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The Role of Guinea Bissau in Global Insecurity Flows

By Laura Nash

Introduction

Throughout the 2000's Guinea Bissau quickly developed into one of the main transshipment points for cocaine traveling from production sites in Latin America to the European market. The problem exploded sometime around 2005 and by 2007 record cocaine seizures were reported from Guinea Bissau and West Africa as a whole.¹ The problems in Guinea Bissau are endemic of the problems within the West Africa region, but Guinea Bissau represents both an extreme and an independent case. Many of the problems that led to the explosion of drug trafficking in Guinea Bissau are the same problems faced by other West African states: lack of a functioning police system, corruption, porous borders and a history of conflict. Yet Guinea Bissau faces even more hurdles than, for example, neighboring Senegal. Guinea Bissau's coast is peppered with islands with landing strips left over from colonial days; Guinea Bissau's GDP per capita ranks 208th in the world;² and Guinea Bissau is plagued by a lack of functioning government more so than any other state in the region. It is thus important that when we talk about the drug trafficking problems of West Africa we not only differentiate the problem by state, but that we also identify the specific locales that illicit organizations use and control for their shipments. These locales change over time as illicit organizations often transit from hub to hub. Thus, it is important to be as specific and as surgical as possible when identifying the sources of drug trafficking in the region.

While Guinea Bissau as a whole is often mentioned as a haven for illicit organized crime, sometimes dubbed the world's first "narco state,"³ reports show that the islands off of the coast and the capital of Bissau appear to be the main locales dominated by transnational organized crime. Defining Bissau and the islands as 'Black Spots' helps the international community to combat the criminal organizations using locales within Guinea Bissau as a safe haven from which to operate their transnational drug trafficking empires.

¹ Senegal, Mauritania and Ghana also posted enormous seizures according to the UNODC. See: <http://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/Cocaine-trafficking-Africa-en.pdf>.

² GDP per capita is roughly \$1100 according to the CIA. While lower than states such as Senegal, Guinea Bissau's GDP per capita is roughly equivalent to the other West African states of Niger, Sierra Leone, Liberia, and Guinea.

³ <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1637719,00.html>.

Locales within Guinea Bissau have largely been taken over by transnational drug cartels primarily due to its geographic and political features. As noted earlier, Guinea Bissau's coast is peppered with islands, making effective patrolling of its coast very challenging. The drug cartels are able to operate within these islands relatively unimpeded, with the island of Bubaque being the predominant island reported to be used by traffickers. In addition, it is the closest African state to Latin America, making it an ideal transit point for drug shipments to Europe. The difficulties faced by Guinea Bissau stemming from geographic features are compounded by its political factors. Guinea Bissau's poverty and political turmoil has resulted in an inability to properly attempt to patrol its islands or enforce the rule of law even on its mainland. Thus, Guinea Bissau's unusual combination of politics and geographic features that has caused some of its territories to become Black Spots.

Why and How the Problem Developed

As noted in the introduction, the development of Guinea Bissau's islands and capital city as Black Spots is due to the confluence of political and geographic factors. Without the failures of Guinea Bissau's government or its geographic features Guinea Bissau may have remained largely untouched by the Latin American drug cartels. The three main geographic features driving the choice of Guinea Bissau by drug cartels are her numerous islands, her proximity to Latin America, and her proximity to Europe. The political factors leading to the establishment of organized crime within Guinea Bissau are directly related to its political instability and high poverty. At one point the value of the drugs transiting through Guinea Bissau were estimated to equal the entire state's GDP.⁴

Guinea Bissau's islands are populated by less than 30,000 inhabitants and were patrolled in the early 2000s by only one marine vessel owned by Guinea Bissau. Numerous landing strips remain on the island from Guinea Bissau's days as a Portuguese colony, facilitating the movement of drugs from Guinea Bissau to major hubs in West Africa and Europe. Similarly, its abundant coastline provides for an easy ability for transatlantic ships to traffic drugs into Guinea Bissau for later movement into consumption markets.

Guinea Bissau's government struggles to fulfill its functions due to a past history of civil conflict, a lack of monetary resources, and, recently, political interference from drug cartels. These political factors leave an opening for drug cartels to operate with little obstruction. Military and police officials have reportedly taken bribes to ignore shipments of drugs,⁵ judges have received threatening phone calls,⁶ and, most worryingly, the drug cartels are suspected of assassinating Chief of Staff (Lt) Gen Baptista Tagme Na Waie, which set off retaliatory actions that led to the

⁴ http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/why-failed-states-shouldnt-be-our-biggest-national-security-fear/2011/04/11/AFqWmjkd_story_1.html.

⁵ "Guinea-Bissau, Assembleia Nacional Popular." *Inter-Parliamentary Union*. 2009. Available at: http://www.ipu.org/parline-e/reports/2133_E.htm.

⁶ "Guinea Bissau prosecutor threatened over drugs haul." *Agence France Presse—English*, 2008.

assassination of President Vieira in March 2009.⁷ This has left the drug cartels operating with near impunity in Guinea Bissau and her waters.

Global Effects of Guinea Bissau as a Black Spot

The ability of Latin American drug cartels to operate fairly freely in Guinea Bissau affects the strength of the cartels, the availability of cocaine in Europe, and the security of Guinea Bissau and her neighboring states. It is difficult to ascertain through open source material exactly which Latin American drug cartels are operating in Guinea Bissau (particularly because there has been considerable reshuffling among the drug-trafficking organizations in Colombia in recent years), but there have been reports of a significant increase in the number of Latin Americans residing and building homes in Guinea Bissau, indicating that the cartels intend to use that state as a base of activities for some time to come. The use of Guinea Bissau's islands and her capital to transit cocaine into Europe has increased the drug cartel's profits and strength to operate in other global markets. Increasingly, Guinea Bissau and other West African locales are being used to also transit heroine from Afghanistan to the United States. The ability to operate in a fairly safe and free environment also serves to increase the availability of drugs and their price in the U.S. and Europe, creating more addicts in each market. Michael Braun, former head of Special Operations for the DEA, noted in a 2009 talk at the Woodrow Wilson Institute that terrorist organizations and drug trafficking cartels are operating in the same space within West African locales. Such sharing of space and mutual illicit goals can easily lead to cooperation and hybridization of transnational illicit organizations.⁸

How this affects the United States

The use of Guinea Bissau's islands and its capital by drug cartels strengthens drug cartels operating within the United States and facilitates the movement of heroine into the American market. Additionally, the risk remains of cooperation between the organized crime elements and other transnational security threats such as terrorist organizations as well as organizations trafficking in goods, such as weapons, and/or people.

Responses to the Problem

The responses to these problems have mainly come from international actors, including the European Union (EU), United Nations (UN), and the United States. The UN, in cooperation with the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), sent a peace-building commission in 2008.⁹ The EU launched a program with Guinea Bissau to reform its security sector,¹⁰ which was of

⁷ "Guinea Bissau: Report shows drug traffickers killed former army chief of staff." *Radio France Internationale*, May 16, 2009.

⁸ 2009 talk at the Woodrow Center titled: "Global Drug Trafficking: Africa's Expanding Role." Event summary available at: http://www.wilsoncenter.org/index.cfm?topic_id=1417&categoryid=09B6BF65-65BF-E7DC-40F567F157F96E15&fuseaction=topics.events_item_topics&event_id=533255.

⁹ Dabo, Alberto. "UN, EU Help Create Guinea-Bissau anti-drugs unit." *Reuters*, June 19, 2008. Available at: <http://www.reuters.com/article/latestCrisis/idUSL19312440>.

¹⁰ <http://www.consilium.europa.eu/showPage.aspx?id=1413&lang=en>.

major importance in Guinea Bissau considering the widespread corruption within the military and the political leverage that the military exerts in Guinea Bissau. The mission ended in 2010 and as of yet it remains unknown whether the EU efforts have been sufficient to end the drug cartel's influence on Guinea Bissau's military. Similarly, the EU has worked to aid the growth of Guinea Bissau's police force, another necessary action considering that Guinea Bissau operated one prison in the early 2000's and many police officers lacked weapons. In addition, both the EU and the U.S. have increased maritime patrols of the waters in and around Guinea Bissau in an effort to stem the flows of drugs to and from the region. The number of interdicted drug shipments from West Africa has fallen since the height of 2007, but, as always with this type of statistical information, it is unclear whether this is due to a weakening of the cartels in the area or whether the cartels have simply learned how to avoid interdiction in the region. While it is too early to decisively state whether parts of Guinea Bissau and other regions of West Africa will continue to be dominated by transnational illicit organizations and remain a security threat to the region and the world, it is clear that their location combined with political and economic vulnerabilities makes them highly attractive to transnational organized criminal operations. For that reason, West African states should be monitored and assisted by the United States and European Union, since it is in their strategic security interest to make that part of the world unattractive to illicit non-state actors.

Laura Nash is a Doctoral Candidate in Political Science at Syracuse University. Her research has focused on three issue areas: conflict, security and leadership analysis, with an emphasis on the Israeli Arab Conflict. She has worked for the past three years as a graduate research assistant for the Global Black Spots-Mapping Global Insecurity Program at Syracuse University. Laura just finished her third year of doctoral studies and is beginning to concentrate on her dissertation, where she is examining leadership of violent non-state organizations.