

When drugs buy out a nation

It is one of the poorest countries in Africa, undermined by ongoing coups and rampant corruption, ruled by soldiers and crushed by the traffic of cocaine from South America. It is Guinea-Bissau, a small state in West Africa, which not even the international community knows how to help.

by Tomaso Clavarino

Here's the thing about cocaine in Guinea-Bissau: you don't see it, notice or even hear talk of it. The white powder seems to be taboo here, an abstract thing. Yet in this small West African country – ranked 176th out of 187 in the United Nations Human Development Index – cocaine commands and rules. Not that you'll see anyone sniffing it on the corners of Bissau's dusty streets or even in most of the capital's nightclubs. You'll find it instead in government ministries, army barracks, generals' mansions, at the port or at Osvaldo Viera Airport.

Recently, several US Drug Enforcement Administration operations have once again shone a light on Guinea-Bissau's role in the global drug trafficking trade. The arrest and indictment for international drug and arms smuggling of Rear Admiral Bubo Na Tchuto and General Antonio Indjai, the powerful 'masterminds' behind the repeated coups ravaging the country over the last 20 years, confirms the suspicions of many analysts: Guinea-Bissau is the only real African drug-state.

Hit by repeated coups, the latest on 12 April 2012, Guinea-Bissau has been singled out by South American drug runners as their main African stopover.

Here they store and sell the drugs – for the most part cocaine – destined for Europe, the



United States and the eastern reaches of the world. The hundreds of islands in the Bissagos archipelago, many of them uninhabited, offer a safe haven for the drug runners' ships and planes. The borders are easily crossed and security is lax. The local police force lacks manpower, is ill equipped, underpaid and, for the most part, corrupt. The government, in the



☒ The political instability and the countless islands of Guinea-Bissau are very enticing to Colombian producers who use the African country as a base for the drugs on their way to Europe.

hands of the military since the last coup, is highly volatile, isolated from the international community and in dire economic straits.

For a year now, many international donors have frozen funding while waiting for political developments. “Little has changed since the coup d’état last April and the country is still very unstable”, says Davin O’Regan, author of

The Arc of State Capture: Narcotrafficking and Instability in Africa. In this climate of political and economic stalemate, the drug smugglers have increased their power and influence in the area.

General Indjai, a heavy hitter in Bissau and an influential figure in the country’s politics for the past 15 years, has been accused of set-



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Two youngsters hoisting a banner during a demonstration against drug trafficking.

ting up a booming arms and drug trade with Colombia (in which even the FARC guerrillas appear to have a stake, according to US sources). What's more, he is believed to have built a runway at one of his residences in central Guinea-Bissau – and it's not designed for flying model airplanes either.

Everyone in the country also knows about the deforestation of approximately three kilometres of road between Mansoa and Mansaba, ordered by the military in January 2012 to allow night-time landing by private aircraft from South America, obviously loaded with drugs. "There are no confirmed figures on the extent of the drug traffic after the 2012 coup", notes Vincent Foucher, an analyst with the International Crisis Group, "but certain indicators would lead us to believe there have been a fair number of boat and plane landings over the last year. And there's no doubt that the top echelons of the army have provided and continue to provide landing strips, protection, fuel and warehousing for many South American aircraft and ships".

its wake, anaesthetising the country's political system and generating power struggles and corruption.

Davin O'Regan recalls: "Recently there have been documented reports of numerous attacks, acts of intimidation, illegal detention and the disappearance of journalists, political activists and some army officers. This is a worrying trend because civil society will yet again be key in stabilising the country and promoting the transition process, which will hopefully be speedy and democratic".

The country's future very much depends on the intentions of the international community. The new UN representative in Guinea-Bissau, Nobel Peace Prize laureate and former president of East Timor, José Ramos-Horta, is trying to raise awareness among foreign countries of the need to intervene and not abandon the country to its own devices. This is a difficult task: more than a year since the last coup, Guinea-Bissau's future still appears to be shrouded in a thick fog. **E**