



Workshop on Narcotics-Trafficking and Political Instability in West Africa

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On May 27, 2009, CNA's Center for Strategic Studies organized a workshop designed to identify new and emerging threats associated with the increased flow of cocaine from South America to Europe via West African transit routes and explore options for stemming the flow of drugs through the region. Panelists and workshop participants, drawn from the U.S. Government, European counterpart organizations, and the analytic community, brought extensive knowledge of the region and functional expertise in counter-narcotics operations to the day-long discussion.

Background

Regrettably, illegal drug trafficking in West Africa has been around for a long time. Why devote increased attention to the issue now? Workshop participants were in agreement on the issue – the size and number of seizures are the difference. The movement of cocaine from South America to West Africa for onward transit to European markets has grown dramatically since 2002. Estimates are that somewhere from 35% to 50% of the cocaine destined for non-U.S. markets transits West Africa. One speaker noted that prior to 2005, seizures from all of Africa rarely totaled more than one ton a year. But, in the period between 2005 and 2008, at least 46 tons of cocaine was seized in West Africa alone.

Several participants noted that the recent political instability in Guinea and Guinea-Bissau led to a 30% decline in the volume of cocaine flowing through the region in 2008. The group, however, assessed this to be a temporary decline, with speakers noting that traffickers were diversifying operations in an effort to develop alternative transit points in the event of state failure. Traffickers succeed in areas of instability, but are inhibited by chaos.

What has prompted this dramatic increase in drug trafficking in West Africa? First and foremost, the European market for drugs – particularly cocaine – is on the rise and South American drug cartels are believed to understand their future growth potential lies within Europe. In addition to the growing demand in Europe, profits to drug traffickers are higher in Europe. In the United States, for example, profits from one kilo of cocaine are valued at ap-

proximately \$15,000 whereas in Europe one kilo brings traffickers profits of between €35,000 - 40,000 (\$48,000-\$56,000).

Law enforcement successes in increasing the interdiction rate of drugs moving directly from South America to Europe have driven traffickers to develop alternative routes. The first of these routes, known in the counter-narcotics community as Highway 10, traverses the Atlantic at 10° N latitude. The second of these lucrative transit routes moves drugs southward to the Gulf of Guinea.

West Africa is an impoverished region with, as one speaker described it, a toxic demographic combination of high rates of unemployed youth, porous borders and a web of existing criminal networks. Weak West African nations tend to present a highly permissive environment for drug trafficking. They offer sufficiently developed transportation networks, including port facilities and remote airstrips, from which traffickers can transship cocaine cultivated in South America onward to Europe. Further enabling the drug trade is pervasive governmental corruption throughout much of the region and underdeveloped criminal justice systems that are unable and/or unwilling to successfully prosecute traffickers.

Converging Interests

Several participants spoke of the relative inattention in the United States to the marked rise in West African drug trafficking. Drug trafficking in West Africa, they argue, should not be viewed as a peripheral concern – it is a national security issue. Left unchecked, the spread of narcotics trafficking in West Africa would contribute to destabilizing U.S. partner nations including oil suppliers such as Nigeria.

In addition to the potential disruption of the oil supply from the Gulf of Guinea, West African drug trafficking further impacts the United States through the influx of drug profits back into the South American criminal organizations that move cocaine to the United States. Consequently, South American governments have a strong interest in disrupting the trans-Atlantic drug trade as well.

Several panelists also noted the potential for Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) to present itself as a future nexus of narco-terrorism. Thus far AQIM has not entered into the lucrative cocaine trade, but the potential threat bears monitoring.

For European countries the major concern regarding drugs transiting West Africa is, of course, the impact on public health and associated crime once the drugs reach their European destinations. But narco-trafficking also undermines U.S. and European security and development objectives throughout Africa.

Thus far most Africans view narcotics trafficking as a European problem. At present, West Africans generally are not drug consumers – it is largely still a pass through business. Transit

countries ultimately suffer, however, from crime, corruption and the health issues associated with the inevitable development of domestic drug consumption. However, with African operatives now receiving some payment in the form of drugs, there is already evidence of a growing user population in the region. Overall, economic and social development of transit countries is negatively impacted as scarce governmental resources are diverted to address security issues stemming from the drug trade and direct foreign investments dwindle due to instability and drug-related violence.

Meeting the Challenge

The volume of drugs on the move, combined with the enormous geographic area available to traffickers, creates a law enforcement challenge that no one country can manage on its own. As a result, international transparency and partnership are essential to success.

There are a number of national and multilateral organizations that are working to address the growing transatlantic drug trade. One such organization is the recently formed Maritime Analysis and Operations Centre-Narcotics (MAOC-N). The MAOC-N, located in Lisbon, Portugal, is a European Union law enforcement unit created to coordinate maritime and aviation intelligence, resources, and trained personnel (including military assets such as maritime patrol aircraft, ships and helicopters) to respond to the threat posed by transatlantic cocaine traffic. MAOC-N primarily focuses its efforts in the Atlantic, but can, on a case by case basis, conduct operations in the Mediterranean.

The MAOC-N, when in possession of actionable intelligence, works with its national partners to identify maritime assets that can be redirected to intercept suspect vessels and identifies a country that will accept responsibility for the arrest and prosecution of the suspected traffickers. One example of a successful internationally-sourced interdiction mission included the use of French maritime patrol aircraft, a British Royal Navy ship with a helicopter and rigid hull inflatable boat (RHIB), and a Spanish law enforcement detachment (LEDET). The French aircraft helped locate and identify the suspect vessel. The Royal Navy had the platforms available to reach the suspect vessel. And, the Spanish LEDET, transported aboard the Royal Navy ship, held the legal authority to arrest and prosecute the suspects. (The Royal Navy does not hold such law enforcement authorities.) For the conduct of the operation, the British helicopter and RHIB were re-flagged with Spanish flag.

Working closely with MAOC-N to stem the flow of drugs through West Africa is the U.S. Joint Interagency Task Force- South (JIATF-South). Twenty years in the making, today's JIATF-South mission is to "conduct interagency operations against illicit trafficking by highly mobile asymmetric threats originating or transiting its Joint Operating Area by detection and monitoring of illicit air and maritime targets, intelligence fusion, information sharing, and multi-sensor correlation to facilitate interdiction and apprehension along with partner nations in support of national security and regional stability".

With drug shipments originating in and transiting the JIATF-South Joint Operating Area en route to the West Africa, JIATF-South is an important interface for European and West African authorities seeking to identify and interdict drug shipments.

An additional new resource in the drug fight is the Centre de Coordination pour la Lutte Anti-Drogue en Méditerranée (CeCLAD-M). Located in Toulon, France, CeCLAD-M will focus its resources on the interception of drugs being trafficked from North and West Africa in the Western Mediterranean Sea. Several conference participants supported the French initiative and spoke to the need for the creation of an additional center with an Eastern Mediterranean area of responsibility.

Workshop participants also discussed the role to be played by the new National Maritime Intelligence Center (NMIC) in national and international efforts to counter drug trafficking. Established on January 19, 2009, by the U.S. Director of National Intelligence, NMIC is not an intelligence generation entity, but rather an integrator of intelligence information. NMIC seeks to be an advocate for maritime domain issues and will develop relationships with the U.S. interagency as well as international, industry and private sector partners to manage a myriad of issues impacting the maritime domain. In addition to assessing highly adaptive adversaries such as pirates, terrorists, and criminals participating in illicit smuggling, NMIC will also address issues such as the impact of environmental change, natural disasters, and the growing volume of international maritime trade.

Participants were in agreement on the need to adopt a matrixed approach for the employment of resources and seek to leverage the relationships among national, multilateral, and international organizations. Several spoke of the need to take a “whole of government” approach in seeking to counter the growing drug trade. Interagency cooperation and international partnership, they say, are the keys to success. But, as with many large, intractable problems, counternarcotics efforts suffer from organizational stovepipes, competition for scarce resources, and restrictive policies governing the releasability of sensitive information.

The Way Ahead

There was widespread agreement among workshop attendees that a concerted, comprehensive and coordinated effort was needed to assist the West African states and, perhaps, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) in developing the institutions, infrastructure and commitment necessary to counter the escalating drug trade in their region. One of the first tasks will be to pursue capacity building initiatives that are perceived to be advantageous to West Africans. There are several approaches in this vein that may elicit a positive response, including assistance in the development (or redevelopment as the case may be) of a coastal security structure. Many of the tools utilized to maintain maritime awareness for coastal dumping, fishery protection, and other customs enforcement activities that are of great interest to West African governments are the same capabilities required for counternarcotics operations. One speaker noted that in the past, similar efforts in the region were met

with success and for a time became self-financing through the limited redistribution of profits from seized cargo to the individuals and organizations who participated in the seizure. It was noted, however, that while there is a desire to train and equip West African officials to be able to interdict and prosecute traffickers of all sorts, it will be important not to press these governments into the acquisition of equipment that is ill-suited to the task and may well not be sustainable either financially or in terms of technical maintainability.

Several attendees suggested West African governments may be more receptive to efforts to curtail the cultivation and distribution of cannabis which, unlike cocaine, is produced in West Africa and is a recognized social and health problem. Another approach that may garner receptivity in the region would be to focus attention on the issue of corruption. Many in the region are unhappy with the level of official corruption in their countries. Corruption enables a variety of bad behaviors and is an essential element of the permissive environment drug traffickers seek to exploit.

Throughout the day-long workshop, discussion returned to the capacity of law enforcement and the criminal justice systems in West Africa. Several participants suggested that the conduct of national legal surveys of West African countries would be of great benefit. Such an effort could inform international law enforcement of national legal processes and requirements for conducting counternarcotics operations as well as identify areas for future cooperation and technical assistance programs. Asset forfeiture laws, for example, were offered as an area for improvement.

Other law enforcement assistance efforts, one speaker suggested, could usefully be focused on best practices in building cases for successful prosecution. In the instances where police and prosecutors actually bring cases to trial, the cases are often weak due to their limited professionalism in developing and presenting cases. Establishment of a forensics laboratory would also bring additional law enforcement capability to the region.

Ideally, over time, West African governments will become full partners in the international effort to counter drug trafficking in the region. As the international community pursues that objective, additional progress will need to be achieved with regard to information sharing. Releasability and information sharing will continue to be issues both in terms of interagency communications within countries as well as releasability among and between international partners. Workshop participants noted that while progress has been made on these issues, releasability issues remain a time-consuming impediment in counternarcotics operations. It was further noted, however, that the cultures of the military, the intelligence community, and law enforcement can be overcome with additional personnel and a cooperative attitude.

Concluding Thoughts

Workshop participants agreed that “cookie cutter” approaches in addressing the various causes, impacts, and developmental challenges in West Africa will be less successful than

country-specific engagement plans that adopt best practices and the hard-learned lessons from other countries in countering the drug trade.

There was also widespread agreement among the workshop attendees that the European market for cocaine will continue to grow for the foreseeable future. And, based on the twenty – year experience of JIATF-South, countering drug traffickers will be a long-term concern. South American drug traffickers and their regional networks are extremely adaptable. It will be a challenge to stay ahead of their evolving methods. Semi-submersibles, for example, have not yet been employed in the transatlantic shipment of cocaine, but such vessels are currently capable of making the trip should the use of traditional vessels become too challenging.

One speaker commented that it will be important to manage our expectations – we are not going to stop all drug trade. The goal is to increase the cost, both financial and criminal, of moving drugs.

Participants were pleased to have the opportunity to come together to discuss the issues. Workshop organizers and participants also expressed a desire to reconvene in several months' time. The inclusion of representatives from South America and the United Nations was suggested as well as a desire for greater European participation.