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BOOKS

How South American drug cartels created a narco-state in West Africa

By [Antony Loewenstein](#) 28 December 2019

Ever since an eleven-year civil war resulted in independence in 1974, Guinea-Bissau has been stricken by poverty, organised crime and international indifference. The lack of governmental authority, plus the country's convenient location midway between Central America and Europe, caught the eye of the cartels



Experts often complain about the characterisation of African countries as “failed states”, arguing that the term justifies disregard for a country’s problems and,

subsequently, excuses a lack of action. They're half right – precious little has been written about the atrocious quality of life in much of Guinea-Bissau in the past ten years – but for many citizens, the definition is essentially academic. Over the past decade, South and Central American drug cartels have infiltrated every one of the facets of the country's civil society, building up their influences and resources in a nation whose location and political instability make it the perfect stepping stone from which to smuggle drugs into Europe to supply the continent's endless appetite for cocaine. In an extract (below) from his book Pills, Powder, And Smoke, the journalist Antony Loewenstein looks at how Guinea-Bissau was turned into a narco-state.

The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) issued a stark warning in 2008: “In the 19th century, Europe's hunger for slaves devastated West Africa. Today, its appetite for cocaine could do the same. The former Gold Coast is turning into the Coke Coast.” The UNODC gave figures to back up its claims, while acknowledging that it was impossible to know the exact amounts of drugs flowing through Guinea-Bissau, and they were stark: at least 33 tons of cocaine were seized on the way to Europe between 2005 and 2007.

In the decades before this, it was rare to seize even one ton across the whole African continent. Between 1998 and 2003, around 600 kilograms of cocaine was seized. The UNODC worried that most of the 33 tons was captured in only 23 large seizures, “many of which were accidental and partial. This indicates the existence of a much larger underlying flow.”

The UNODC admitted that they were only able to seize 46 per cent of the total global traffic in drugs, with the majority of illicit substances reaching their final destinations. The UNODC estimated in 2008 that around 27 per cent (or 40 tons) of the cocaine taken annually across Europe transited through West Africa, with a wholesale value of \$1.8 billion. By 2012, the UNODC believed that nearly 60 per cent of cocaine taken in western Europe transited through the region. The UN report found that nearly 1,000 kilograms of cocaine was being flown into Guinea-Bissau every night, co-ordinated by 50 Colombian drug lords based in the country.

The modern history of Guinea-Bissau proves that transitioning from a colonised nation to a democratic and independent state, when beset by transnational organised-crime groups, is close to impossible – especially when demand for drugs in the West is so high. Colonised by the Portuguese in the 16th century and achieving liberation in 1974 after an eleven-year armed struggle, Guinea-Bissau has been ruled by a succession of autocrats ever since. The country ranks 178 out of 188 countries on the United Nations Human Development Index.

GUINEA-BISSAU IS ONE OF THE POOREST COUNTRIES IN THE WORLD, WITH CASHEW NUTS, TIMBER AND FISH BEING MAJOR SOURCES OF INCOME FOR MANY CITIZENS

Today, Guinea-Bissau is one of the poorest countries in the world, with cashew nuts, timber and fish being major sources of income for many citizens and the main source of foreign exchange. Nearly 70 per cent of the population lives on less than \$2 a day. Exports only total roughly \$250 million annually. The creation of a “narco-state” was deceptively simple. Although Guinea-Bissau has never seen the levels of extreme

violence unleashed in Honduras, Mexico or the Philippines around the drug war, this tiny West African state was vulnerable because of its weak political structures and the scant foreign attention it was subject to.

Media reports from 2008 provided anecdotal evidence of South American traffickers driving expensive cars through the streets of the capital Bissau, purchasing lavish, hacienda-style estates and drinking in ways that the vast bulk of the population couldn't afford. During my visit, I never saw any signs of such wealth, but I was told that cartels had become less ostentatious in flaunting their money.

There were few public signs that drugs had consumed the country – namely violence or gang activity that was rife across Latin and South America – but crumbling infrastructure and buildings were visible indicators of misplaced priorities by those in power. The constant soaring humidity had cracked many painted surfaces, and spirits were languid. Many people sold apples, bananas, and nuts on the side of the dusty, often fraying roads. With only 500 tourists arriving annually, outside visitors were rare. Most signs were in Portuguese or French. The parliament building was decaying, with mould crawling up the walls. Bissau was filled with Portuguese-era colonial-style architecture.

After travelling for around three hours from Bissau, I arrived in the Saltinho area at the Hotel Pousada Do Saltinho, close to the village of Sintcha Sambel. It was advertised, including on its colourful outside wall, as a tourist hotel, but I soon learned that it never received tourists. It was a regular base for South American drug smugglers. Mostly from Venezuela, Brazil, and Colombia, they stayed anywhere between one and three months and waited for safe passage for drugs to Bissau, up through Africa and on to Europe.

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Cartels had refined the delivery process. Drugs were dropped off by plane on the Rio Corobal. They came from Guinea-Conakry; often, the Bissau port was heavily policed, though I heard that the port was increasingly used for smuggling, so it was easier to deliver the drugs near the hotel. A lieutenant-colonel from the Guinea-Bissau military often came from Bissau to oversee the smooth transfer of cocaine. He provided protection for the goods – sometimes up to 500 kilograms of cocaine – and ensured they were stored in safe houses in Bissau before leaving for other African countries.

Guinea-Bissau had perfected the trafficking of cocaine, but other drugs were also smuggled: morphine pills and tramadol, an opioid pain medication. Islamist fighters in Africa and the Middle East, including the Islamic State, loved this drug because it reduced pain in the case of injury – pills of abuse-grade strength, along with the amphetamine-type stimulant Captagon, gave militants an inflated sense of strength and bravery, with no need to sleep for days. Legitimate medical patients in Guinea-Bissau couldn't get this drug, even though it was pouring into the country (around 4,000 tramadol pills entered monthly). Smugglers take the drugs from Bissau to Mauritania and sell them to Ansar Dine, an Al-Qaeda-aligned group in Mali, Mauritania and Senegal, and to Boko Haram in Nigeria.

SMUGGLERS TAKE THE DRUGS FROM BISSAU TO MAURITANIA AND SELL THEM TO ANSAR DINE, AN AL-QAEDA-ALIGNED GROUP

A key aspect of a “narco-state” is the ability of outsiders to regularly infiltrate it and to

leave undetected. This was the case with Guinea-Bissau. So-called humanitarian caravans have arrived from Eastern Europe in the last decade. People from Poland, Hungary and Romania fill a convoy with clothes, medicines, and second- and third-hand ambulances to mask their activities, and they hand out these goods along the route from Europe to Africa.

They arrive in Guinea-Bissau to pick up drugs and receive around €10,000 for the work. They then take the cocaine through Mali and to the Toubou people living in Chad, Sudan, Niger and Libya. This group completes the mission towards northern Libya and then trusted smugglers take it on to Europe. Such a “humanitarian caravan” may seem like an arduous and dangerous path to ensure the safe passage of drugs, but the

economics work out for the traffickers and the drug mules.

Pills, Powder, And Smoke by Antony Loewenstein is out now.

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