

By Andrew Mok

The small coastal West African nation of Guinea-Bissau is easy to ignore. It occasionally surfaces in the newswires, such as during last week's coup attempt by the disgruntled deputy military chief of staff, before disappearing again into the geographic trivia. However, neglecting Guinea-Bissau risks allowing a currently overlooked problem to fester and grow into something more threatening. The current exploitation of Bissau territory by narco-traffickers shipping drugs to Western Europe and the weak nature of state institutions remain the principal problems. The potential for the situation in Guinea-Bissau to pose a threat to US and European security interests is considerable, and Western countries need to engage Guinea-Bissau and assist its government in building capable, professional security forces that can tackle the narco-transit trade; and deny safe havens to any potential terrorist groups who wish to exploit state weakness and narco-trafficking for their operations, and the reduction of tensions with Senegal, which often accuses Guinea-Bissau of being unable to stop Senegalese separatist rebels from using cross-border bases.

Guinea-Bissau has a history of instability marked by periods of violent conflict, including an anti-Portuguese war of independence. Today, after a military dictatorship from 1980 to 1994, a civil war in 1998, and coups in 2003 and most recently 2009, which saw the deaths of both the military chief of staff and then-President Joao Vieira, Guinea-Bissau's stability remains fragile despite recent democratic progress. Good governance remains a problem, while corruption remains among the world's worst. State institutions struggle to provide basic services to the population. Economically, Guinea-Bissau is one of the world's five poorest countries, with a per capita income of only \$190. Economic performance is largely dependent on the agricultural sector (62% of GDP), particularly fluctuating cashew nut production. Economic growth has been inconsistent at best and contracting at worst. The lack of legitimate employment has turned many towards narco-trafficking, and illicit drug revenue greatly surpasses the official Gross National Income.

The government remains incapable of asserting control over its territory. As a result, narco-traffickers from South America have exploited the weak state as a transit base for cocaine destined for Western Europe. Cocaine shipments usually arrive by light, sometimes amphibious, aircraft crossing the Atlantic, which land at one of the country's 50 offshore islands, many sheltered coves or deserted former Portuguese airstrips where they are offloaded for onward shipment to Europe. Although there has yet been no large-scale terrorist activity, the risk of such groups exploiting state weakness was made clear by the arrest in Bissau city of two men responsible for shooting 4 French tourists in Mauritania in December 2007. These men had managed to flee to and enter Guinea-Bissau after orchestrating the attack by the Algerian-origin radical Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat, now Al-Qaeda in the Maghreb. The country's unguarded border with Senegal remains a source of tension, as rebels from the Casamance region of southern Senegal have used Guinea-Bissau territory as a base.

Western countries should engage Guinea-Bissau with the immediate objective of reducing narco-trafficking and ensuring that the state is able and willing to control its own territory. Reducing subregional tensions with northern neighbour Senegal and denying terrorist groups potential safe havens is also important. One key way to fulfil these objectives is for the international community to assist Guinea-Bissau in training and fielding professional and effective security forces. Only capable national security services can suppress narco-trafficking and potentially terrorist groups seeking safe havens. Tackling these challenges and bringing public law and order will also provide the security needed to boost both foreign and local investor confidence and economic production. A Guinea-Bissau with capable security forces can prevent Casamance separatists from using its territory for bases, improving regional trust and security.

A new paramilitary police

Police forces have shown some willingness to tackle narco-trafficking, but are hampered by the lack of resources and non-cooperation from the military, so a new paramilitary gendarmerie organisation will represent a substantial strengthening of police capabilities. It would have counter-narcotics as its primary mission and consist of light, mobile infantry units. Such a force would be able to react rapidly and conduct raids and seizures of cocaine shipments on land, and could benefit from surplus military equipment such as older helicopters being retired by Western militaries, as well as specialized training from Western counter-narcotics law enforcement agencies such as the US Drug Enforcement Agency.

A maritime force

Countries providing security assistance should help expand the maritime component of Guinea-Bissau's customs service to monitor coastal waters and interdict drug shipments before they make landfall and disappear inland. Western navies and coast guard services, particularly those with experience in maritime drug interdiction, should assist with training such an expanded force. This maritime force could also benefit from surplus equipment, including patrol boats, cutters and other small naval vessels. In addition, Western countries should consider the provision and establishment surface-search radar facilities, operated by an adequately trained maritime force, to allow for more efficient monitoring of Guinea-Bissau's coast.

Intelligence capability

Both the land and maritime drug-interdiction forces would be useless without actionable intelligence. In addition to training for intelligence officers in the National Police, US and European nations should use the Maritime Analysis and Operations Center for Narcotics in Lisbon to share intelligence with and on-the-job training experience for Guinea-Bissau's intelligence officers. A joint intelligence centre could be established drawing on Western, West African, and Guinean expertise, modelled after the one in Colombia that uses both US and Colombian intelligence resources and monitors other organized criminal activities, such as terrorism.

A regional perspective

Regional cooperation in combating the drug-trafficking problem in West Africa is crucial. Even if narco-trafficking is curbed in Bissau, traffickers may merely relocate to another country in the region. Thus, Western security assistance programs should encourage the development of counter-narcotics capabilities among other West African countries. Western militaries can do this through conducting multilateral counter-drug exercises involving West African and US and European participants. The proposed joint intelligence centre could also be used to share regional counter-narcotics intelligence between West African countries. Enhancing regional cooperation not only reinforces West African counter-narcotic capabilities, but also promotes trust, contributing to greater regional security.

The National Military

At present, the military's involvement in narco-trafficking, such as the Naval Chief of Staff's alleged role in a smuggling ring, makes it more liability than asset in the counter-narcotics effort. However, countries providing security assistance should not completely ignore this powerful institution; after all, as demonstrated by last year's violence, the armed forces exert a strong influence beneath the fragile surface of civilian political leadership. Rather, there needs to be continual efforts to train military officers to abide by high professional and ethical standards. In addition, Western countries should also focus on training Guinea-Bissau's military in border control roles so the military can focus on the non-narcotics task of securing the north against incursions by Casamance rebels, which will defuse Bissau-Senegal tensions and promote regional security.

Building capable and professional security services in Guinea-Bissau is only one, but a critical part in reducing narco-trafficking and strengthening state territorial control. Combined with assistance in improving the economic situation and strengthening political institutions, building competent security forces will promote a Guinea-Bissau free of drugs, capable of denying terrorist groups use of its territory, and stable enough for long-term economic growth, which will benefit Guinea-Bissau, West Africa, and Western countries alike. At present, however, the situation remains urgent; despite the dire narcotics situation, however, the priority is still the prevention of further state failure and anarchy . . . for now. A stitch in time saves nine, and it is important to strengthen Guinea-Bissau's security institutions now to prevent future disaster.