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Omoregie: Drug and organised crime in West Africa

By Shola Omoregie

GUINEA-BISSAU has become an important conduit for drug trafficking and organized crime in particular for Colombian and other Latin American narco-cartels in collaboration with other criminal networks in Europe which use West Africa as a transit for drugs going to markets in Europe. The drugs originate from Latin America (Colombia, Venezuela, Mexico and Brazil).

A combination of weak State apparatus, brought about by prolonged period of political instability and high poverty rate in the country has made the country highly susceptible to, organized crime and drug traffickers to easily infiltrate state structures with large sums of money of questionable source and operate with impunity. This situation is compounded by the fact that the law enforcement institutions in Guinea-Bissau which are supposed to combat drug trafficking and organized crime are barely functioning due to lack of resources.

In many cases, these criminal syndicates appear to be better organized and resourced than the State, raising the specter of Guinea-Bissau being transformed into a narco-state. The authorities have complained of the lack of capacity and resources with which to patrol Guinea-Bissau's porous air, sea and land borders. These illicit activities threaten to subvert the country's nascent democratization process and to ingrain organized crime. Thus undermining respect for the rule of law and posing a serious threat to peace-building efforts and the economic and political stability of the country.

The evidence of using Guinea-Bissau as a transit route began mounting a few years ago. In September 2006, the Judiciary Police seized 674 kilogrammes of cocaine. A similar seizure was made in 2007, including some arms and money from drug traffickers. In fact, there have been other cases such as the landing in July 2008

in Bissau of a plane suspected of shipping cocaine from Venezuela and another landing in March 2010 of a plane at Cufar airstrip. The drugs on the aircraft simply disappeared and the suspects were released with impunity and the investigation files opened by the Prosecutor-General remain uncompleted. There have been claims that high government officials, including the military and politicians are involved in drug trafficking. It is believed however, that drug trafficking and organized crime cut across the society.

The sub regional context is important in responding to the criminal network in Guinea-Bissau. Drug trafficking cannot be combated without sub regional and international cooperation. There is little point in closing off access to Guinea-Bissau, only for the drug traffickers to move into another less regulated spot in the region, such as Guinea, Sierra Leone and Ghana. Criminals are able to operate with impunity because (a) they know the State has little capacity; (b) they know the judicial system is flawed and (c) international cooperation mechanisms are weak. If the Guinea-Bissau authorities are strengthened and able to prosecute and to detain foreign traffickers, they will still need improved international cooperation in order to speedily extradite those wanted in other countries instead of allowing them to go scotch free as has been the case.

In October 2008, ECOWAS and the United Nations convened a regional conference on drug trafficking and organized crime in Praia, Cape Verde. The emphasis on sub regional approach is important in order to prevent the situation from developing somewhere else in the region. This sub-regional initiative has resulted in the West Africa Coast Initiative (WACI) under which pilot Transnational Crime Units are being established in Sierra Leone, Liberia, Côte d'Ivoire and Guinea-Bissau. Under the TCU-WACI in the case of Guinea-Bissau, the focus is on bringing together a team of law enforcement and security experts from Interpol to work together with Bissau-Guinean law enforcement agencies as part of one highly specialized unit which will be structured, trained and equipped to provide a robust response to counter the activities of drug trafficking cartels and other criminal syndicates in Guinea-Bissau.

In Guinea-Bissau, the Judicial Police (JP) is the main security force, and perhaps the credible body involved in combating drug trafficking. Until my departure from Guinea-Bissau in December 2008, the JP was made up of 63 officers, with only 10 officers directly involved in combating drug trafficking in the entire country. No doubt, this force was seriously handicapped. While there have been some improvements, more assistance is required

to effectively cover the whole country. The criminal networks have found Guinea-Bissau vulnerable because it is a poor country without resources.

Finally, the following measures would be necessary in order to address these problems: (1) as a preventive measure, it is necessary to address, through strong regional and international assistance, the request of the Government of Guinea-Bissau to help secure its porous borders in order to ensure proper maritime, land and air space control and surveillance; (2) reduce the activities of criminal networks through the sharing of information, experiences and best practices and provision of technical assistance; (3) undertake training to uphold human rights and ensure good governance and the rule of law in order to prevent the conditions that are conducive to the spread of organized crime; (4) combat poverty and marginalization; and (5) within the framework of international partnership cooperation, there is the need to continue emphasizing a holistic antinarcotics approach targeting countries of Origin, Transit and Destination, as recommended in recent United Nations Security Council resolutions on Guinea-Bissau (UNSCR 1876(2009) of June 26 and UNSCR 1949(2010) of November 23.

Support by the international community to combat drug trafficking and organized crime in Guinea-Bissau is urgently needed. While it is encouraging that the Government of Guinea-Bissau, on June 27, 2011, adopted a "Political Declaration to combat and to prevent Drug Trafficking and Organized Crime", the time has come for the United Nations Security Council to act by imposing targeted sanctions on individuals involved in the criminal activities in Guinea-Bissau.

*** Ambassador Omoregie is the former Special Representative/Envoy of the United Nations Secretary-General to Guinea-Bissau and the Head of the UN Peacebuilding Support Office in Guinea-Bissau: 2006 - 2008**