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# West Africa's warning flares?

## Rethinking the significance of cocaine seizures

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### Summary

Drug seizures are widely referred to in the media and academic reporting on drug trafficking and organised crime. Everyone knows their limitations. But what if seizures represent the exact opposite of what we generally think them to be? That is, not a reflection of state efficiency, but rather cracks in systems of political protection. If that is the case, they may appear more regularly at some times rather than others. A detailed study of West African cocaine seizures in the context of periods of political instability over a twenty-year period suggest this association is worth exploring.

### Key findings

- Drug seizures in West Africa have been concentrated in two periods: 2003-2012 and more lately in the period from 2019, with a 'seizure drought' in between.
- At a regional level, increases in seizures correlated with period of declining political stability while declines in seizures occur during periods of political stability.
- This relationship can also be seen in countries with cycles of conflict and instability, namely Guinea-Bissau and Mali. Notably, seizures occur in the period just before instability increases.
- As there is strong evidence of political protection over the drug trafficking economy in the region, increases in seizures may align with periods when political protection systems for trafficking weaken or crack. Seizures decline again when new systems of political protection are put in place.
- One outlier is Nigeria which has a very stable and low level of seizures. This is a reflection of a long-standing and lower-level system of criminal protection, partly the outcome of the fact that most illicit profits are generated outside the drug sector.
- This suggests that seizure data is important – but not for the reasons generally accepted – and when carefully examined can be read as a reflection of changes in the political economy. If so, they may serve as 'warning flares' of pending political instability.

## Introduction

A pattern of cocaine seizures has emerged in West Africa since regional trafficking began in the 1990s. At first, only small quantities were seized, but over time, the volumes have increased. There was a surge in seizures in the mid-2000s and another surge in 2019, 2020 and early 2021. Much lower volumes were seized in between in the period that has been described as a 'seizure drought'.

How do we understand the distinctive pattern of these two surges of seizures in West Africa? For example, do increases in seizures mean that actual cocaine flows through the region have been increasing, or that law enforcement efficacy simply improved?

Or, in contrast, does the decline/lack of seizures (for example, in the period 2013 to 2018) mean that the criminal system managing the drug movement is working effectively through adopting methods that evade scrutiny, such as concealment in containers? It may equally be the case, given the many possible variables at play, that no single answer suffices. Yet, the two-headed seizure increase seems hard to dismiss simply as the outcome of a series of random events.

## Economic decline, combined with political instability, may promote trafficking

In trying to answer this conundrum, the available data and qualitative research suggest another intriguing possibility – that periods of political fracture, conflict or political transition may be aligned with greater volumes of cocaine seizures in West Africa. This is because, in certain states in West Africa, drug trafficking depends upon political protection, which (for a price) allows the trafficking machine to run smoothly: violence is kept in check and the product keeps moving unhindered.

Such protection networks often form in contexts where high-value flows (such as drugs) pass through areas of poor or weak governance, and exist along a spectrum from centralised state control to local actors, depending on the presence and influence of the state.<sup>1</sup> Seizures, therefore, indicate that the protection

machine is not working, and may point to political instability or political transition of some sort.

The breakdown of systems of political protection is most likely to occur in periods of political or economic disruption when either new players enter the system (looking for new protectors) or old systems of protection themselves weaken or decline. Economic decline, combined with political instability, may also promote trafficking, as may external pressure from affected states.

To emphasise, not every publicised seizure can be identified to be the result of breakdowns in the protection economy. What is likely significant, however, are overall patterns of seizure activity and their alignment to periods of political disruption/change, including data that suggests such an alignment in particularly badly affected countries.

This report is an attempt to explore the evidence and the implications for policy of this hypothesis. To do so requires a review of the cocaine seizure data, as well as what is known about the cocaine trade through West Africa, over the past three decades. It also requires probing how cocaine seizures may have intermeshed with periods of political instability or transition. If this hypothesis is borne out, then cocaine seizures in the last two years may perhaps themselves represent a 'signal flare' of wider disruption in the West African political economy.

The importance of this argument is twofold. Firstly, it reverses a too-simplistic understanding that seizures are a measure of actual flows of cocaine in West Africa.<sup>2</sup> Secondly, and more importantly, it turns the argument of instability and drug trafficking on its head by suggesting that drug seizures (and thus a perception of increased flows) are an outcome of the breaking down of protection systems tied to a particular political economy. As such, they are potentially a *sign of future instability* rather than necessarily a measure of increased trafficking flows, or a trigger of instability in and of themselves.

The paper begins with a brief overview of the West African cocaine trade and its place in the global cocaine economy. It then turns to an exploration of what might be termed the Goldilocks hypothesis, which explores the 'just right' set of conditions that are required for drugs to flow unrestricted through the West African region. It also briefly explores the question of what, in such contexts, seizures may or may not indicate.

The available data on cocaine seizures in the region is then presented, both by country and by region. An attempt is made to match the increases in cocaine seized with periods of political disruption. This is followed by a discussion on the political economy and conflict characteristics of the region and specific countries where seizures have occurred. The report concludes with a brief assessment of the implications of the findings for the future in light of the recent surge in seizures.

While the paper focuses on the relevance and evidence of the theory for West Africa, this is not to suggest that it is a phenomenon exclusive to the region. Similar large-scale seizures in North Africa over the same period, as well as in other regions of the world, certainly suggest that the same hypothesis may be true in these regions. Therefore, while recognising the complexity of the environment and the potential multiple causes and inter-dependencies, this is nonetheless a thesis worth considering as part of a wider discussion around the impact and political economy of illicit flows, governance and stability.

## The changing West African cocaine trade

West Africa has been a major repackaging and transshipment hub for cocaine produced in Latin America and then shipped and sold to markets in Europe since the early 1990s. The general interpretation is that the region represented a perfect opportunity for Latin American drug cartels seeking to diversify their traffic away from North America – and avoid mainly United States anti-narcotics efforts in and around the Caribbean – by aggressively targeting Europe.

However, the primacy given to Latin American traffickers generally discounts the fact that West African criminal groups, most notably Nigerians, were, in fact, the first innovators in the regional drug trade in the 1990s.<sup>3</sup> Africans (including West Africans in Brazil) and Europeans remain key actors in the transit trade. There are, in fact, two parallel trafficking economies in the region. One is largely West African organised and relies on commercial airline couriers. The other, with greater direct Latin American involvement (and a limited presence in West Africa itself), is responsible for bulk shipments of cocaine through the region.

Cocaine passes through three main geographic hubs on the western side of the African continent on its way to European drug markets. These hubs and the main cocaine trafficking routes from Latin America to West Africa are illustrated in Figure 1.

## West Africa has been a major repackaging and transshipment hub for cocaine since the early 1990s

The southern hub is centred largely on Nigeria and Ghana and neighbouring states such as Benin and Togo, while the western hub is centred around the small states on the coast of the African bulge, with Guinea-Bissau being the most well-known example. A northern hub, through which cocaine from the West African coastal states moves to Europe, is situated along the North African coast.

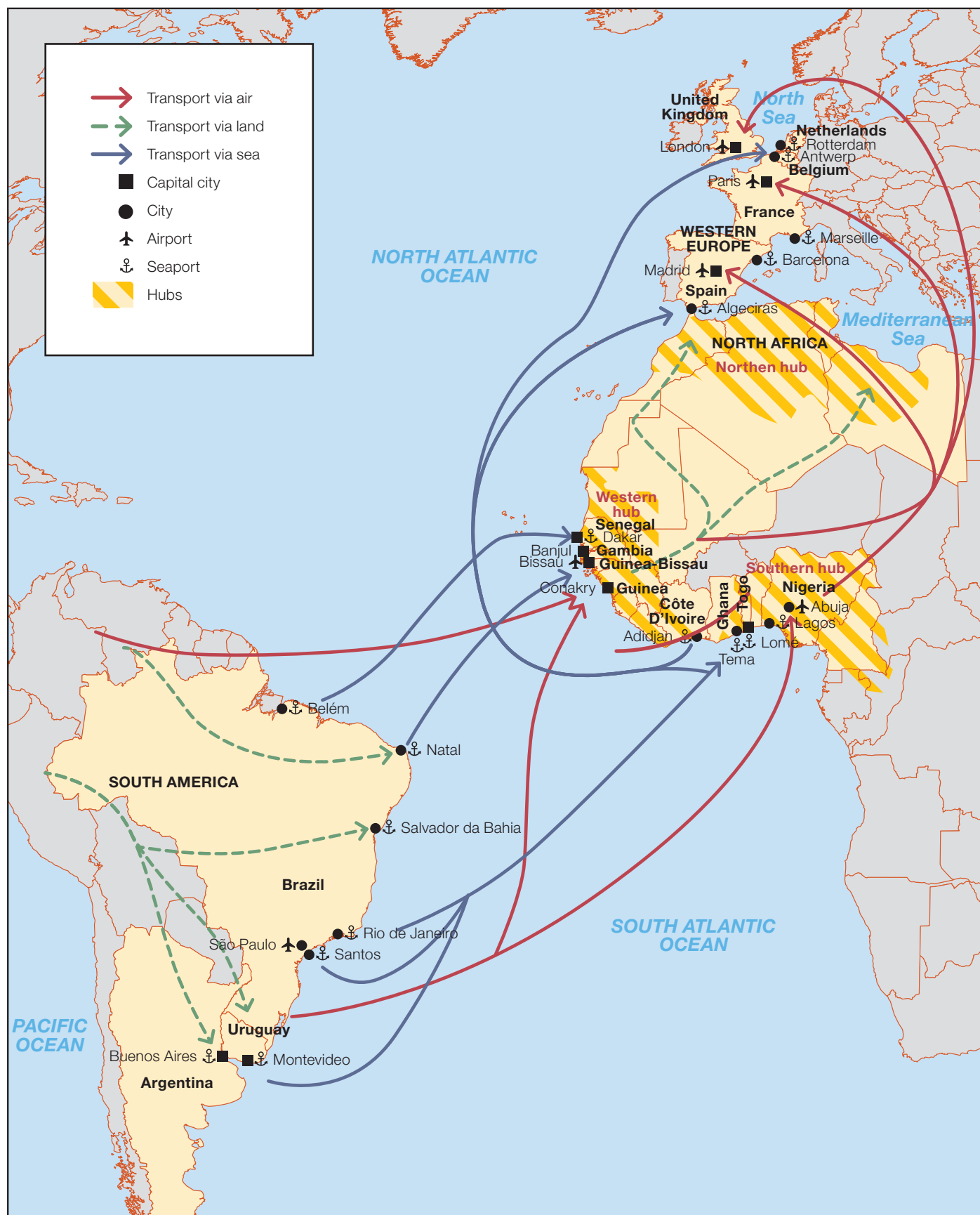
## Drought and flood

The last two years have seen a string of significant cocaine seizures in West Africa. These are mainly in the western hub (Cape Verde off the coast, Senegal, neighbouring Guinea-Bissau, The Gambia and Ivory Coast). What is significant is that these seizures follow a period between 2013 and 2018 when no significant seizures were made in West Africa during what has been termed the ‘seizure drought’.

This drought led to some debate from 2013 as to whether the region was no longer a major transit point for cocaine being shipped from Latin America to Europe. A diverse group of experts interviewed by the author in 2016 and 2018 almost all concluded that trafficking through West Africa had slowed or stopped. At least one reason cited was the increase in conflict in Libya, disrupting the ability of traffickers to transport drugs overland to the Mediterranean coast.<sup>4</sup>

The lack of seizures was all the more puzzling given that production of cocaine in the Andean region and consumption in Europe both increased during this time. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) measures of potential pure cocaine production remained relatively stable from the early

**Figure 1: Map of main trafficking routes from Latin America to West Africa and on to Europe**



Source: Global Initiative Against Transnational Organised Crime (GI-TOC); redrawn by COMPRESS.dsl



2000s until 2013/14, whereafter the volumes of pure cocaine produced accelerated dramatically, peaking in 2018 (the last year for which production data is available) at over 1 700 metric tonnes.<sup>5</sup>

However, interviews with those close to or involved in trafficking activities through the region have always emphasised that the phenomenon is not new and that the trade may have ebbed and flowed but never stopped.<sup>6</sup> More recent interviews, including with an experienced United Nations (UN) official in the region, indicate that trafficking never stopped or slowed during the 'seizure drought'.<sup>7</sup>

Criminal entrepreneurs active in West Africa have developed significant links over time with Latin American traffickers and these ties are resilient. As noted above, West Africans now have a significant presence and network in Latin America while Latin American traffickers have been frequent visitors to, and are sometimes resident in, West Africa. That suggests that trafficking through West Africa is well entrenched, with established networks, logistics systems and accumulated experience, all of which serve to maintain a flow of drugs.

Indeed, it seems that the drought period represented a time of innovation in the West African drug trafficking trade. The traffickers' approach shifted in the wake of a high-profile US Drugs Enforcement Administration (DEA) sting operation in 2013. The landing of cocaine onshore had become riskier. There was a general perception among traffickers that long-term trustworthy relationships in West Africa (as in the case of the Guinea-Bissau military who had tried to muscle in on the trade themselves<sup>8</sup>) were hard to sustain.

For this reason too, local criminal entrepreneurs were also emerging as stronger interlocutors, serving as effective go-betweens between suppliers and protectors, and in the process emerging as substantial players in their own right.<sup>9</sup> In Guinea-Bissau for example, the system of protection became more complicated, with overlaps in the political, military and criminal justice hierarchies.<sup>10</sup>

It now seems clearer that the flow continued and the movement of cocaine shifted to the use of containers.<sup>11</sup> Several interviewees at the time argued that the most likely scenario was that cocaine was being re-containerised in ports in West Africa before

being brought to Europe. A recent review of the Latin American European cocaine trade notes that this shift could have been a response to security measures targeted at suspicious vessels making the journey, or 'simply because traffickers were growing more aware of the advantages ... a sign of the fact that the volume of cocaine needed to feed the booming European markets required the type of bulk-transport capabilities offered by containers.'<sup>12</sup>

The shift to containers took advantage of the enormous diversity of port facilities with container terminals along the West African coastline. A 2012 study, for example, noted that while 'West Africa occupies a marginal position in the [global] economic system, [it] nevertheless provides a striking illustration of the changes that are occurring as a result of globalisation and the deregulation of transport networks.'<sup>13</sup> That made West African port infrastructure uniquely vulnerable and allowed traffickers to rapidly switch ports. Trade volumes through several West African ports has also increased since 2006, making it more challenging to intercept and/or search shipments of cocaine.

The lack of seizures was all the more puzzling given that production and consumption of cocaine increased during this time

However, this shift to containers could not have been done without the cognisance and support of the authorities (port officials, customs, police) and in some cases, some political elites in the region. Trafficking containers through ports was made possible by high levels of corruption and low levels of port security. In that sense, the low seizure figures for the drought do not merely reflect a changing modus operandi, but also constitute an important dataset regarding the evolution of the political protection economy in the region. And it was this aspect of institutional and political protection that may again have proved West Africa's most appealing characteristic when it came to drug trafficking.

## The Goldilocks principle

Many explanations have been put forward as to why West Africa is such an attractive transit zone for drug trafficking. At the height of a period of drug seizures in 2008, Antonio Maria Costa, the Executive Director of the UNODC, concluded in the UNODC's first major report on cocaine trafficking in West Africa that 'Latin American drug cartels are preying on West Africa because the countries of the region are vulnerable.'<sup>14</sup>

Several analyses have concurred with this assessment, positing that the region is vulnerable because it is politically unstable and prone to corruption, with weak systems of governance and criminal justice.<sup>15</sup> Drug traffickers, both in sworn court testimony and in interviews with the author and others, have suggested that particular countries (most notably Guinea-Bissau) have a set of useful conditions, such as weak oversight by foreign actors and the ease with which political protection can be bought.<sup>16</sup>

These conditions might be termed the Goldilocks principle, after the well-known fairy tale. The term has spread to be used in a wide variety of disciplines to define a zone or place where conditions may be 'just right'.<sup>17</sup> In astrophysics, for example, a Goldilocks zone is the habitable zone around a star, where it is not too hot or too cold for liquid water to form – a useful guiding principle when searching for planets that may host extraterrestrial life.

'Latin American drug cartels are preying on West Africa because the countries of the region are vulnerable.'

In the context of drug trafficking, interviews and court testimony in the case of Guinea-Bissau (but which have wider applicability) emphasise two particular and connected success or 'just right' factors for those engaged in trafficking. The first of these is that trafficking requires a relative degree of stability. Unpredictable political and military regimes and open violence on the streets are bad for traffickers. The level of stability need not be Switzerland-style – in other words too stable, which allows for effective law enforcement – but just stable enough (in other words 'just right').<sup>18</sup>

The second factor is the aforementioned ability to buy political or criminal justice protection – the higher up the better. We know from multiple interviews with those engaged in different forms of illicit trafficking that successful criminal actors actively seek out protection, seeing it as essential to business.

Even here there is a 'just right' balance: protection must be buyable from multiple actors, but with the opportunity to use senior actors to reach in and rescue people or consignments when necessary.<sup>19</sup> To put it differently, the 'just right' level of political protection needs multiple and overlaying forms, rather than just the owning of the political leadership.

A single political leader in a drug trafficker's pocket may be useful in the short term, but a better system is one that appears almost normal on the surface, but in reality, consists of multiple and often confusing overlays of protection. This makes it harder for outsiders to understand who to target and why. In short, a complex set of conditions that can be judged as 'just right'.<sup>20</sup>

The 'just right' form of political and institutional protection often appears as impregnable, or at least (deliberately) confusing and hard to understand for outsiders and indeed sometimes for insiders, *until it is not*. Complex and overlaying systems of political and institutional protection are often reliant on a few key nodes or strategic appointments. So the shift of a single individual or the weakening of some part of the system means that the unravelling of the system or at least the opening up of space for law enforcement can occur rapidly.

This weakening can occur, for example, when a senior political actor finds themselves vulnerable and unable to provide protection. In the case of Guinea-Bissau for example, a significant seizure in March 2019 was made by the Judicial Police despite the apparent intervention of the office of the president. Senior Judicial Police officers felt there was enough external backing for what they were doing because the president was reaching the end of his term and an election was about to be held.<sup>21</sup>

In short, the 'just right' conditions as the phrase implies, can quickly change and shift out of kilter. When that occurs, the system of political protection fractures and the trafficking flow is disrupted.

Perhaps the most prominent indicator of that disruption is the incidence of seizures. On its own, seizure data does not provide an accurate description of trends and patterns in the illicit trade. Seizure data includes the total number,

or weight, of seizures over time or between countries. However, what seizures do show clearly is whether trafficking is present, as well as the local and international networks connected to individual consignments.<sup>22</sup> Seizures are also failures of the trafficking business to transport product to an end consumer – what one recent review of the topic called ‘the dysfunctional part of the trade.’<sup>23</sup>

Seizures also tell us something about law enforcement and reporting, which can occur only in specific sets of conditions. When conditions are ‘just right’, there is little scope for seizures as trafficking activity is protected and law enforcement activity is constrained. When seizures do occur, the seized drugs are handed back to the traffickers (perhaps for a fee) and the seizure is not recorded. But when a period of political change or conflict causes disruption in the system of protection, seizures increase because law enforcement is more independent and less constrained.

Some of these activities may also occur in periods of political change as old members of the protection system (who may now be political opponents) are targeted. Such political transitions do not have to be negative in content or

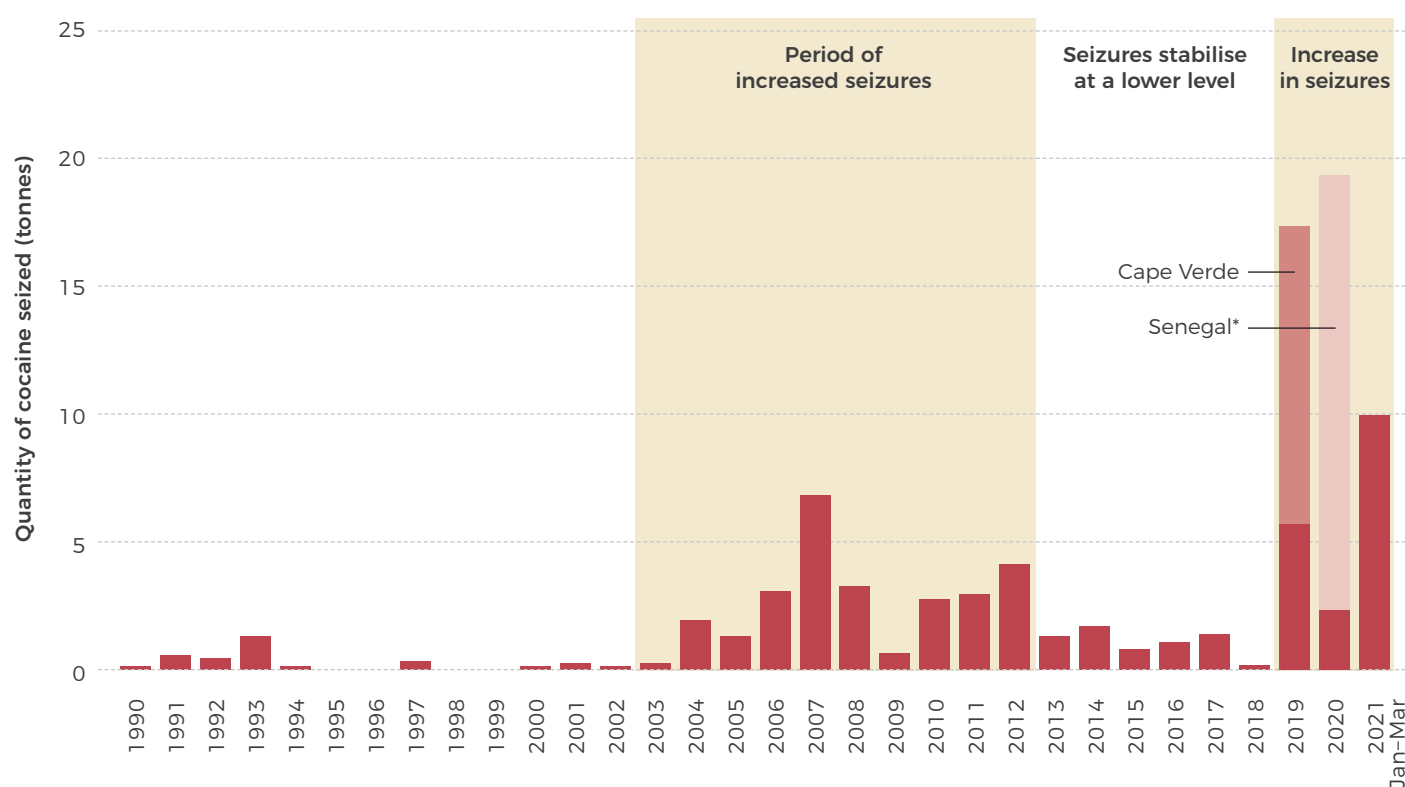
outcome. Opposition politicians may have the opportunity of coming to power and then displaying stronger levels of integrity and accountability. But that is still a disruption to the prevailing system of protection and is no guarantee that new systems of protection will not be built.

In this explanation, seizures become a warning flare of impending political instability or transition – effectively the breaking or weakening of protection networks and the period before the establishment of potential new ones. This is rather than a seizure being an indication of a surge or increase in drug trafficking itself. What follows is an attempt to put this assertion to the test.

## West African cocaine seizure data

There is no single source providing a comprehensive overview of all reported cocaine seizure data for West Africa. The data represented here is collated from a variety of sources, including a review of media and other reporting, taking care to eliminate cases of double counting. The overall results of this process are presented in Figure 2, which shows the total volumes of seized cocaine across the region by year.

**Figure 2: Annual reported cocaine seizures by volume in West Africa 1990–2020**



Source: GI-TOC

When presented in this way, the data shows four broad periods. The first period, from 1990 to 2002, shows relatively low levels of seizures. The second, from 2003 to 2012, shows a marked increase and then a concentration over time in cocaine seizures. The third period, from 2013 to 2018, shows a decline in seizures to lower levels, although not as low as in the 1990 to 2002 period, referred to as the 'seizure drought'. The fourth, over the last two and a half years, shows a rapid increase in seizures, with two extraordinarily large seizures that are either yet to be confirmed (Senegal) or tangentially linked to West Africa (and thus are shown as shaded).

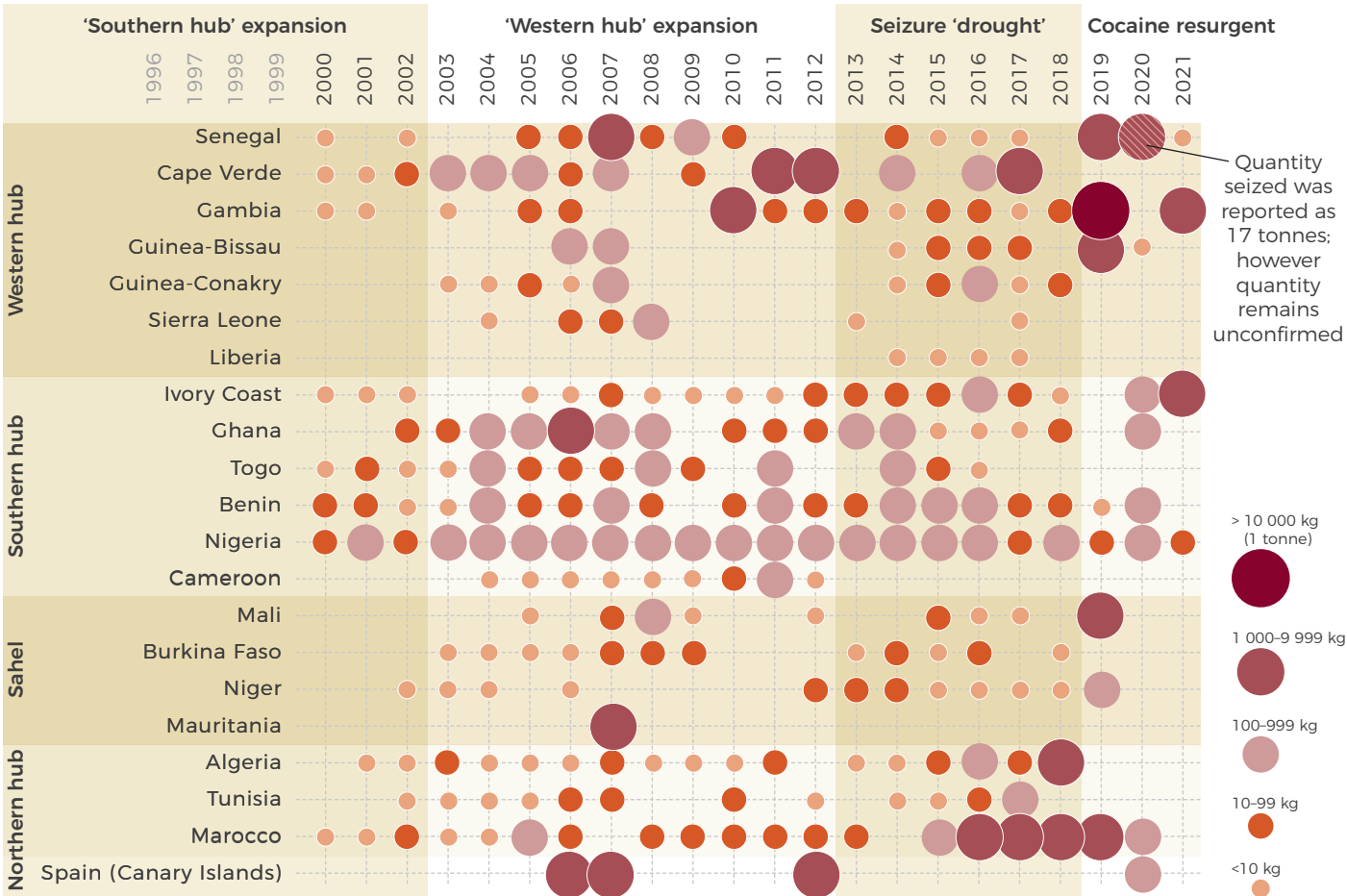
Figure 3 shows the breakdown of seizures per country in each of the main regional/geographic trafficking hubs. This shows a geographic shift in the weight of where seizures occurred along the following lines:

- Seizures in the western hub (the top band) are broadly clustered around two periods: the mid-

2000s and a distinctive surge from 2019. The mid-2000s seizures coincided with a period in which drug trafficking through West Africa, most notably Guinea-Bissau, was in the news. This also included seizures in several neighbouring countries. Most prominently, The Gambia, but also Sierra Leone, Liberia, Guinea, Senegal and, most recently, Ivory Coast. Cape Verde, a key island stop on the Latin America-West Africa drug route, has also reported significant cocaine seizures, including a colossal 9.5 tonne seizure in 2019 that is described in more detail below.

- Seizures are most consistent across the southern hub (the middle band of Figure 3), but with only one exception, have never exceeded 1 000 kg. Seizures in Nigeria have remained remarkably consistent and low across the reporting period, averaging about 270 kg per year between 2003 and 2020 (a figure in itself skewed by a one-off large seizure of over 700 kg in 2010). With one exception

Figure 3: Cocaine seizures across West Africa by hub and country, 2000–2021



Source: GI-TOC



(Ghana, 2006), large seizures are not a feature of this group of countries.

- The Sahelian region has seen few major drug seizures. This is perhaps unsurprising, given both its vast area and the fact that drug consignments are broken into smaller volumes before being transported across its expanse. Mauritania last reported a sizable volume of cocaine seized in 2007 and Mali did the same in 2019 (although what happened, in this case, remains unclear). Both consignments were likely to have entered West Africa through Guinea-Bissau.
- In contrast to the West African coastline and the Sahel, the northern hub along the North African coast showed a distinct upswing in seizures, in particular in Morocco, between 2015 and 2019. It is likely that at least some of these cocaine consignments were moving westward from the drug system around Guinea-Bissau and then transiting Mauritania on their way to Morocco for onward shipping to Europe. This is another indication that trafficking through the coastal states continued in the course of the 'seizure drought'.

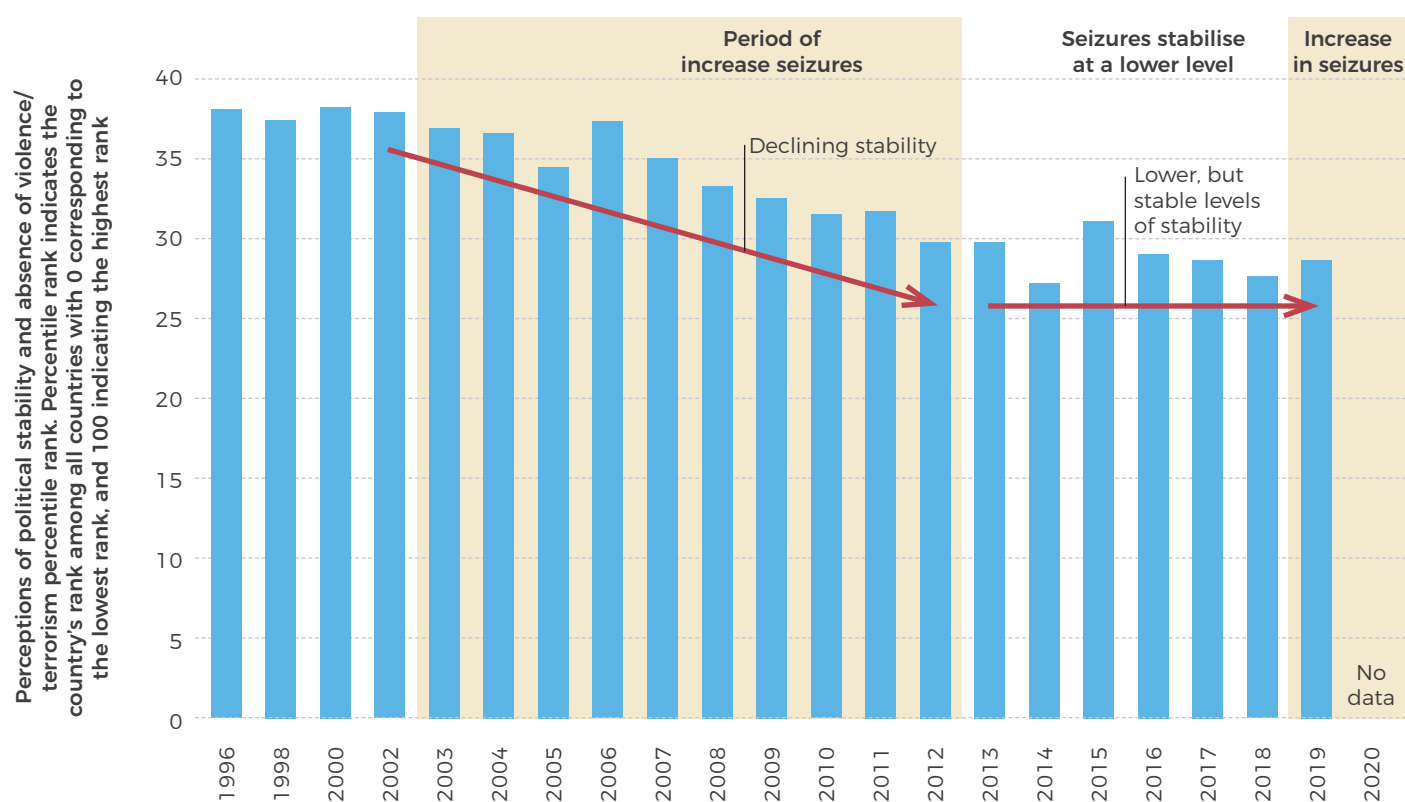
## Aligning cocaine seizures with reductions in stability

Several global indices provide the opportunity to measure changes in stability or increases in political conflict. For our purposes, the World Bank's Political Stability and Absence of Violence/Terrorism Ranking provides a useful long-term data set to measure increases or declines in political stability in the West African region. Political stability, as a concept, is not obviously quantifiable, so the ranking measures a series of perceptions of the likelihood of political instability and/or politically motivated violence.<sup>24</sup>

This ranking is useful as it provides a consolidation of a wide array of assessments not only of political violence and conflict but also of political unrest and transition. It also gives data over a relatively long period (although ending in 2019).

As illustrated in Figure 4, the Political Stability Ranking for West Africa shows a period of relative stability between 1996 and 2004 (above a score of 35), followed

**Figure 4: West African Political Stability Ranking measured alongside increases in seizures of cocaine**



Source: GI-TOC

by a relatively steady decline in political stability in the region from 2005 (2006 is an outlier).

The ranking dropped below 30 in 2012. From 2013 there is once again a period of comparative stability, although at a significantly lower level (in a band between 25 and 30, with an outlier in 2015).<sup>25</sup> The period of decline in political stability in the region aligns closely with the largest increase of seizures which took place between 2003 and 2012, followed by a period of relatively few seizures to 2019.

This apparent alignment between declining stability and rising cocaine seizures, on the face of it, seems counter-intuitive. We might expect seizures to rise during periods of political stability, when law enforcement agencies benefit from a stable administrative environment, and fall when political turmoil hampers law enforcement efficacy or will, and yet the opposite seems to be the case.

While it is conceded that multiple variables may give rise to individual seizures, it can equally be argued that a pattern of increased seizures in a particular period suggests a set of conditions making seizures more likely or possible.<sup>26</sup> But that granted, we are still left with the question: How might these conditions of instability foster a climate that is more conducive to seizures?

## Instability breaks old systems of political protection, resulting in more seizures

In answering this question, it may help to look at the equation from the other side and ask what effect political instability/disruption may have on the overall ecosystem of trafficking. One possibility is that instability breaks old systems of political protection, resulting in more seizures. This cracking in the protective film around the trafficking ecosystem may provide new information for law enforcement to exploit (individuals telling what they know about political opponents). It may also provide less political control over law enforcement. Non-corrupted officers may feel that they have more political space in a time of contested politics.

Internal events within law enforcement agencies themselves may also serve as flares of change. The replacement of key personnel or the dismissal of some personnel for corruption may signify the end of political

protection. Although depending on the context, it may also mean there are new players in a newly constituted one.

Several key and interconnected points need to be made in this regard. The first is that it is challenging to make a direct alignment between individual seizures and local politics. Rumours abound in every case, including over what may be behind a seizure, and information that led to the seizure may be heavily masked to disguise the source. As interesting as the background to a seizure, is the outcome. Do senior officials/state functionaries/politicians attempt to interfere in the case? Is a seizure reported with no resulting drugs produced? Are drugs seized but then all or a part of the consignment disappears from state custody?

There are numerous accounts of all such cases from across the region. The main conclusion here is to suggest that while it may be impossible in all cases to link individual seizures and politics, a higher-level data comparison (instability vs growth in reported seizures), provides one way to illustrate a set of connections that occur below the surface. Thus, even a report of a seizure where no drugs are seized would be important for our analysis, illustrating as it does that interference has occurred and that by implication, systems of political protection remain in place.<sup>27</sup>

The second issue to highlight is that trafficking systems are ecosystems that cross national borders. That means that individual country seizures may not align with the overall trend. Seizures linked to certain countries may occur elsewhere, in another country or at sea. A good example of this is Guinea-Bissau, which remains a key platform in the trafficking ecosystem around The Gambia and Senegal – the western hub. Seizures that are likely to have transited Guinea-Bissau have been made at sea, in neighbouring country ports (Dakar and Banjul, for example) and on the sub-regional road system (in Mali, for example).

Given this, instability in two key countries – Guinea-Bissau and Mali, where significant volumes of cocaine are trafficked, and which we will consider in more detail below – aligns closely with overall increases in wider regional seizure data. It also suggests that a consolidated set of regional seizure data is a good data set to compare against the regional stability ranking.

The final point to make is that while the alignment between increased volumes of seizures and instability is relatively consistent regionally as illustrated in Figure 4,

there is likely a delay between increasing seizures and a perceptible increase in instability or a period of political transition. One hypothesis for this is that seizures occur before rapid declines in instability, making them indicators of fragmenting politics.

## Case studies: Nigeria, Guinea-Bissau and Mali

The alignment between rising seizures and declining stability invites a more detailed qualitative look at how such relationships might look in practice. Three brief case studies deserve attention. The first is the interesting pattern of consistent seizures in Nigeria and what this may say about that country's trafficking ecosystem in the context of what might be called stable instability. The other two case studies – Guinea-Bissau and Mali respectively – serve as useful test cases both of alignment between seizures and instability. They also make the point that seizures are a harbinger of instability, given that there is a delay between clusters of seizures and then sudden declines in instability.

### Nigeria: the seizure ceiling

As shown in Figure 3, Nigeria has had a remarkably consistent pattern of low seizures – averaging about 270 kg per year – reported every year between 2003 and 2020. There was only one year in that period showing a significant spike above the 400 kg threshold (706 kg in 2010), and only two years dropping below the 100 kg threshold (90 kg in 2017 and 15 kg in 2019).

What is also intriguing is that the country is reflected in the World Bank Stability Ranking as having a low but stable ranking ('stable instability'), without the dramatic fluctuations present in other countries (Guinea-Bissau, Mali, The Gambia or Ivory Coast). A consistent volume of low seizures is matched by a consistent measure of low stability – in contrast to the gyrations in other countries in the region. What could be the explanation? A quick historical overview is helpful.

In the late 1980s, major Colombian drug-smuggling groups, reacting to the near-saturation of the US market, sought relationships with West African heroin traders to transport cocaine.<sup>28</sup> The result was that in the course of the 1990s and early 2000s, small volumes of cocaine transited through the region, most notably in Nigeria and Ghana – the nascent southern hub.

This movement was largely the work of West African criminal networks themselves, with no Latin Americans in West Africa to coordinate the trade or seek alliances. These networks were mainly made up of Nigerians with an initial concentration of activity in Nigeria itself.<sup>29</sup>

Trafficking took place mainly by commercial airliner, a system in which Nigerian criminal groups have specialised. While seizures have been made at Nigerian seaports (for example, 60 kg on a Brazilian vessel at Tin Can Island in 2002<sup>30</sup>), they have been few and far between. Couriers travel on flights using complicated routings, in some cases travelling from Brazil to Europe, changing courier in the airport transit area itself before travelling back to West Africa, where passengers arriving from Europe are less likely to be searched thoroughly.

One hypothesis is that seizures occur before rapid declines in instability, making them indicators of fragmenting politics

The growth and long-term settlement of a large West African population in Brazil has also been key to sustaining the airline courier drug business from Latin America.

Cocaine money had never been far from politics<sup>31</sup> but Nigeria and neighbouring Ghana are big countries and cocaine money was less significant alongside other illicit flows, most notably from oil in Nigeria. That did not mean that there was no protective system around cocaine trafficking, only that it may have occurred at lower levels within the state, or had fewer higher-level connections, as in, for example, Guinea-Bissau or Mali.

These particular conditions may have resulted in an established system of trafficking where a tacit understanding has developed between some in the authorities and traffickers that smaller and consistent amounts are surrendered. Admittedly this may be impossible to prove.

Interviews with foreign law enforcement officers in Nigeria do suggest the real possibility that this might be the case. According to a senior Western law enforcement official: 'No one gets access to the airport. Anyone who works at the airport gets a brown envelope and nothing

happens there without the officials in charge knowing. Smaller seizures are either for show or to take out smaller competition.<sup>32</sup>

The suggestion was that there was effectively an agreement between trafficking networks and at least some of the authorities. A small portion of cocaine is given up to demonstrate state activity through 'seizures', on the understanding that wider trafficking will not be impeded.<sup>33</sup> Foreign officials' suggestions of external assistance, such as the buying of computers to assist profiling and training of officials, are not drawn upon for this reason.<sup>34</sup>

## There may be a tacit understanding that smaller and consistent amounts are surrendered

It is conceded that a reliance on foreign law enforcement sources does not provide a definitive conclusion, but is only indicative of what may be occurring. Media coverage and interviews in Nigeria, for example, point to the complexity of trafficking networks, with airline officials and cargo handling personnel also being implicated. But the presence of wider and complex networks engaged in moving drugs in Nigeria still does not negate the reality that some form of protection or payoff is required to move drug consignments, whoever is involved.

As suggested, such an arrangement would be highly challenging to prove and any attempt would no doubt be strongly objected to by the authorities. However, it is certainly not unknown elsewhere in drug trafficking and/or local criminal economies.<sup>35</sup> If this is true, and to draw the argument back to the link between stability and seizures, the Nigerian 'seizure ceiling' suggests a balance has been achieved.

Again, one reason for that endurance may be the size of other illicit markets in Nigeria (reducing competition and political attention) and the reality that coastal West Africa also provides multiple other trafficking through-points. It may also be because there has not been enough political disruption (instability) to break apart the protective ecosystem. The result is a locked-in ecosystem of trafficking that has remained reasonably stable, resulting in the low but consistent volume of seizures.

## Guinea-Bissau: seizures as a signal of coming instability

Unlike Nigeria, smaller countries with weaker systems of governance and histories of conflict were to prove more vulnerable to the impact of the cocaine trade – or at least more vulnerable to having greater involvement of the political elite when there are fewer other resources. Nowhere is this clearer than in Guinea-Bissau, where the link between political instability and cocaine seizures is remarkably consistent.

The initial focus of cocaine traffickers was on Guinea-Bissau because of the perceived lack of foreign surveillance, and because of perceptions that local elites (particularly the military) were corruptible.<sup>36</sup> There is evidence that Latin American traffickers from Colombia and Venezuela began exploring the possibilities of using Guinea-Bissau as a transport platform in the late 1990s. Court testimony from those close to the traffickers, however, suggests that the transit of cocaine was scaled up in 2003 after the military seized power in Bissau, partly because the country was not seen as 'pro-Yankee', in the words of one trafficker.<sup>37</sup>

During this period of expansion, cocaine trafficking affected multiple states, most prominently Guinea-Bissau, but also Liberia and Sierra Leone, and was conducted by sea and air, with ships and planes used specifically for transporting cocaine. In the case of sea transport, particularly off the rugged island-dominated coast of Guinea-Bissau, mother ships transferred cocaine to smaller boats for transport to shore or packages were floated from the ships to be washed up on the shore. Such extensive operations undeniably required protection.

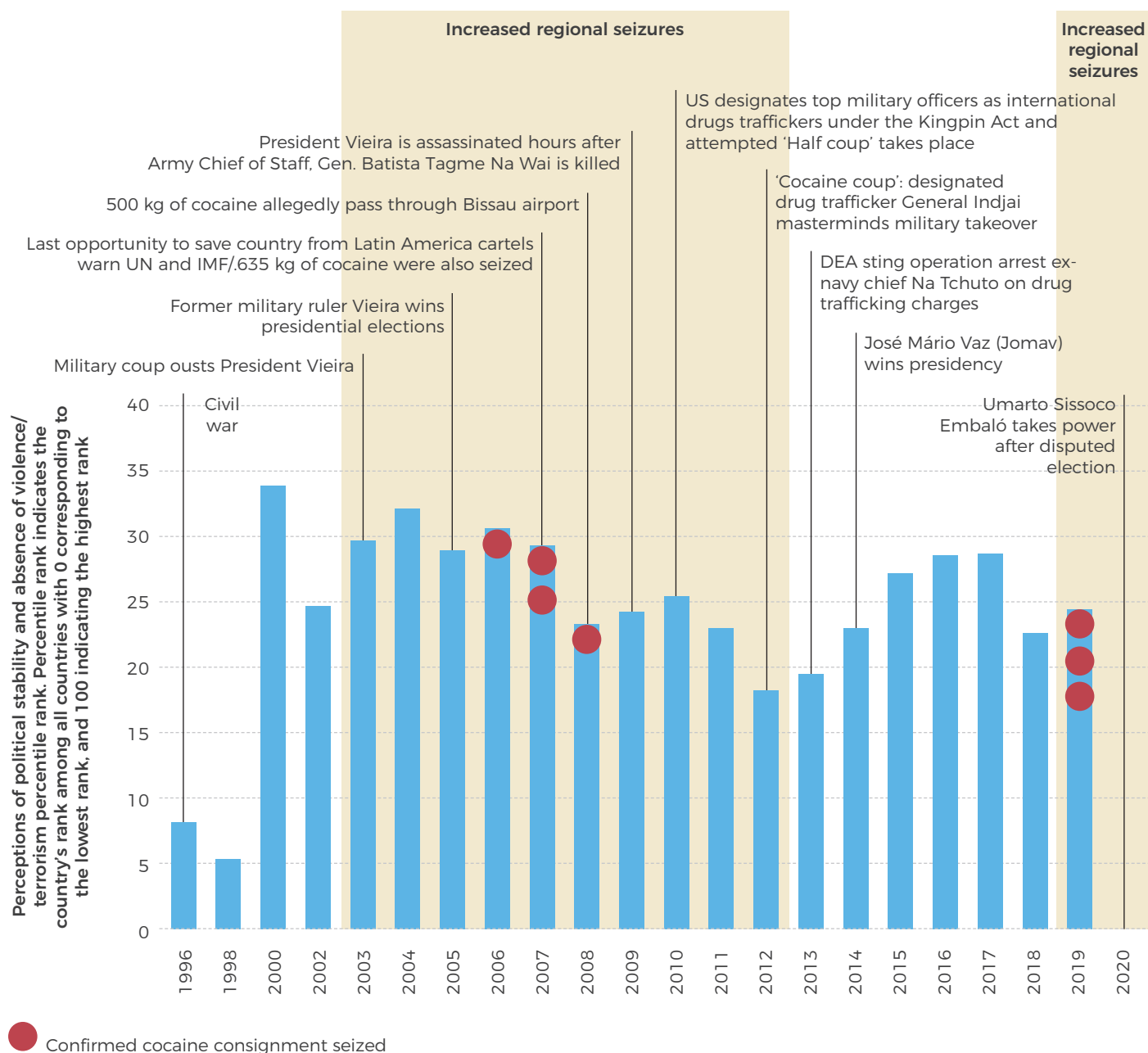
Trafficking of cocaine through Guinea-Bissau was running at full throttle by 2007 and Latin American traffickers were a prominent fixture in Bissau, moving around the city with little fear of arrest or interference. When seizures of drugs were made, as was the case in April 2007, when the Judicial Police seized 635 kg, consignments were confiscated by the military and returned to the traffickers.

In effect, elements within the Bissau-Guinean elite at the time had made a pact with the traffickers, and a protective ecosystem in exchange for payment allowed the movement of drugs. There was an international outcry at the time, with Guinea-Bissau earning the label of Africa's first narco-state.<sup>38</sup>

But there were signs of impending change too. The volume of seizures was greatest in 2007, with matching interview and court testimony from traffickers who reported on their concerns around the interception of consignments by the Bissau-Guinean Judicial Police. This included raids on warehouses rented by a prominent criminal entrepreneur with political connections. This rise in seizures took place against a backdrop of rising instability, as shown in Figure 5, which evolved into a prolonged period of political instability between 2008 to 2014.

There are two possible explanations of the link between seizures and instability worth highlighting here. The first is that the occurrence of the seizures in this period aligns with the argument that major seizures take place when the political protection system is damaged in some way, opening up the possibility for independent law enforcement action. This was the case in Guinea-Bissau, with a series of courageous attempts by the Judicial Police to arrest key traffickers.

**Figure 5: Political stability in Guinea-Bissau with prominent events and major cocaine seizures**



Source: GI-TOC



That space was partly opened up by a growth in international oversight but also by a local law enforcement perception that there was some space for their intervention.<sup>39</sup> 'Sometimes the best time to act,' said one senior Judicial Police official, 'is in the more uncertain periods between governments and when information from political opponents may be more available.' A prominent civil society leader agreed: 'When politics is shifting, or seen to be shifting, then the possibility of the system being disrupted is higher.'<sup>40</sup>

However, the system of protection still retained significant influence, including the forceful blocking of the Judicial Police, the seizure of drugs by the military and their return to the traffickers. The latter occurred in a seizure in September 2006, for example, when the Bissau-Guinean military confiscated drugs that subsequently disappeared.<sup>41</sup>

## By 2007 Latin American traffickers were a prominent fixture in Bissau

The second issue to consider here is one of timing. The seizures align with a rapid descent into instability between 2006 and 2008. Seizures then stop as instability stabilises at a lower level as military actors grew in influence both politically and in the drug trade. In 2010, senior military officials, including Chief of Staff General Antonio Indjai, were designated as drug traffickers by the United States and a so-called half-coup took place in which military officers were behind a new civilian government.

The period of political instability within the Bissau-Guinean elite effectively ended when one faction, aligned to senior military officers, mounted a coup in April 2012, sealing their influence. At least one objective of that coup was to strengthen the military's hold on the cocaine trade, with strong evidence that trafficking was ramped up in the wake of the power grab. The coup was widely referred to locally as the cocaine coup. Seen through that lens, the seizures between 2006 and 2008 were an indication of the impending power struggles that characterised the country until 2014.

With stability on the rise, there were no subsequent seizures until a spate of large cocaine hauls, again due to

the activity of the Judicial Police, in 2019. These seizures significantly also marked the beginning of another period of political flux and conflict within Guinea-Bissau as one political regime succeeded another, potentially opening an established system of political protection and creating a new one.

The question should then be asked: Does the more recent cluster of seizures in Guinea-Bissau signal a new longer-term cycle of instability and more authoritarian rule, as did the previous cluster in 2006–2008?

## Seizures and high-level protection in Mali

By the late 1990s, Mali had become a key through route for cocaine into the interior, with new commercial elites with drug ties having emerged in the northern half of the country.<sup>42</sup> Smuggling through the Sahel has long been a resilience strategy for ordinary people and prominent businessmen and from which local protection networks have benefited. But the comparative profits from the cocaine market attracted high-level attention and eventually, President Amadou Toumani Touré (widely known as ATT) himself became invested in the control of the cocaine economy.<sup>43</sup>

Drug money, while not the only illicit source of funds, became a key source of patronage mediated by the presidency, who was often in direct contact with Latin American traffickers. Over time, illicit money distorted the fragile politics of the north. Eventually, the whole edifice, which had been bolstered by the appointment of compromised military personnel, came tumbling down in the coup of March 2012 when ATT was overthrown by disaffected army officers.

A period of conflict and instability has followed, despite the deployment of a UN peacekeeping mission and French and other foreign military forces.<sup>44</sup>

In contrast to Guinea-Bissau, there have been few large seizures in Mali and so the overall position is harder to interpret. This is largely because consignments have been broken up as they are transported northwards and there has been greater secrecy around airplane landings. However, based on the major seizures and incidents where trafficking has been exposed, Mali can be said to fit a similar pattern to Guinea-Bissau: a set of seizures and two incidents of exposed state interference just as the decline in stability accelerates.

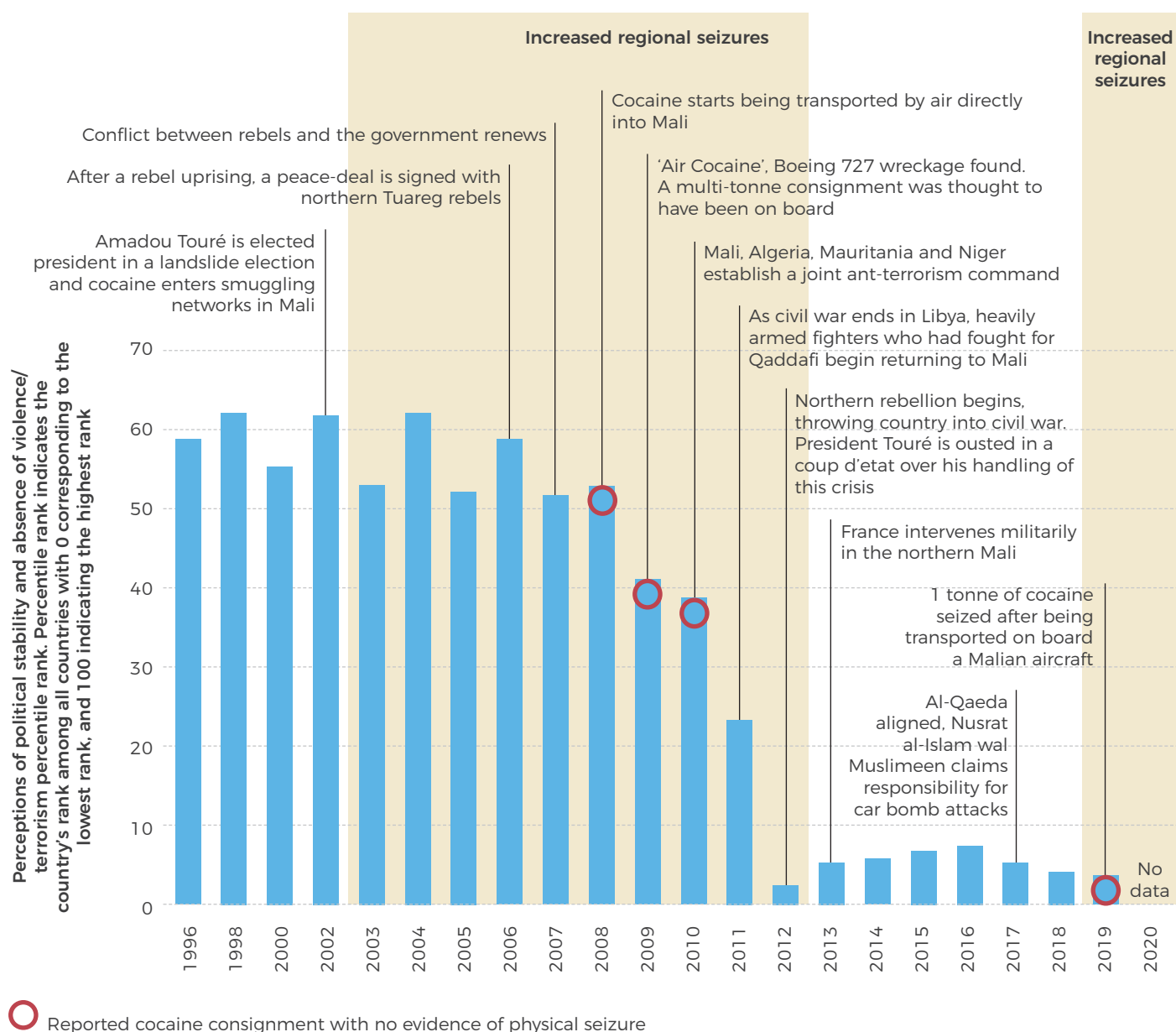
As outlined in Figure 6, Mali's stability ranking had been very high (60), with the country considered a beacon of democracy in the region. However, its ranking declined sharply from 2008 to one of the lowest in the world in 2012 (under 10) when the government was overthrown. This period was also when three publicly reported cocaine-related incidents occurred, in 2008, 2009 and 2010.

In January 2008, 750 kg of cocaine were reported to have been seized by the authorities following a shootout. There are no subsequent indications of what happened to the drugs.<sup>45</sup>

In 2009, a Boeing 727 airliner flew from Venezuela to Mali with a cargo of cocaine and was found burned out in the Malian desert in what became known as the Air Cocaine incident. The exact quantity of cocaine removed from the plane is unknown but it was likely to have been several tonnes. Interviews suggest that the presidential office effectively blocked intervention until the drugs had been removed and the plane destroyed.<sup>46</sup>

In 2010, another large consignment of cocaine was seized by a group of Ifoghas Tuareg and Kounta Arabs from Tilemsi Arabs and Imghads Tuareg smugglers.

**Figure 6: Changes in Mali's political stability ranking, key events and major drug seizures/events**



Source: GI-TOC

Tilemsi Arabs responded by kidnapping the leader of the Kounta Arabs in the region of Gao. What happened to the drug consignment after the seizure is unknown.<sup>47</sup>

In each of these incidents, no volumes of cocaine were made public or recorded in UN statistics. There is strong evidence that the highest level of the state intervened in the case of the Air Cocaine incident, and it is likely that state officials may have played a role in mediating the outcome in the other two cases. The incidents suggest the erosion of the established political economy around cocaine trafficking as state control weakened but did not become powerless as it was able to intervene in the seizures suggesting a core of political control remained.

As instability grew, however, evidence of cocaine quite literally dried up, although interviews suggest that some trafficking continued. It seems possible that at least one reason for the decline in the evidence of drug trafficking in the form of seizures (even where the drugs subsequently disappear) is that instability in Mali became chronic. The result was that law enforcement seizure capacity was minimal and the landscape also became hostile to traffickers. However, there have been signs in the past two years that trafficking through Mali is once again rising.

## Possible implications of the new wave of seizures

This report has attempted to rethink how seizure data may be useful, beyond assertions of increases or decreases in trafficking, and suggests that seizures might be more usefully read as a signal of declining stability than as an indication of the overall extent of cocaine flows through West Africa. If the overall analysis in the paper is correct, then the surge in seizures from 2019 up till the first three months of 2021 perhaps bode poorly for several West African countries.

In February 2019, the regional seizure drought came to an abrupt end when 9.5 tonnes of cocaine was found on a Russian vessel that had been forced to dock in Cape Verde when a crew member had fallen sick. The Cape Verde seizure was only inadvertently connected to West Africa in that the ship would presumably have made directly for Europe or another destination, from where the cargo would have been transferred. However, several seizures in the following months clearly showed the extent to which cocaine was transiting West Africa.

In March 2019, just under 800 kg of cocaine was seized from a Senegalese-registered truck that had travelled from Bissau to Dakar to pick up the consignment. The truck was to have driven on to Mali.

More mysteriously, a report of the UN Panel of Experts on Mali reported in August 2019 that earlier in the year 'the Panel received two precise testimonies from informed Government sources concerning an intercept in Tabamkort of 1 tonne of cocaine, which was flown by a CASA CN-235 transport aircraft of the Malian army from Gao to Bamako during the weekend of 11 and 12 May 2019 and is allegedly in the custody of the Malian security services.'<sup>48</sup> There was no subsequent media reporting of this case, although its sourcing appears to be reliable.

Seizures might be more usefully read as a signal of declining stability than as an indication of the overall extent of cocaine flows through West Africa

Seizures continued throughout 2019 and 2020. In July 2019, 1.3 tonnes were seized in Dakar's port in a consignment of cars. An unknown amount, said to be substantial, was seized in The Gambia in August 2019, with 3 tonnes washing up on a beach in Morocco in the same month. In November 2019, Guinea-Bissau saw another substantial seizure of 1.8 tonnes (believed to be part of a 13-tonne consignment) and 750 kg was seized off the Senegalese coast. In December 2019, 4.4 tonnes were found in shipping containers in the port of Montevideo, Uruguay, which were destined for Lomé in Togo.

A reference in a UN Security Council report in December 2020 of a truly enormous seizure of 17 tonnes off the West African coast by the Senegalese navy appears not to be accurate,<sup>49</sup> although given the source it has been included speculatively in Figure 2 above.

The upswing of seizures was strongly concentrated around the western hub, with several having a strong connection to criminal networks operating in and around Guinea-Bissau. A change of government after a contested election at the end of 2019 saw the return of

at least some military officials that had been previously linked to drug trafficking in the country. While the position continues to evolve, the pattern of seizures suggests that the country may be on a precipice leading to further conflict.

The other country where there has been a recent pattern of seizures is Ivory Coast, including a 6-tonne haul in March 2021. Time will tell whether those seizures also portend a period of instability in the coming years.

## Broader flow dynamics

Even if the 9.5 tonne shipment in Cape Verde is considered an outlier and the 17 tonne Senegalese navy haul treated with caution, the combined seizure levels of these two years and three months (at over 17 tonnes) are comparable with that of the previous highest year, 2007 (just over 6 tonnes).<sup>50</sup> Assuming conservatively that the volumes moving through West Africa today are therefore at 2007/8 levels (estimated around 40 to 50 tonnes), something in the order of 15–20%<sup>51</sup> of cocaine destined for Europe from Latin America is currently transiting in some way through West Africa.

There is the possibility that this amount could now be higher<sup>52</sup> and it represents a sizable proportion of Europe's cocaine market.

Globally, the drivers are in place to push these flows even higher, in the shape of record-high levels of cocaine production in Latin America and sky-high demand in Europe. The United States' Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP) reports an increase in estimated production to record levels in 2019 in each cocaine-producing country (Colombia, Peru and Bolivia). Taken together, the total estimated 2019 figure is a whopping 1 886 metric tonnes of pure cocaine production from the Andean region.<sup>53</sup>

Across the Atlantic, demand for cocaine in Europe has been increasing (except during the periods of lockdown due to COVID) and several analysts suggest that this trend may continue.<sup>54</sup> The 2020 European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction (EMCDDA) report concludes that cocaine availability in Europe is now at 'an unprecedented level' with 'signs of growth in countries where it was previously uncommon'.<sup>55</sup>

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the supply of cocaine to Europe appeared to have continued largely unimpeded. There were disruptions in local distribution and changes

in patterns of use as a result of the closure of the nighttime economy but drug use patterns for cocaine do not appear to have been significantly disrupted.<sup>56</sup>

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the supply of cocaine to Europe appeared to have continued largely unimpeded

Greater volumes of cocaine also appear to be pushing wider volumes of trafficking and use within Africa itself. Preliminary data from ENACT's 2021 organised crime index shows cocaine trafficking to have increased significantly in all countries of the continent since the first sweep of the index in 2018/19.<sup>57</sup> This makes it likely that political protection networks will continue to multiply in number and increase in influence in the near future.

## Conclusion

One of the most important implications of this analysis is that it suggests that trafficking of cocaine, despite periods in which no seizures have been made, has continued relatively uninterrupted since its beginnings in the late 1990s. Consistent but low seizures in places like Nigeria, as well as several other countries, suggest established systems of protection that have remained in place. That may also be a reflection that drug trafficking is a comparatively minor source of illicit funds in comparison to other larger grey economies.

In periods of profound instability, or just before they begin, larger seizures may emerge. It is important to recognise a key conclusion here – cocaine seizures, representing as they do the visible emergence of a hidden economy, take place only when the conditions become ripe for them to do so. The 'just right' conditions for trafficking – a degree of stability and the possibility of protecting the movement of consignments – will keep the practice largely hidden otherwise. Of course, there may be exceptions and exceptional seizures, but the point is to understand overall patterns and inter-relationships.

There are no simple solutions. Protection economies have a corrosive impact on governance, undermining the rule of law and putting justice up for sale, but

attempts to dismantle them could have unintended consequences. While political protection networks may enable drug trafficking, they also ensure an environment of relative stability and low violence. Eroding their influence without bolstering institutions could engender a free-for-all for control of the protection market, with state actors replaced by more violent local actors.

Instability at state level may also result, creating the opportunity for new actors to take control of protection rackets at high levels of the administration. In such contexts, significant change will be difficult to achieve unless the distorting revenues from trafficking are also addressed. If these continue to flow through vulnerable states, they will continue to warp governance and fuel corruption.

It is also possible of course that political transition and instability may lead to new periods of political rule where accountability and integrity increase, preventing the formation of strong protection economies. Within the wider framework of this analysis, each case needs to be considered within its particular context.

Efforts to improve law enforcement interdiction capacity must also be cognisant of contexts where political interests may act against or capture such efforts. Enhanced international support for and involvement in regional interdiction efforts may therefore be the best way of empowering regional agencies and independently monitoring the flow of cocaine to the continent. One thing is certain – while protection networks may rise and fall with the fate of regional governments, the traffickers who buy such protection will continue to operate, so long as there is a demand to be met and money to be made.

For now, political analysts and conflict specialists should pay more attention to the incidence of seizures as potential warning flares that bouts of instability, political uncertainty and possibly political transition may be on their way or already underway. If this hypothesis is true, then several countries in the region where there have been recent seizures, including Guinea-Bissau, Mali and Ivory Coast, may be on a trajectory for periods of uncertainty and political change.



## Notes

- 1 Mark Shaw, "We Pay, You Pay": protection economies, financial flows, and violence, in Hilary Matfess and Michael Miklaucic (eds), *Beyond convergence, world without order*, Washington, D.C.: Center for Complex Operations, Institute for National Strategic Studies, 2016, 235-250.
- 2 As Gernot Klantschnig, Margaret Dimova and Hannah Goss have pointed out in the debates on drug trafficking through West Africa there is an 'overreliance on fragmentary and unreliable seizures and arrest statistics....' See G Klantschnig, M Dimova and H Goss, Africa and the drugs trade revisited, *Review of African Political Economy*, 43:148, 2016, 168.
- 3 See for example Axel Klein, Trapped in the traffic: the growing problems of drug consumption in Lagos, *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, 23:4, 1994.
- 4 A reference to the debate and the decline from 2009 can also be found in Liana Sun Wyler and Nicolas Cook, *Illegal drug trade in Africa: trends and U.S. policy*, Washington DC: Congressional Research Service, 30 September 2009, 1-2, [www.everycrsreport.com/files/20090930\\_R40838\\_64cbfc42148841d69df03115dea39f204351fc1d.pdf](http://www.everycrsreport.com/files/20090930_R40838_64cbfc42148841d69df03115dea39f204351fc1d.pdf).
- 5 A summary of the UNODC estimates can be found in the *World Drug Report 2020*, Booklet 3, Drug Supply, Vienna: UNODC, June 2020, [https://wdr.unodc.org/wdr2020/field/WDR20\\_Booklet\\_3.pdf](https://wdr.unodc.org/wdr2020/field/WDR20_Booklet_3.pdf).
- 6 See for example Mark Shaw, West African criminal networks in South and Southern Africa, *African Affairs*, 101, 291-316. The author has worked in various capacities on the West African trade since the early 2000s and the point about its earlier origins is often forgotten in later analyses.
- 7 Personal communication, April 2021.
- 8 See Mark Shaw, Drug trafficking in Guinea-Bissau, 1998-2014: the evolution of an elite protection network, *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, 53:3, 2015, 229-364.
- 9 A good example is Braima Seidi Bá in Guinea-Bissau. See Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, *The Seidi Bá cocaine trial: a smokescreen for impunity?* Risk Bulletin, January 2021.
- 10 This was clear from interviews conducted by the author in Guinea-Bissau in 2019, where the military were less involved in directly protecting shipments, and a more complicated system, including the appointment of key senior officials in the criminal justice system, served as an effective shield against any attempt to investigate and prosecute trafficking.
- 11 Interviews conducted by the author in 2017/2018. Some of the conclusions are contained in OECD, *Illicit financial flows: the economy of illicit trade in West Africa*, Paris: OECD, 2018.
- 12 Jeremy McDermott, James Bargent, Douwe den Held and Maria Fernanda Ramírez, *The cocaine pipeline to Europe*, Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime and Insight Crime, Research Report, February 2021, 40, <https://globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/The-cocaine-pipeline-to-Europe-GI-TOCInsightCrime.pdf>.
- 13 Jean Debie, The West African port system: global insertion and regional particularities, *EchoGéo*, 20 April-June 2012, 2, <https://journals.openedition.org/echogeo/13070>.
- 14 Quoted from Costa's preface to the report, UNODC, *Drug trafficking as a security threat in West Africa*, Vienna: UNODC, November 2008, [www.unodc.org/unodc/en/frontpage/drug-trafficking-as-a-security-threat-in-west-africa.html](http://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/frontpage/drug-trafficking-as-a-security-threat-in-west-africa.html).
- 15 See for example Côte Dechery and Lura Ralston, *Trafficking and fragility in West Africa*, Fragility, Conflict and Violence Group, The World Bank, 2015.
- 16 The author has conducted interviews with individuals close to or involved in trafficking who have made these points. The same points were echoed in testimony to the US District Court, Southern District of New York, United States of America vs. Rafael Garavito-Garcia, Case 1:12-cr-00839-JSR Document 77 Filed 04/24/15, pp. 40-42.
- 17 I am indebted to Jason Eligh for this point. See [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Goldilocks\\_principle](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Goldilocks_principle).
- 18 Arguments along these lines are not new. Stewart Patrick for example has suggested that if 'state weakness is often a necessary condition for the influx of organized crime, it is not a sufficient one' and that organised criminal groups require some aspects of state infrastructure to operate. See Stewart Patrick, Weak states and global threats: assessing evidence of 'spillovers', Working Paper Number 73, January 2006, 20.
- 19 For a useful overview of the concept see Matías Dewey, State-sponsored protection rackets: regulating the market for counterfeit clothing In Argentina, in Jens Beckert and Matías Dewey (eds), *The architecture of illegal markets: towards economic sociology of illegality in the economy*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007, 125-127.
- 20 State-sponsored protection rackets are assessed in an important study to be important in reducing violence and their breakdown is likely to promote violence. See Richard Snyder and Angelica Duran-Martinez, Does illegality breed violence? Drug trafficking and state-sponsored protection rackets, *Crime, Law and Social Change*, 52, 2009, 253-273.

- 21 Interviews, Bissau, August 2019. This highlights the importance of external oversight and the presence of UN and foreign law enforcement officials to provide backing to local officers.
- 22 For a discussion on the utility of seizure data, see a joint publication of the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction (EMCDDA) and Europol, *Improved drug supply indicators for Europe: progress report*, December 2018, 10.
- 23 Fiona Underwood, *Using seizures data to measure the scope and scale of organised crime*, Working paper for the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organised Crime, August 2017, 2.
- 24 For more details see <https://info.worldbank.org/governance/wgi/Home/Documents>.
- 25 To put the West African scores into perspective, Sweden has shown a declining score from 100 to 80 from 1996 to 2019; the United States declined from just over 80 in 1996 to just under 60 in 2019, with a significant decline in the mid-2000s; and Brazil declined from highs close to 60 in the early 2000s to a score in the low 20s in 2019.
- 26 This link between the political economy and law enforcement effectiveness runs counter to the idea – widely held in the development and security support debate – that better training and enforcement on their own result in seizures.
- 27 There is for example an intriguing case of a seizure off the coast of West Africa of a fishing boat said to have been transporting 17 tonnes of cocaine in the course of 2020. This was reported to the UN Security Council. The boat was subsequently scuttled and no drugs seized. Very little other information is available. While 17 tonnes appears to be too large an amount to have been transported in a fishing boat, questions remain around the incident and what in fact transpired.
- 28 During the 1980s West Africans – particularly Nigerians and Ghanaians – became active participants in the heroin trade, using the region as a transit zone from Asia to European and North American markets. Airline couriers were the main source of transport, bolstered by a growing West African diaspora in several parts of the world. The growth of groups of Nigerian expatriates was a result of the economic crises that affected the Nigerian state during the period of the Second Republic, 1977–83, when many people sought a better life outside of the country. Stephen Ellis, *This present darkness: a history of Nigerian organised crime*, London: Hurst, 2016, 123.
- 29 Stephen Ellis, West Africa's international drug trade, *African Affairs*, 108, 2009, 171–196.
- 30 Ibid., 173.
- 31 In Ghana, for example, accusations were made of the links between the Rawlings government and the illicit drug trade when the Ghanaian ambassador to Switzerland was arrested for trafficking in 1998. The drug economy was relatively open as Emmanuel Akyeampong notes: 'In the 1990s in Accra it was public knowledge which houses were built with cocaine money, and which flashy cars were cocaine cars.' Emmanuel Akyeampong, *Diaspora and drug trafficking in West Africa: a case study of Ghana*, *African Affairs*, 104, 2005, 443.
- 32 Interview, Lagos, August 2019. This sentiment was confirmed in an interview with another official from a different country.
- 33 Interviews, Lagos, August 2019.
- 34 The author in an assessment in Lagos airport for example was shown computer equipment which was not unpacked, had not been used and/or could not be plugged in.
- 35 An excellent example is Graham Denyer Willis, *The killing consensus: police, organised crime and the regulation of life and death in urban Brazil*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2015.
- 36 Interviews conducted in Bissau over several years highlight this issue. This has also been outlined in court testimony.
- 37 The phrase is quoted from a transcript of a recording read out by the prosecutor during the questioning of a DEA confidential source. Case 1:12-cr-00839-JSR Document Filed 04/24/15, pp. 40–42.
- 38 The use of the term 'narco-state' has been criticised for Guinea-Bissau based on a lack of criteria as to what a state defined in this way should fulfil. See for example the introduction to Patrick Chabal and Toby Green (eds), *Guinea-Bissau: micro-state to 'narco-state'*, London: Hurst, 2016.
- 39 Interviews with Judicial Police officials in the years in which the seizures were made.
- 40 Interviews, Bissau, August 2019.
- 41 See UNODC, *Cocaine trafficking in West Africa: situation report*, May 2007, [www.unodc.org/pdf/dfa/Cocaine-trafficking-Africa-en.pdf](http://www.unodc.org/pdf/dfa/Cocaine-trafficking-Africa-en.pdf).
- 42 See Ivan Briscoe, *Crime after Jihad: armed groups, the state and illicit business in post-conflict Mali*, Clingendael: Netherlands Institute of International Relations, May 2014, 21, [https://globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/Clingendael\\_Crime-after-Jihad.pdf](https://globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/Clingendael_Crime-after-Jihad.pdf).
- 43 See Global Initiative Against Transnational Organised Crime, *Illicit trafficking and instability in Mali: past, present and future*, Geneva: GI-TOC, January 2014, <https://globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/Illicit-Trafficking-and-Instability-in-Mali-Past-present-and-future.pdf>.

- 44 Alexandre Marc, Neelem Verjee and Stephen Mogaka, *The Challenge of Stability and Security in West Africa*, Washington DC: Agence Française de Développement and the World Bank, 2015, pp. 37-38.
- 45 Reported in Davin O'Regan, *Cocaine and instability in Africa: lessons from Latin America and the Caribbean*, Washington DC: African Centre for Strategic Studies, July 2010, [www.jstor.org/stable/resrep19077?seq=1#metadata\\_info\\_tab\\_contents](http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep19077?seq=1#metadata_info_tab_contents).
- 46 See Ivan Briscoe, *Crime after Jihad: armed groups, the state and illicit business in post-conflict Mali*, Clingendael: Netherlands Institute of International Relations, May 2014, 21, [https://globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/Clingendael\\_Crime-after-Jihad.pdf](https://globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/Clingendael_Crime-after-Jihad.pdf); and Global Initiative Against Transnational Organised Crime, *Illicit trafficking and instability in Mali: past, present and future*, Geneva: GI-TOC, January 2014, <https://globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/Illicit-Trafficking-and-Instability-in-Mali-Past-present-and-future.pdf>.
- 47 GI-TOC interviews conducted in Mali. Reported in <https://globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/Illicit-Trafficking-and-Instability-in-Mali-Past-present-and-future.pdf>.
- 48 Final Report of the Panel of Experts established pursuant to Security Council resolution 2374 (2017) on Mali and renewed pursuant to resolution 2484 (2019), S/2020/785, 13 August 2020, [www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/S\\_2020\\_785.pdf](http://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/S_2020_785.pdf).
- 49 United Nations Security Council, Report of the Secretary-General on the activities of the United Nations Office for West Africa and the Sahel', S/2020/1293, 24 December 2020, <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3896005>.
- 50 *Cocaine trafficking in West Africa: the threat to stability and development (with special reference to Guinea-Bissau)* UNODC, December 2007, p. 3, [www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/West%20Africa%20cocaine%20report\\_10%2012%2007.pdf](http://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/West%20Africa%20cocaine%20report_10%2012%2007.pdf).
- 51 In 2019, the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction (EMCDDA) estimated that some 120–140 tonnes of cocaine are consumed every year within the European Union, while approximately the same volume of cocaine is seized by European law enforcement agencies. Thus, about 260–280 tonnes of cocaine are likely to be targeted at reaching the wider EU drug market each year. Interviews with EMCDDA officials, Lisbon, October 2019. See also EMCDDA, *Technical Report: Estimating the size of the main illicit retail drug markets in Europe: an update*, December 2019, p. 34, [www.emcdda.europa.eu/system/files/publications/12174/TD0219965ENN.pdf](http://www.emcdda.europa.eu/system/files/publications/12174/TD0219965ENN.pdf).
- 52 The most common entry points for cocaine into Europe is in the north-west, reflecting the location of the main container ports, and in the south-west, along the Spanish coast. The port of Antwerp in Belgium is the single largest trafficking through point for cocaine into the European Union. Reflecting this, the largest seizures of cocaine for 2018 for example were reported in Belgium (53 tonnes), the Netherlands (40 tonnes) Spain (48,5 tonnes).
- 53 Colombia has the highest estimated production at 936 metric tonnes, followed by Peru at 649 tonnes, and Bolivia at 301 metric tonnes. For Colombian figures see: United States and Colombian officials set bilateral agenda to reduce cocaine supply. The White House, 5 March 2020, [www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/united-states-colombian-officials-set-bilateral-agenda-reduce-cocaine-supply/](http://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/united-states-colombian-officials-set-bilateral-agenda-reduce-cocaine-supply/). For Peruvian figures: ONDCP releases data on coca cultivation and production in Peru. The White House, 31 July 2020, [www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/ondcp-releases-data-coca-cultivation-production-peru-073120/](http://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/ondcp-releases-data-coca-cultivation-production-peru-073120/). For Bolivian figures see: ONDCP releases data on coca cultivation and cocaine production in Bolivia. The White House, 13 November 2020, [www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/ondcp-releases-data-coca-cultivation-cocaine-production-bolivia/](http://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/ondcp-releases-data-coca-cultivation-cocaine-production-bolivia/). The UNODC figures provide a better long-term measure than those of the ONDCP, given a change in methodology in the latter case.
- 54 Cocaine use data in Europe is measured, in among other ways, through wastewater analysis in selected cities, which is a relatively reliable indicator, and shows increases in use across several European cities, most notably Antwerp, Amsterdam, Bristol, Zurich and Barcelona since around 2014. While a statistical analysis of long-term cocaine use trends amongst young adults (aged between 15–34) in the European Union is only possible for a small number of countries, among these there is evidence of increased use from this time. The retail price of cocaine has remained stable over a ten-year period in Europe, while the purity has increased. In 2007 for example, at the height of the focus on the transit trade through West Africa, one kg of cocaine sold for around US\$80 000 in Europe, compared to only US\$50 000 in the United States. That position seems to have been reversed by ten years later (in the middle of the West African seizure drought), with the street value of one kg in Europe priced at around US\$82 000 against the equivalent price in the United States of US\$96 000. Despite the stable price the purity of retail cocaine has increased since 2009, with levels of purity in 2018 the highest they have been in a decade. Increases in purity combined with stable prices provides a useful indicator of growing availability.

- 55 European Drug Report 2020: trends and developments, European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction (EMCDDA), 2020. Quotes are from p. 8 and p. 21.
- 56 See the discussion in Tuesday Reitano and Mark Shaw, *Criminal contagion: how mafias, gangsters and scammers profit from a pandemic*, London: Hurst, 2021, 65–80.
- 57 This is based on currently unpublished data which remains to be reviewed by continental expert groups. However, it seems unlikely to shift dramatically.



# Read more about drug trafficking and counterfeit medicines at [www.enact.africa](http://www.enact.africa)



Issue 04 | July 2018

## Tackling heroin trafficking on the East African coast

Wimpey Haggard, Peter Gashira and Mark Zibane

### Summary

In recent years, the volume of heroin shipped from Afghanistan along a network of maritime routes to East and Southern Africa appears to have increased considerably. An integrated regional criminal market has developed, shaped and played by political developments. Africa is now experiencing the sharpest increase in heroin use worldwide, and a spectrum of criminal networks and political elites in East and Southern Africa are substantially involved in the trade. New policy approaches are urgently needed.

### Key points

- Heroin routes challenge the challenge as a cross between criminal systems.
- Progressive action should be targeted in major drug hubs along the southern coast, focusing on vulnerable areas and potential sources of regional instability, such as Southern Mozambique.
- The relationship between politics, business and organised crime must be adequately researched and addressed.
- Vested private sector actors should be engaged to prevent or reverse the criminalisation of key ports.
- Support must be increased for community-based initiatives that mitigate the effects of drug use.
- Programming interventions to reduce demand in the most vulnerable communities affected by the heroin trade in Southern and East Africa should be considered.



POLICY BRIEF



Issue 05 | June 2018

## The heroin coast

A political economy along the eastern African seaboard

Wimpey Haggard, Peter Gashira and Mark Zibane

### Summary

In recent years, the volume of heroin shipped from Afghanistan along a network of maritime routes to East and Southern Africa appears to have increased considerably. Most of this heroin is destined for Western markets, but there is a spin-off made for local consumption. An integrated regional criminal market has developed, shaped and played by political developments in the region. Africa is now experiencing the sharpest increase in heroin use worldwide and a spectrum of criminal networks and political elites in East and Southern Africa are substantially involved in the trade. The report focuses on the characteristics of the heroin trade in the region and how it has become embedded in the societies along this coast. It also highlights the features of the criminal governance systems that facilitate drug trafficking along this coastal route.

### Recommendations

- The East African heroin market forms an integrated regional criminal economy based on the trade of heroin from Afghanistan to the West.
- The heroin economy relies on international ports and other infrastructure, and high levels of political protection.
- There is a rapidly growing consumer drug market in the region – one that is much larger than is commonly acknowledged.
- Despite some positive trends in drug users' ability to access health services in some locations in the region, there are nonetheless gaps in appropriate drug treatment interventions.



RESEARCH PAPER



Issue 06 | November 2018

## The rise of counterfeit pharmaceuticals in Africa

Robyn Cuthbert and Anil Bhat

### Summary

Subsistence Development Capital (SDC) is a platform designed to improve health and well-being by 100-150 million people across the continent. A key objective of the platform is to address the growing prevalence of counterfeit medicines, which disproportionately affects vulnerable populations. Counterfeit medicines put people's lives at risk, threaten national health and cause profound public health challenges. The full scope of the challenge in Africa is not fully understood, but research suggests that the problem and its impact are acute. If the continent is to make headway in achieving SDG 3, the issue of counterfeit medicines must receive higher up on policy agendas. Experience elsewhere suggests that there would be scope for significant positive results.

### Key points

- Addressing counterfeit medicines in Africa may have profound widespread loss of life, including an estimated 100-150 million deaths from malaria alone, as well as increasing other public health and public safety risks.
- A clear governance framework for the issue by African states and continental or regional bodies is needed. The response should include a substantial overhaul of the analytical, legal, educational, regulatory and enforcement systems around medical supply chains. The legal and regulatory frameworks for combating medicine fraud will need strengthening.
- These responses should lead to be coordinated within a global effort, including setting up a database of intelligence on counterfeit medicines and improved surveillance and testing campaigns. National medicines regulatory authorities should investigate these potential forms of black and grey.



POLICY BRIEF



Issue 07 | July 2018

## Analysing drug trafficking in East Africa

A media-monitoring approach

Derek Austin

### Summary

By analysing drug-related incidents reported in the media in three key East African nations over the past decade, this paper provides insights into drug trafficking in the region. The analysis includes the different drug types in circulation across Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda; the quantities and trafficking methods used; as well as the origin, transit and destination hubs. The report also suggests patterns in the data, including the nature of state responses and the reporting style of the African and foreign press. The potential for improved security using this methodology, and for greater public awareness of drug trafficking-related harms, lies in the development of strategic and more capable journalism in the region.

### Key points

- East Africa plays an increasing role as the continent's main drug trade hub, particularly as a corridor for heroin and cocaine.
- Media monitoring is an innovative way of gathering data to help illustrate trends in transnational organised crime, including drug trafficking trends.
- Findings show interesting patterns in reporting on major harmful drugs in the region and the many challenges faced by journalists in investigating and publishing drug trafficking news.
- The report calls for greater press freedom and increased training and financial support for investigative journalists in East Africa and across the continent more generally.



RESEARCH PAPER





## About the author

Mark Shaw is the Director of the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime. He was previously the National Research Foundation Professor of Justice and Security at the University of Cape Town. Mark worked for ten years at the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, including as Inter-regional Advisor, Chief of the Criminal Justice Reform Unit and with the Global Programme against Transnational Organised Crime. Before joining the UN, Mark held a number of positions in the South African government and civil society.

## About ENACT

ENACT builds knowledge and skills to enhance Africa's response to transnational organised crime. ENACT analyses how organised crime affects stability, governance, the rule of law and development in Africa, and works to mitigate its impact. ENACT is implemented by the Institute for Security Studies and INTERPOL, in affiliation with the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime.

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