacity, reproducing the patterns that made Colombia the business model of the drug industry. In this reshaped context, of particular concern is the role played by the Colombian FARC (*Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia*) as provider of cocaine shipments to West African cocaine entrepreneurs, as well as the impact of drug trafficking money on the financing of terrorist and rebel groups operating in the Sahel-Saharan belt.

## **From Facilitators to Producers**

On 7 July 2007, *The Economist* published a short article on Guinea Bissau titled, “Pushers’ Paradise—the Drugs Trade in the Continent’s First Narco-state is Booming.”<sup>36</sup> The article, the first by a leading international magazine, analyzed the implications of cocaine trafficking on fragile state like Guinea Bissau. Almost two years later, Marco Vernaschi was awarded first prize in the *Photographers Giving Back Photo Award* for a photo showing the blood-stained steel chair on which the President of Guinea-Bissau, João Bernardo Viera, was executed.<sup>37</sup> From Bissau, Mr. Vernaschi also published a series of articles, one of which was titled, “Guinea Bissau: A Gangster's Paradise,”<sup>38</sup> where he describes his direct experience with Augusto Bliiri, a

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<sup>36</sup> “Pushers' paradise: The drugs trade in the continent's first narco-state is booming,” 7 June 2007, *The Economist*, <http://www.economist.com/node/9304402>.

<sup>37</sup> Natalie Applewhite, “Marco Vernaschi wins top Prize in PBC Award Contest,” 4 March, 2010, <http://pulitzercenter.org/blog/awards/marco-vernaschi-wins-top-prize-pgb-award-contest>.

<sup>38</sup> Marco Vernaschi, “Guinea Bissau: A gangster's paradise,” *The Pulitzer Centre*, 23 June 2009, <http://pulitzercenter.org/blog/untold-stories/guinea-bissau-gangsters-paradise>.

“young but talented drug lord who is legend in Bissau.” The story of Bliri is probably not different from the many other foot soldiers of the drug industry in Mexico, Colombia, or Albania, and represents the danger to which countries like Guinea Bissau are exposed. Augusto started his career as drug trafficker by buying back recovered cocaine bricks from Guinea Bissau fishermen and reselling them to Latinos and international traffickers. The money generated from this allowed Augusto to move ahead in the trafficking chain and become a visible reference for young Guinea Bissau traffickers. The article describes, in simple but frank terms, the likely trajectory of West African cocaine traffickers from “pushers” to “gangsters.” The history of Augusto Bliri, the Guinea Bissau pusher-turned-cocaine-kingpin, describes only the most obvious part of the story and does not identify the real operators and masterminds of the West African cocaine trade. Much more representative are the stories of Sidi Mohamed Ould Haidalla,<sup>39</sup> son of former of Mauritanian President Mohamed Khouna Ould Haidalla, and Ousmane Conte, the eldest son of the President of Guinea Lansana Conte,<sup>40</sup> and Rear Admiral Jose Americo Bubo Na Tchuto, openly accused by the US as being a major drug kingpin.<sup>41</sup> Each of them could be considered a different but complementary model of the new West African drug trafficking industry in the realms of transportation, partnerships, entrepreneurship, and facilitation. Their stories mirror (to a certain extent) the success stories of Mexican and Colombian drug entrepreneurs who were able to create viable narco-trafficking industries from controlling and developing a trafficking route.

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<sup>39</sup> See footnote 23 and related text.

<sup>40</sup> Ousamene Conte was arrested by the Guinea military junta immediately after the death of his father and confessed on TV his involvement in drug trafficking. He was recently released. On 1 June 2010 the US designated him as “drug kingpin” and as such imposed sanctions. See “In TV Confessions, Curtain Lifted on a Narcostate” *ABC News*, 14 March 2009, <http://abcnews.go.com/search?searchtext=conte%20guinea%20>.

<sup>41</sup> US Department Of Treasury, “Treasury Designates Two Narcotics Traffickers in Guinea-Bissau - Treasury Targets Emerging West African Narcotics Transit Route:” “Jose Americo Bubo Na Tchuto, Guinea-Bissau's former Navy Chief of Staff, and Ibraima Papa Camara, current Air Force Chief of Staff, are both involved in narcotics trafficking in Guinea-Bissau, including being linked to an aircraft suspected of flying a multi-hundred kilogram shipment of cocaine from Venezuela to Guinea-Bissau on July 12, 2008. Na Tchuto has long been suspected of being a major facilitator of narcotics trafficking in Guinea-Bissau,” Press Room, TG 6338 April 2010, <http://205.168.45.51/press/releases/tg633.htm>.

Probably the most interesting profile among the individuals mentioned above is that of Ousmane Conte, arrested together with his brother Aususmane and his brother-in-law Saturnin Bangoura shortly after the *coup* that followed the death of President Lansana Conte of Guinea on December 2008. Released on bail in July 2010, Ousmane Conte confessed on Guinean TV his involvement in drug trafficking. Beside cocaine trafficking, Ousmane Conte was suspected of being involved in the smuggling of migrants, as well as carrying out indiscriminate violence resulting in the deaths of some 129 civilians during riots that occurred in Conakry at the beginning of 2007 (while he was Captain of the Red Berets (Presidential Guard)).<sup>42</sup> In addition to multiple criminal activities, Ousmane Conte is strongly linked to the attempted upgrading of Guinea Conakry from the simple role of a stockpiling and redistribution location to one of a producer of cocaine and methamphetamine.

On 15 July 2009, the authorities of Guinea raided a suspected drug processing facility, seizing equipment and toxic chemical substances. Reports about drug processing facilities in Guinea had been circulating among the intelligence community since 2007, as well as rumors about the attempt of introducing opium poppy cultivation in the highlands of Guinea. A later UNODC-INTERPOL mission visited the eight seized facilities located in Conakry and in the nearby native village of former President Lousana Conte, some 100 kilometers north of Conakry. The UNODC-INTERPOL mission confirmed that the equipment and the chemical substances seized<sup>43</sup> enabled

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<sup>42</sup> Human Rights Watch, "Guinea: Free Rein to Security Forces Fuels Violence -Government Should Create Independent Body to Investigate, Prosecute Abuses," 24 April 2007, <http://www.hrw.org/en/news/2007/04/19/guinea-free-rein-security-forces-fuels-violence>.

<sup>43</sup> Seized chemical substances included ether, sulfuric acid, sassafras oil, and acetone. Also, traces of cocaine were detected.



the processing of cocaine and heroin and the production of methamphetamine and MDMA (ecstasy).<sup>44</sup>

Ousmane Conte and Sidi Mohamed Ould Haidalla shared one common feature: their closeness to power, which gave drug traffickers and any other criminal elements the benefit of a considerable reduction of the risks<sup>45</sup> connected with the drug business. Moreover, the benefits and corruptive power of criminal activity do not know gender boundaries, as proved by the case of Ms. Zainab Conte, a wife of former President of Guinea Lousana Conte. She was arrested whilst attempting to cross the Sierra Leone border with hundreds of thousands US dollars and Euros and some gold bars. According to a leaked cable from the US Embassy in Freetown:

*A presidential advisor reported that, though border officials detained Zainab and a convoy of three luxury vehicles, they waved other vehicles through, not realizing one contained the long-sought after Gibrilla Kamara (aka GK). Kamara is a prime suspect in the July 13 cocaine bust, and the only “big fish” remaining outside the net of the Sierra Leone Police. Thought to be one of the drug trafficking ring’s key facilitators, rumours abounded that he had fled to Guinea shortly after the bust. It now appears that Kamara remained in Sierra Leone with the currency and other valuables, with the intention of crossing the border under the protection of Zainab.*<sup>46</sup>

Ms. Conte and her convoy of three luxury 4WD vehicles were later released following a telephone call from President Conte of Guinea to President Koroma of Sierra Leone. According

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<sup>44</sup> UNODC, “Evidence of drug lab activity in West Africa,” 7 August 2009, <http://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/frontpage/2009/August/evidence-of-clandestine-laboratory-activity-in-w-africa.html>. See also “UN denounces Guinea ‘drug labs’,” *BBC World News*, 6 August 2009, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/8188581.stm>.

<sup>45</sup> As risks connected with the drug trafficking business are concerned, they mainly involve prosecution from law enforcement and security agencies and seizure of shipments resulting in heavy financial loss.

<sup>46</sup> Festus Lahai, “Ernest Koroma Aides Escape of Drug Lord,” *The New People Newspaper Online*, [http://www.thenewpeople.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=733:adminthenewpeoplecom&catid=50:ariogbogmailcom](http://www.thenewpeople.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=733:adminthenewpeoplecom&catid=50:ariogbogmailcom).

to other sources, the intent of Ms. Conte's travel to Sierra Leone was buying back the cocaine seized one month before at Lungi International Airport. Mastermind and financial promoter of the operation was Ousamane Conte, probably the owner of the seized shipment.

The need for reducing risk by enlisting into the business young but influential West African personalities is further proved by the DEA's "Operation Relentless,"<sup>47</sup> which contributed to the dismantling of an international network led by a Colombian trafficker and involving Nigerians and a Russian pilot (July 2010). In this case the defendants were accused (and eventually convicted) of trying to smuggle several tons of cocaine from Colombia and Venezuela to West Africa, and subsequently to the US. According to wire-taped conversations, the network had access to a private airfield in Guinea, and was considering buying its own airport in order to arrange direct deliveries from Bolivia to West Africa. The group also planned to set up methamphetamine production in Liberia. In order to operate, the network tried to enlist the Director and Deputy Director of the Liberian Security Agency, both of who were working as undercover agents for the DEA. Incidentally, the Director of the National Security Agency of Liberia, Mr. Fombah Teh Sirleaf, is also the son of the President of Liberia<sup>48</sup>.

## **Foreign Providers, Rebels and Terrorist Groups**

The development and growth of West African trafficking routes could have not happened without the participation and the *in loco* presence of European, South American (mostly Colombian), and North African traffickers. As mentioned above, the Italian Ndrangheta set up

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<sup>47</sup> U. S. Attorney Southern District of New York, "Manhattan U.S. Attorney announces unsealing of charges arising from historic undercover operation in the Republic of Liberia," 1 July 2010, <http://www.justice.gov/usao/nys/pressreleases/June10/operationrelentlessliberiapr.pdf>.

<sup>48</sup> Chris Hawley, "New Trend in Drug Smuggling: Secret Trans-Atlantic Flights in Old Jets," *Associated Press*, 15 November 2010, <http://www.cnsnews.com/news/article/new-trend-drug-smuggling-secret-trans-at>.

operations via Togo in 2004: the Pesce and Mancuso clans are said to be present in Togo from where they supposedly traffick cocaine to Europe.<sup>49</sup> The Ndrangheta operational presence in West Africa was confirmed in 2007 when the Italian Guardia di Finanza seized 250 kg of Bolivian cocaine in Milan belonging to the Ndrangheta clan Morabito-Bruzzaniti-Palamara.<sup>50</sup> The shipment was hidden in a camper originally from Brazil but re-shipped to Italy from Dakar. Sicilian mafias also showed their presence in West Africa. In 2005 the Italian security services picked up the Sicilian mafia boss Giovanni Bonomo on the tarmac of the Dakar international airport.<sup>51</sup> Coming from Abidjan, Mr. Bonomo was regularly visiting Dakar where he apparently had a stake in gambling and tourism businesses. In Italy, Mr. Bonomo was the boss of the Partinico “*mandamento*,” a village in the outskirts of Palermo.

The networks established by the Italian Mafiosi preceded the arrival and installation of Latinos, principally Colombian and Venezuelan, in the region. Controllers of the supply from the other side of the Atlantic, Colombians and their Venezuelan partners, are nowadays the most prominent operators in the region. According to the DEA, at least nine top-tier South American and Mexican drug trafficking organizations (DTOs) have established operations in Africa since 2007.<sup>52</sup> The ideological differences that, in the past, could be drawn between representatives of Colombian DTOs and Colombian guerrilla organizations (particularly the FARC) seem nowadays blurred when looking at the development of the Colombian presence in West Africa. Based on arrests and intelligence reports, both are well established in the region. In November

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<sup>49</sup> “The map of 'Ndrine in the world,” *MilanoMafia*, <http://www.milanomafia.com/le-mappe/world>.

<sup>50</sup> Alberto Berticelli, “Scoperta a Milano la centrale della mafia calabrese,” *Corriere della Sera*, 4 May 2007, [http://archiviostorico.corriere.it/2007/maggio/04/Scoperta\\_Milano\\_centrale\\_della\\_mafia\\_co\\_7\\_070504015.shtml](http://archiviostorico.corriere.it/2007/maggio/04/Scoperta_Milano_centrale_della_mafia_co_7_070504015.shtml).

<sup>51</sup> “Italy police arrest Mafia suspect,” *BBC World News*, 14 November 2003, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/3270935.stm>.

<sup>52</sup> Thomas Harrigan’s testimony on Confronting Drug Trafficking in West Africa, before the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Subcommittee on African Affairs, 23 June, 2009 in Liana Sun Wyler and Nicolas Cook, “Illegal Drug Trade in Africa: Trends and U.S. Policy,” 30 *Congressional Research Services Report*, R40838, September 2009, page 3.

2008, the Togolese police, with the assistance of the DEA, dismantled in Lomé, Togo, an international cocaine trafficking network made up of nationals from Colombia, Costa Rica, Mexico, South Africa, Ghana, and Togo.<sup>53</sup> According to a report, the group was planning to fly cocaine from South America to a landing strip in the northern part of the country. Once in Togo, cocaine shipments would be moved to the port of Lomé and rerouted to European destinations via containers. Some members of the group had entered the country a few months before with diplomatic passports issued in Guinea. One of the arrested persons was Jorge Solano Cortes, a well-known partner of the Rodriguez brothers in the Cali Cartel, who had started his cocaine trafficking career as a deputy of Harold Ackerman in the early 1990s.<sup>54</sup>

Beginning in 2006, intelligence reports alerted the international community of the interest of the FARC in developing the West African route. In August 2007 Guinea-Bissau's police announced the arrest of two Colombians after seizing weapons and a large sum of money in a raid on a suspected location in the Bairro Militar of Bissau.<sup>55</sup> During the raid police also seized documents relating the two Colombians to the highest levels of Guinea Bissau's institutional and political powers. One of the two arrested was identified as Juan Pablo Rubio Camacho, already convicted in the US for cocaine trafficking in 1988. In 2001 Colombian police arrested Juan Pablo Camacho and accused him as being one of the organizers of the money laundering machinery of the FARC. According to reports made available at the moment of the arrest, Juan Pablo

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<sup>53</sup> Pascal Fletcher, "Togo says extradites Colombian drugs suspect to US," *Reuters*, 16 January 2009, <http://uk.reuters.com/article/2009/01/16/idUKLG739882>.

<sup>54</sup> "Ex socio de los Rodríguez, uno de los capos de la coca en el occidente de África," *El Tiempo*, 16 February 2009, <http://www.eltiempo.com/archivo/documento/CMS-4820944>.

<sup>55</sup> Cathy Suárez, "África, en la ruta de la droga hacia Europa," *Canarias7.es*, 15 September 2007, <http://www.canarias7.es/articulo.cfm?id=66251>.

Camacho owned properties worth some \$50 million in Panama.<sup>56</sup> The FARC also appears as a direct promoter of the West African route by providing regular cocaine shipments to West Africa. In the indictment submitted by the Manhattan US Attorney against Marcel Acevedo Sarmiento in the case following the DEA's "Relentless Operation,"<sup>57</sup> Ms. Daria Lupacchino, DEA Special Agent involved in the case, related that two of the defendants not only confirmed FARC ownership of cocaine to be shipped to Liberia but also the FARC's readiness to send regular cocaine supplies to West Africa.

A further serious concern of the West African drug trafficking scenario is represented by the growing relevance of cocaine money in the financing of rebel and terrorist groups operating in the Sahel-Saharan corridors.<sup>58</sup> Collected evidence (seizures and arrests) allows for the connection of direct links between rebel and terrorist groups operating in the region to cocaine trafficking. With the exception of a recent case presented by the DEA at the US Southern District Court of New York,<sup>59</sup> these links are more the result of situational awareness on the ground and reports from the media<sup>60</sup> rather than data from investigations and prosecutions. Indeed, providing

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<sup>56</sup> "Cae cerebro financiero de las FARC," *El Mercurio*, 5 November 2001, <http://diario.elmercurio.cl/detalle/index.asp?id={855f2d84-f3d1-4a3f-b6a5-131242253083}>.

<sup>57</sup> See footnote 53 above.

<sup>58</sup> The international community, particularly the US and some of the countries of the region, had well understood the risks deriving from the arrival of cocaine money in the region. Starting from 2004 and as part of its global anti-terrorist response the US started refocusing and expanding its African anti-terrorist strategy and in 2005 the Bush administration launched the Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership to enhance the capabilities of governments across the Sahel as well as in Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia for counter-terrorism. US assistance, mostly in the form of training, equipment and joint simulated operations, was delivered to national armies leaving, however, aside police and customs agencies. Starting from 2007 and thanks to the bold eloquence of some presidents of the region, particularly President Amadou Toumani Toure, the international and regional community started to focus on the links and explosive implications of drug trafficking vis -a-vis rebellion and terrorism.

<sup>59</sup> *US versus Oumar Issa, Houruna Toure and Idriss Abelrahman*, 30 December 2009. The three were arrested in Ghana at the beginning of December and extradited to the US where they faced charges to commit acts of narco-terrorism and to provide material support to a foreign terrorist organization. The charges stem from the defendants' alleged agreement to transport cocaine through West and North Africa with the intent to support three terrorist organizations -- Al Qaeda, Al Qaeda in the Islamic Magreb ("AQIM"), and the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, or "FARC"). U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency, "Three Al Qaeda Associates Arrested on Drug and Terrorism Charges," Press Release, 18 December 2009, <http://www.justice.gov/dea/pubs/pressrel/pr121809.html>.

<sup>60</sup> Just to mention a few: Samuel Benshimon, "Exclusif: une réunion secrète des cartels de la drogue en Guinée-Bissau," *AQMI presente*, 3 November 2010; Frederic Powelton, "Sahel: le terrorisme entre réalité et banditisme," *Sahel Intelligence*, 16 March 2009; "L'alliance entre al-Qaïda et les trafiquants de drogue menace la sécurité au Sahel,"

logistical assistance to trafficking operations and charging security fees for ensuring free and safe passage of illicit shipments is certainly an easy source of fresh cash for those involved in the trade and for those traffickers who are able to operate in uncontrolled territories.<sup>61</sup>

Running from the shores of the Atlantic to the Mediterranean Sea, the Sahel-Saharan route has always served as main trading and communication route for the nomadic migrations of Tuareg communities living in Mauritania, Northern Mali, Niger, and Chad. The almost total absence of a state presence and state control over this huge territory and the independent nature of Tuareg communities, in tandem with an increased presence of bandits and rebel and terrorist groups, have resulted in an ideal environment for the development of a smuggling-based economy. Besides contraband of licit items and the smuggling of small arms, the Sahel-Saharan corridor became one of the preferred routes for cigarette smuggling in the early 1990's. Known in Algeria as the "Marlboro Connection," cigarette smuggling prospered due to the complacent attitude of local border authorities. By early 2000, the same route started to be used for trafficking of arms, migrants, and hashish. From April 2006 to April 2007, Niger authorities reported the seizure of 5.7 tons of hashish in five different operations carried out in the Northern part of the country.<sup>62</sup> In the same period, the *Mouvement des Nigériens pour la Justice* (MNJ), a Tuareg rebel group operating mostly in the Northern part of Niger, also announced the seizure of a large consignment of narcotics,<sup>63</sup> probably hashish, which was first offered to authorities in the region for destruction and later sold to North African buyers. Also, in December 2007 the international

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*Magharabia.com*, 09 January 2010; Salima Tlemçani, "Au Sahel, narcotrafiquants et terroristes se partagent le terrain," *El Watan*, 1 November 2010. Also, for a more complete review, search the archive of Temoust, <http://www.temoust.org>.

<sup>61</sup> The need for cash coupled with the effects of more stringent measures on terrorism financing do explain the booming of both kidnapping and drug trafficking in the Sahel-Saharan corridor. In this respect the relation between rebel/terrorist groups and traffickers is purely tactical, at least in the short run.

<sup>62</sup> UNODC, "Cannabis in Africa – An overview," November 2007, [http://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/Can\\_Afr\\_EN\\_09\\_11\\_07.pdf](http://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/Can_Afr_EN_09_11_07.pdf).

<sup>63</sup> Moussa Aksar, "NIGER: Situation dans le nord: Le MNJ arrête des trafiquants de drogue," *L'Evenement* N°196, 4 June 2007, <http://www.temoust.org/niger-situation-dans-le-nord-le.125>.

media reported the seizure of 750 kg of cocaine by Malian customs following a shootout with a caravan of highly armed traffickers 150 km north of Kidal.<sup>64</sup> Two months later, Malian authorities officially announced that the drug seized was hashish and not cocaine. Incidentally, Mr. Sidi Mohammed Ould Haidallah, the mastermind of the Mauritanian cocaine trafficking network,<sup>65</sup> was arrested in Morocco in 2008 where he was residing with a Malian passport released in Gao, a key location on the Sahel-Saharan route. Final confirmation of the importance and upgrading of the route for cocaine trafficking is given by the story of the Boeing 727 landed in Mali in 2009.

The destructive and corruptive effects of drug trafficking money in the Sahel-Saharan region on genuine political claims and struggles is further evidenced by the recent arrest in Mali on drug trafficking charges of six alleged members of the Front Polisario,<sup>66</sup> a separatist movement fighting for decades to get independence for the Western Sahara. One of the arrested, Sultan Ould Bady, seems also to be involved in the kidnapping and subsequent sales of European hostages in the Sahara before joining the ranks of AQIM (al-Qaeda in the Maghreb). In August 2010, Mauritanian authorities “deported” to Mali a well-known Sahwari, Omar Ahmed Ould Sidi Ould Hama (aka Omar Sahraoui), sentenced to life imprisonment in Mauritania for masterminding the AQIM kidnapping of three Spanish aid workers in 2009. According to reports, the “deportation” of Omar Sahraoui was part of a deal allowing the release of two Spanish nationals kidnapped by AQIM.<sup>67</sup> Front Polisario had openly denounced the risk of

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<sup>64</sup> Alistair Thomson, “Mali seizes 750 kg cocaine after Saharan gunfight,” *Reuters*, 3 January 2008, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2008/01/03/idUSL0338497>.

<sup>65</sup> See footnote 30 above.

<sup>66</sup> “Drug traffickers arrested in Mali,” 10 December 2010, <http://m.news24.com/news24/Africa/News/Drug-traffickers-arrested-in-Mali-20101210>.

<sup>67</sup> According to media reports, Malian authorities did not request for Sahraoui’s deportation to Mauritanian authorities and never acknowledged his arrival in Mali. The same sources state that Sahraouian “disappeared” after he was handed over to Mali. See

infiltration of AQIM in its ranks and in the very impoverished Sahrawi's camps located at the border of Western Sahara.

## **West African Style**

The above-described situation, despite a more convoluted scenario in terms of actors, operational capacities, and *modus operandi*, calls for a tentative comparative analysis with similar situations experienced by other regions and countries. Building upon proved successes and failures might assist West Africa in mitigating the worst effects of the lure of a booming drug trafficking industry. The emerging West African drug industry, however, contains some nuances, and cannot be entirely analyzed based on Colombian and Mexican drug trafficking experiences. Indeed, Colombia and Mexico have built their drug industries on pre-existent cultivation and subsequent exporting/smuggling networks. In the case of Colombia, the cocaine boom was built on the marijuana industry and the so-called “*marimberos*” of the Caribbean coast.<sup>68</sup> In the case of Mexico, cocaine trafficking took advantage of the already existent networks developed by Mexican drug trafficking organizations that specialized in marijuana and heroin (black tar) production by generations of “*gomeros*” localized in the Sonora state.<sup>69</sup> The proximity to the largest consumer market for illicit drugs, however, clearly added value and opportunities to the Mexican drug trafficking industry. Differences also exist in terms of the main actors involved. Whilst in West Africa, main drug trafficking actors appeared to be linked to elites; in Mexico and Colombia, prominent figures in drug trafficking come from popular origins and had to build

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“Spanish hostages release: Al-Qaeda active in Polisario-controlled area,” *Middle East Online*, 26 August 2010, <http://www.middle-east-online.com/english/?id=40899>.

<sup>68</sup> Darío Betancurt and Martha L. García, *Contrabandistas, marimberos y mafiosos- Historia Social de la mafia Colombiana (1965 – 1992)*, (Bogotá, Colombia: TM editores, 1994).

<sup>69</sup> Luis Astorga, *El siglo de las drogas: el narcotráfico del Porfiriato al nuevo milenio*, (México, MX: Plaza y Janes Editoriales, 2005).



up their careers on their specific (criminal) competences rather than pre-existent wealth and ability in corrupting and infiltrating state institutions. In other words, as in Colombia and Mexico, drug trafficking mirrored the overall social and economic transition of national societies towards liberal markets and democratic rule. In West Africa drug trafficking has mostly benefited, directly or indirectly, the same elites who monopolize economic opportunities arising from the participation of West African economies in global markets.<sup>70</sup>

As to the participation and increased role of terrorist and guerrilla groups, the Colombian and West African situations also vary. In Colombia, FARC and paramilitary groups benefited from control of production. Hence, their direct involvement in trafficking came at a second stage and as a natural consequence of control over raw materials and their related markets. In the Sahel-Saharan corridors terrorist and rebel groups capitalize on their logistical and territorial control capacities, offering drug traffickers services in exchange for money (and perhaps arms). The West African situation also radically diverges from the one characterized by the presence of structured Mafia-type criminal organizations, the aim of which is “controlling the supply of protection”<sup>71</sup> to any actor operating in their territories, often in competition with state institutions. From this perspective, the very nature of West African drug trafficking syndicates, modeled on the loose business-oriented Nigerian model, represents *per se* a new challenging and successful model of an organized criminal network. Hence, there is no value in comparing the West African drug trafficking situation to the ones prevalent in scenarios characterized by the operation of the Italian and Russian mafias, the Japanese yakuza, or the Chinese triads.

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<sup>70</sup> J. F. Bayart, S. Ellis, B. Hibou, *La Criminalisation de l'État en Afrique*, (Brussels, Belgium: Complexe, 1997).

<sup>71</sup> Federico Varese (Ed.), *Organized Crime - Critical Concepts in Criminology*, (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2010). According to the definitions by Prof. Varese, “an organized crime group attempts to control the production, supply and distribution of a given commodity or service unlawfully ... A Mafia group is type of organized criminal group which attempts to control the supply of protection.”

The scenarios which can be compared with the West African one are those offered by some Central American countries (Guatemala and Honduras) and the Caribbean (Jamaica, in particular). As in West Africa, in Honduras and Guatemala foreign drug trafficking organizations (Colombian and Mexican) seem to have established an operational basis for stockpiling large cocaine shipments destined for North American markets, infiltrated state institutions, and have developed business alliances with members of economic and political establishments. In December 2010, President Alvaro Colón of Guatemala declared a state of emergency in a province bordering Mexico because of the presence and operation of the (Mexican) Zetas drug trafficking organization.<sup>72</sup> In Honduras, the Chief of the Anti-Narcotics Squad was murdered just after he publicly denounced the complicity of land-owners in the landing and subsequent unloading of cocaine in airplanes in December 2009.<sup>73</sup> Different from West Africa, Honduras and Guatemala also present a complex internal criminal panorama featuring the presence and territorial challenge to state institutions by *maras*, juvenile criminal gangs operating in Mexico and the US. The scenario and experience of Jamaica in the cocaine flows of the 1980's provides an example of what West Africa may experience as a consequence of the growth of small cocaine trafficking gangs like the one led by Augusto Bliri in Guinea Bissau. The recent case of the extradition from Jamaica to the US of drug kingpin Christopher "Dudus" Coke provides a clear example of the costs of letting native drug traffickers prosper.<sup>74</sup> Common and certainly threatening features of both the Central American and the Caribbean scenarios are the very high

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<sup>72</sup> Juan Carlos Llorca, "Guatemalan military seizes drug-plagued province," *Associated Press*, 19 December 2010, [http://news.yahoo.com/s/ap/20101220/ap\\_on\\_re\\_la\\_am\\_ca/lt\\_guatemala\\_state\\_of\\_siege](http://news.yahoo.com/s/ap/20101220/ap_on_re_la_am_ca/lt_guatemala_state_of_siege).

<sup>73</sup> "Honduras anti-drug chief shot dead by gunmen," *BBC*, 8 December 2009, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/8402521.stm>.

<sup>74</sup> On May 2010 the Jamaican Government's decision of extraditing Mr. Christopher "Dudus" Coke to the US provoked riots all over Kingston, forcing the government to declare a state of emergency and deploying hundreds of soldiers in Christopher "Dudus" Coke's fief, Tivoli Garden. The search did not prove successful. Mr. Coke was eventually arrested four weeks later at a vehicle checkpoint on the outskirts of Kingston. Over 70 people were killed in clashes and gun battles between police and army operatives and gangs. "Profile: Christopher 'Dudus' Coke," *BBC News*, 23 June 2010, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/10146172>.

murder rates, among the highest in the world,<sup>75</sup> and the linkages to the effects of drug (cocaine) trafficking. Violence in these two scenarios mirrors two complementary phases of the destabilizing effects of drug trafficking. In Central America, violence is mostly instrumental to affirming control of trafficking routes. In the Caribbean (particularly in Jamaica), violence is the result of turf wars among criminal groups caused by the drying up of drug-derived revenues. Luckily, drug trafficking-originated violence is still minimal in West Africa, but previous well documented experiences of civil conflicts caused by the fight over control for important sources of revenues (oil, diamonds, etc.) ought to serve as a clear indicator of the risks.

## **Conclusions**

Far from losing its relevance, the West African routes and the increasingly complex network of operators involved are a serious threat to the stability and balanced development of the region. Stronger in terms of operational capacity and global networking, West African operators, whether criminal entrepreneurs from the Atlantic coast or members of terrorist and rebel groups operating in the Sahel-Saharan corridor, are gradually climbing the ladders of the drug and criminal industries. Their rise will extract a heavy price on West African societies and institutions, slowing down, if not hijacking, the pace of social and economic development. Countries and institutions unable to evade and/or counter the corruptive power and lure of the culture of drug money will pay the heaviest price. Conscious of the risks, governments in the region, their partners, and the international community have devised plans and operational

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<sup>75</sup> UNODC, “The destabilizing influence of drug trafficking on transit countries: The case of Cocaine”, World Drug Report 2010, pages 231 to 245. Also see “Crime, Violence, and Development: Trends, Costs, and Policy Options in the Caribbean,” Report No. 37820, (A Joint Report by the UNODC and the Latin America and the Caribbean Region of the World Bank), March 2007.

mechanisms<sup>76</sup> which, if properly and promptly implemented, ought to provide effective responses to this threatening menace. Yet, as cautioned by former Minister of Justice of Guinea Bissau, Ms. Carmelita Pires, the current Special Advisor to the President of the ECOWAS Commission, political will and robust partnership between the sub-region and the international community will be crucial in order to end “the culture of impunity.”<sup>77</sup> Indeed, focusing on drug trafficking should not divert attention from the core problems of the West African situation: corruption, impunity, and the progressive erosion of a culture of respect for legality and state institutions.

West Africa could, in this respect, learn from the experiences of Guatemala (and its International Commission Against Impunity in Guatemala (**CICIG**)). Restoring confidence in justice and in national institutions—breaking the circle of impunity, particularly when impunity is a peculiar feature of political and economic power—is indispensable to the inputs of technical cooperation the international community may be ready to provide. Undoubtedly, any West African-CICIG experience should maximize the strengthening of the capacity of national institutions, be less “intrusive” as possible, and focus on the capacity-building of reliable teams of investigators, prosecutors, and judges accountable to the highest authorities of the state and civic society. In this respect, external independent commissions should then periodically verify progress in the fight against impunity and publicly report about them to both national stakeholders (including civic society) and the international community. Also, international

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<sup>76</sup> Among them, certainly the 2008 ECOWAS political declaration and regional action plan to combat drug trafficking and organized crime in West Africa, and the joint UNODC-UNDP/UNDPKO and INTERPOL West Coast Initiative. Also national integrated programs against drug and crime have been developed by a number of countries of the region with the assistance of UNODC.

<sup>77</sup> Speech delivered at the occasion of the launching of the UNODC Regional Program for West Africa at the UN HQ of New York, on 16 December 2010. The UNODC program for West Africa oversees investments in the areas of law enforcement and justice in the West African Region (including Nigeria) for some USD 70 million.

partners of West African countries ought to take a clear stand against those PEPs suspected of involvement in criminal affairs. The examples given by the US with respect to the cases of Guinea and Guinea Bissau set a clear standard and silence those voices which are ready to offer impunity to native drug and war lords in exchange for an uncertain renunciation of the use of violence in post-conflict scenarios. Investing in justice, legality, and good governance may sound like a long term utopian investment,<sup>78</sup> but it is the only way to nurture a culture of the rule of law and of state which can eventually minimize the impact of drug and other criminal organizations.

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<sup>78</sup> Carlo Maria Verardi, "Democrazia, giustizia e libertà," Speech delivered at the XX Magistratura Democratica National Congress, Bologna, April 1998.

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