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How the Drug Trade Transformed a Peaceful Tropical Country into a Narco State

Guinea-Bissau is more reminiscent of holiday destinations than some kind of drug war zone.

By Antony Loewenstein

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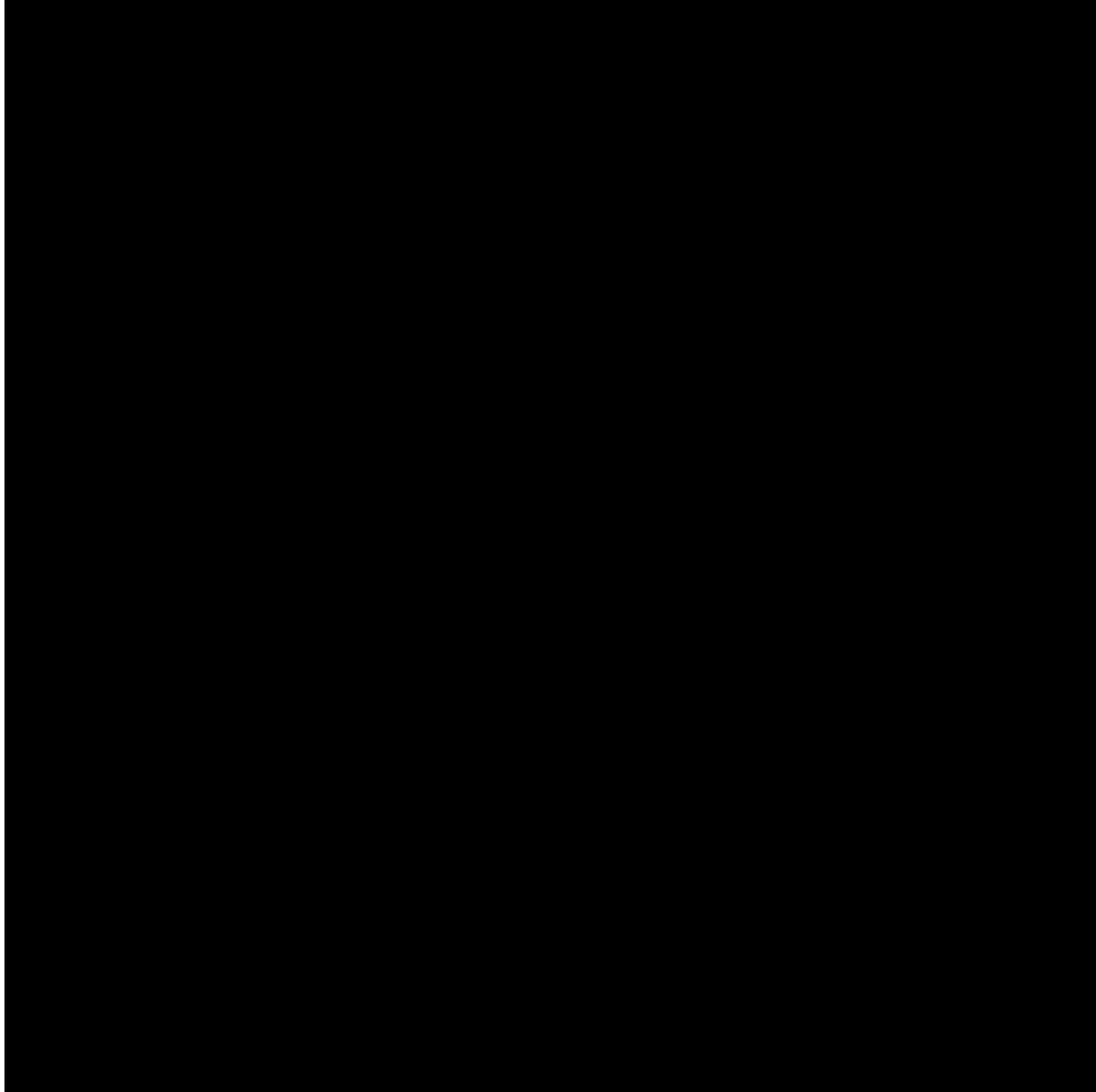
PHOTO: ANTONY LOEWENSTEIN

It was the biggest cocaine seizure in the country's history. In September, 1.8 tons of the drug was **discovered** in flour bags on a boat off the Atlantic coast of Guinea-Bissau in west Africa. Within two weeks, four Bissau-Guineans, three Colombians, and a Malian had been arrested. The seizure followed another huge one in the country **earlier this year**, when 789kg of cocaine was found in the false bottom of a truck transporting frozen fish.

Despite turbulence in its government and institutions over recent decades, Guinea-Bissau doesn't fit the stereotypical image of what the UN and DEA have **branded** a "narco-state," defined by the International Monetary Fund as one "where all legitimate institutions become penetrated by the power and wealth of the illegal drug trade."

I've been **reporting** on the country for five years and it's relatively safe compared to most other countries that are havens for drug trafficking. Although petty crime is **high and rising** and the rate of serious violence against civilians is worsening, it's far lower than comparable nations consumed by drugs, such as Mexico or Afghanistan.

There is high unemployment, but the country has a plethora of remote, peaceful, tropical islands, more reminiscent of holiday destinations with swaying palm trees and warm ocean water than some kind of drug war zone. In comparison, **Honduras**—the central American cocaine transit country with one of the highest **levels of violence** in the world outside a war zone, and which I also spent time in **for my book** on the drug war, *Pills, Powder and Smoke: Inside the Bloody War on Drugs*—felt dangerous on a daily basis.



ANSUMANA KEITA, 87, WHO LIVES IN KASSUMBA VILLAGE NEAR THE BORDER WITH GUINEA-CONAKRY. PHOTO: ANTONY LOEWENSTEIN

I met Ansumana Keita, an 87-year-old man who spoke frankly about his community being exploited by corrupt Bissau-Guinean authorities and foreign drug cartels. Keita's village, Kassumba, which lacks basics such as electricity and running water, has received nothing from the soaring drug trade, nor from the government. He implied that he had seen cocaine in water-proof sealed packages washing up on the beach, dropped off by boats. But they are useless to his community. "We don't benefit from the beach," he said, "we just need fresh water and better schools."

Despite the relative calm of Guinea-Bissau's cities and countryside, the drug cartels have essentially co-opted Guinea-Bissau.

So what is going on here? Why has this former Portuguese colony, a country not much bigger than Maryland, become a major stopping-off point for cocaine grown in South America and smuggled into Europe?

Guinea-Bissau has been beset by political instability since declaring independence in 1974. Outgoing President José Mário Vaz has appointed and sacked eight prime ministers since taking office in 2014, and corruption in successive governments and the armed forces is **endemic**. The country held largely peaceful **presidential elections** last month, but ongoing political

wrangling and a **recent alleged coup** look set to complicate the run-off in late December.

This corruption has seeped into society. Since independence, there have been hundreds of political assassinations. Ten years ago, a truth and reconciliation commission was **established** and yet not one killing has been investigated. Many citizens told me that they didn't trust the police or courts. People instead report their problems to journalists, who themselves face serious harassment. Last year Augusto da Silva, president of the Guinean Human Rights League, told the Portuguese news agency Lusa that due to the police brutality, corruption, poor government services and lack of state accountability for violence, the human rights situation in Guinea-Bissau was "precarious and worrisome."

Citizens face a bewildering **lack of options** in holding authorities to account. "This country throughout its history was marked by serious episodes of violations which remain unpunished, thus making impunity the brand image of the country, which has consequently generated a sense of hatred, revenge, retaliation," da Silva said in 2017.

When civilians do protest, like in October 2019 when a protestor was **shot dead** at a funeral in the capital Bissau, they risk being gunned down in the streets with little hope of justice.

Added to this instability, Guinea-Bissau is one of the poorest countries on the planet. Nearly 70 percent of its citizens **live below** the poverty line, leaving society vulnerable to the lure of the drug dollar.

It is these weaknesses, alongside the country's porous borders and its geographical position on Africa's Atlantic coast, that have **since the mid-2000s** turned Guinea-Bissau into a trusted cocaine trade transit point for South American and African organized crime groups. One high-ranking UN official has **estimated** that at least 30 tons of cocaine—a fifth of America's entire **annual cocaine consumption**—enters and leaves Guinea-Bissau each year.

In 2013, before the current president came to power, the U.S. State Department **reported** that "government officials at all levels are complicit" in the drug trade. Last year, a senior UN official based in Guinea-Bissau confirmed to **Global Initiative** that "the country is still a major [smuggling] hub. The actors might change but the game remains the same."

It's a vicious circle: The more drug money enters the country's institutions, the more open they are to further corruption. Not every government or military official is involved in drug trafficking, but years of political

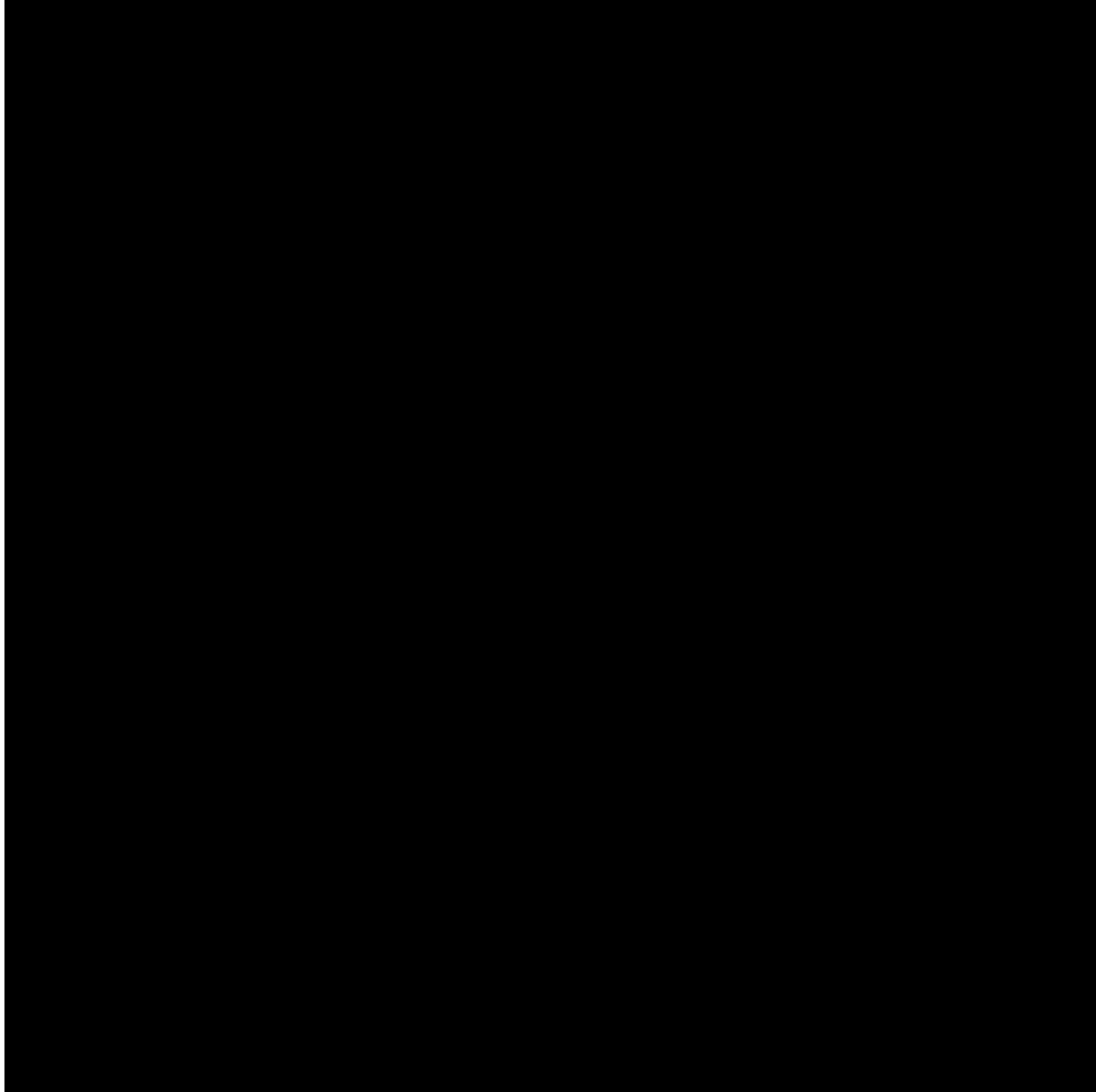
dysfunction has left the country without strong or accountable institutions.

“While the narco-traffickers did not seize power [in Guinea-Bissau], they were indeed extremely close to the centre of power,” **wrote** Gambian historian Hassoum Ceesay in 2017. “And while drugs did not run the country, traffickers took advantage of the state’s inherent weakness and exacerbated it by their presence.”

Antero Lopes, head of Rule of Law and Security Institutions at the UN mission in Bissau, told **Bloomberg** in late 2018 that "Guinea-Bissau is a victim of narco-trafficking because of the vulnerability of its institutions. Organized crime also corrodes stability and democracy—it’s a catch 22.” What this means in practice is that many local politicians are funded by narco money and become dependent on it when they win office. According to Transparency International in 2018, Guinea-Bissau had one of the **most corrupt** public sectors of any nation on earth.

Nonetheless, the narco state label **vastly oversimplifies** the problems facing Guinea-Bissau. Constant rivalries between its military and government have played into traffickers’ hands. Generals have often paid their soldiers from sacks of hard cash, something drug smugglers are willing to part with if officials can make their jobs easier. Direct cash payments ensures loyalty and are impossible to trace, allowing corrupt generals and traffickers to buy friendship.

Attempts to deal with Africa’s narcotic Achilles Heel have not gone well. The DEA has been **active** in the nation for years, but apart from the high-profile though ultimately fruitless **arrest** in 2013 of Jose Americo Bubo Na Tchuto, a former Guinea-Bissau naval chief alleged to be a key West African drug kingpin, the agency has failed to deal with the problem. The authorities too are stumped. President Vaz **said in March** that, “we don't have airplanes, we don't have boats, we lack the radars that would give us control over our... economic zone.”



BUBAQUE IS ONE OF THE BIJAGOS ISLANDS WHERE DRUG SMUGGLERS REGULARLY DEPOSIT, STORE AND TRAFFIC DRUGS.
PHOTO: ANTONY LOEWENSTEIN

One army official, Djibril Sanha, told me on Bubaque Island that he had “no communication devices and only our mobile phone,” and yet he was expected to chase drug traffickers. “I don’t understand what I’m doing here,” he said. “You give us a head and stomach but no legs.”

That the authorities are so undermined in their fight against traffickers may be the result of corruption right to the top. Umaro Sissoco Embaló, a former prime minister of Guinea Bissau and presidential candidate in the December run-off poll, told me that he had long believed the country’s ruling party, the African Party for the Independence of Guinea and Cape Verde (PAIGC), is directly involved in drug smuggling, a charge I routinely heard while visiting Guinea-Bissau for **my book** on the global war on drugs. It’s no coincidence that Cape Verde, where the party has deep connections, is also a nation heavily **entangled with the cocaine trade**.

“The current government is working with drug cartels,” said Embaló, who is **accused** of leading a coup attempt against the government in October, a claim he has denied. “It sounds crazy but it’s true. They only care about staying in power. They don’t care about the people of Guinea-Bissau. Many current presidential candidates support drug cartels, privately not publicly.”



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The UN believes the country is turning a corner. In fact it is advising drug traffickers to avoid Guinea-Bissau because it is now too expensive for them to bribe officials. After the big seizure in September, Representative for West and Central Africa of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crimes (UNODC), Antonio Mazzitelli, told me: “The route in Guinea-Bissau is completely sealed after the recent seizure, at least for the next six months,” he said. “If I was a reasonable drug trafficker, I wouldn’t go through Guinea-Bissau. I might look for other spots in the region, and those weak spots do exist in West Africa, but costs of operations [paying corrupt officials] are increasing for traffickers.”

Mazzitelli argued that many previous cocaine seizures were “due to accidents or committed individuals who wanted to stop seizures,” but the recent interdictions were signs that there was “growing interest in the rule of law and firm [court] sentences”.

In recent years, drug smuggling through West Africa has been consistently linked by enforcement agencies and the media to the Taliban or Al Qaeda, who are alleged to profit from the trade. Indeed, Domingos Monteiro, deputy director of Guinea-Bissau’s judicial police, claimed September’s seized shipment was destined for Islamist militants. “The drugs belong to the terrorist network Al Qaeda,” he told **Reuters**.

When VICE asked to see evidence for this claim, Monteiro declined to comment. In reality, the evidence is just **not there**. The Geneva-based Global Initiative, a group investigating organized crime, found **no evidence** this year of any Al-Qaeda link to cocaine smuggling, though said it was plausible that extremist organizations operating in the Sahara were involved in the trade.

According to Global Initiative, this year’s seizures were of cocaine trafficked by highly connected African smugglers who operate in the trans-Saharan cocaine trade, playing the role of interlocutors connecting drug cartels in Latin America, Africa and Europe. With demand for cocaine **rising in Europe**, and especially the UK, Africa will continue playing a vital role in the trade.

Guinea-Bissau is not alone in its bind. Many impoverished, and therefore vulnerable, African states are being targeted by drug cartels, such as

Guinea-Conakry, Togo, Mali, Niger and Ivory Coast, as waypoints to smuggle cocaine into Europe.

Meanwhile, Africa is no longer just a transit continent for drug trafficking, but a fast-growing collection of states that produce **huge amounts** of drugs such as heroin and meth for **domestic** and **international** consumption in Asia.

This is already affecting drug use on the continent. According to a recent report by Enact, a coalition of security-focused groups including Interpol that is funded by the European Union, Africa will see the world's **biggest rise** in illicit drug use over the coming 30 years. Enact predicts that both West and East Africa will see huge rises in drug use by 2050.

But the drug trade is pernicious. Even in parts of the country where the lure of drug money has receded, those who had got used to earning good money have turned to other forms of crime. Boat mechanic and pilot Papis Djata told me on Bubaque Island in the Bijagos Islands – an archipelago of around 88 islands that are used by smugglers to store and transit drugs – that neither the government nor foreign donors have provided any viable, employment opportunities. “Young men used to carry drugs around and make a little money”, he said. “When these young men used to work for smugglers, I would see them driving around in expensive cars. But when the work stopped, crime suddenly increased.”

While the corrupt officials and traffickers count their cash, the people of Guinea-Bissau remain stuck in a cycle of poverty. Until or unless Western demand for cocaine and other illicit substances declines, or drugs are legalized in major Western nations, Guinea-Bissau will continue to fall victim to smugglers.

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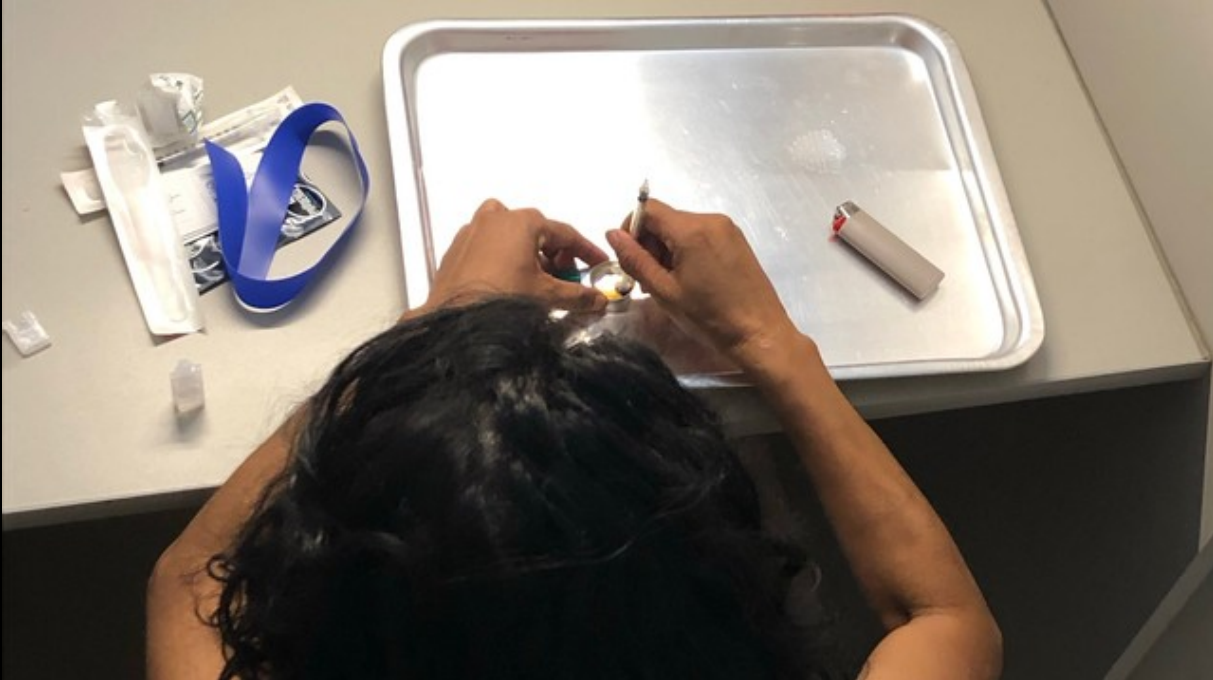


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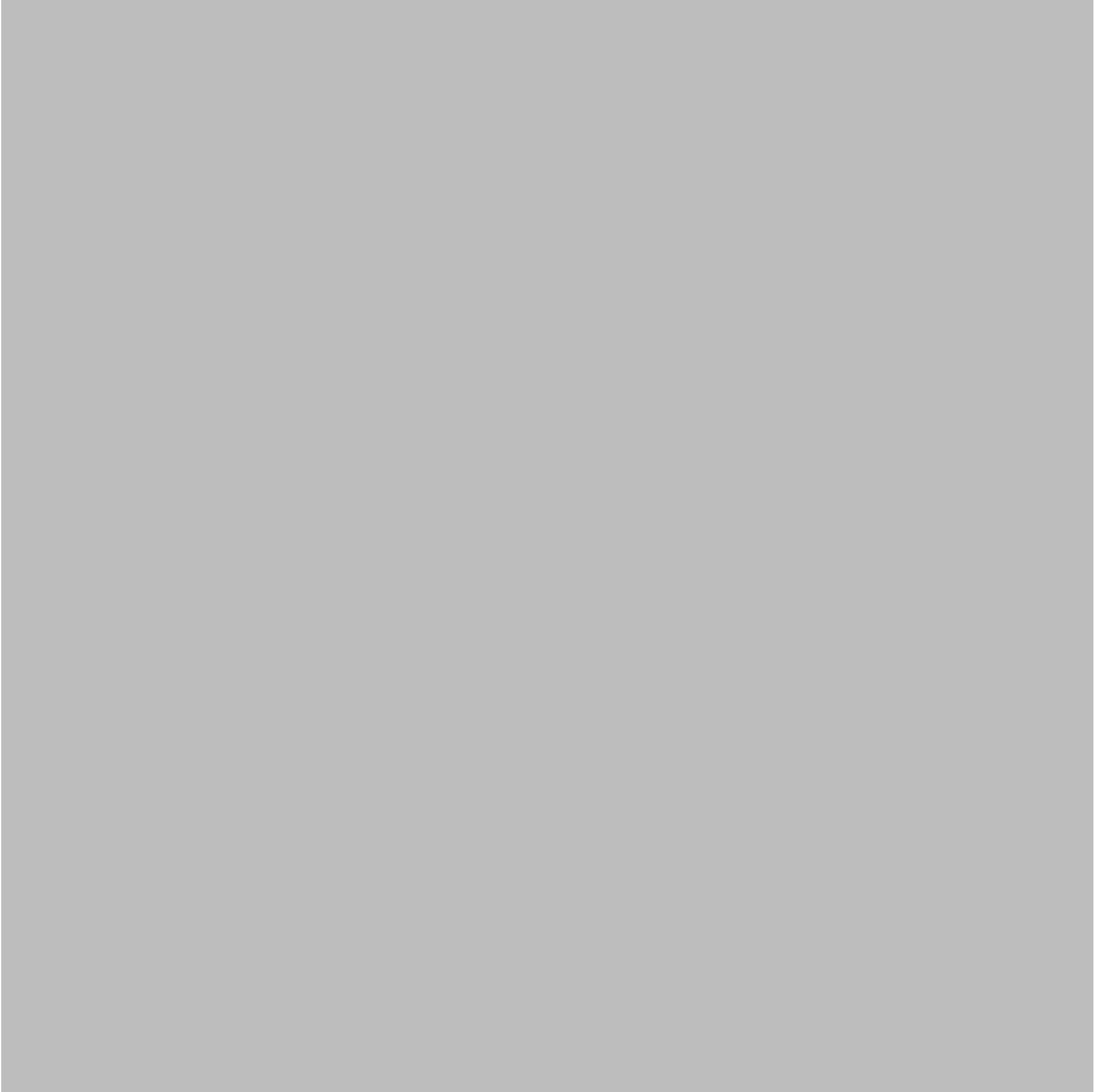
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By [Maxwell Strachan](#)

Nov 18 2019, 11:13pm   



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