

Leader Ousted, Nation Is Now a Drug Haven

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BISSAU, Guinea-Bissau — When the army ousted the president here just months before his term was to expire, a thirst for power by the officer corps did not fully explain the offensive. But a sizable increase in drug trafficking in this troubled country since the military took over has raised suspicions that the president's sudden removal was what amounted to a cocaine coup.

The military brass here has long been associated with drug trafficking, but [the coup](#) last spring means soldiers now control the drug racket and the country itself, turning Guinea-Bissau in the eyes of some international counternarcotics experts into a nation where illegal drugs are sanctioned at the top.

"They are probably the worst narco-state that's out there on the continent," said a senior Drug Enforcement Administration official in Washington, who spoke on the condition of anonymity so as not to jeopardize his work in the region. "They are a major problem."

Since the April 12 coup, more small twin-engine planes than ever are making the 1,600-mile Atlantic crossing from Latin America to the edge of Africa's western bulge, landing in Guinea-Bissau's fields, uninhabited islands and remote estuaries. There they unload their cargos of cocaine for transshipment north, experts say.

The fact that the army has put in place a figurehead government and that military officers continue to call the shots behind the scenes only intensifies the problem.

The political instability continued as soldiers attacked an army barracks on Oct. 21, apparently in an attempt to topple the government. A dissident army captain was arrested on an offshore island on Oct. 27 and accused of being the organizer of the countercoup attempt. Two critics of the government were also assaulted and then left outside the capital.

From April to July there were at least 20 landings in Guinea-Bissau of small planes that United Nations officials suspected were drug flights — traffic that could represent more than half the estimated annual cocaine volume for the region. The planes need to carry a one-and-a-half-ton cargo to make the trans-Atlantic trip viable, officials say. Europe, already the destination for about 50 tons of cocaine annually from West Africa, United Nations officials say, could be in for a far greater flood.

Was the military coup itself a diversion for drug trafficking? Some experts point to signs that as the armed forces were seizing the presidency, taking over radio stations and arresting government officials, there was a flurry of drug activity on one of the islands of the Bijagós Archipelago, what amounted to a three-day offloading of suspicious sacks.

That surreptitious activity appears to have been simply a prelude.

"There has clearly been an increase in Guinea-Bissau in the last several months," said Pierre

Lapaque, head of the regional [United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime for West and Central Africa](#). “We are seeing more and more drugs regularly arriving in this country.”

Mr. Lapaque called the trafficking in Guinea-Bissau “a major worry” and an “open sore,” and, like others, suggested that it was no coincidence that trafficking had spiked since the coup.

Joaquin Gonzalez-Ducay, the European Union ambassador in Bissau, said: “As a country it is controlled by those who formed the coup d’état. They can do what they want to do. Now they have free rein.”

The senior D.E.A. official said, “People at the highest levels of the military are involved in the facilitation” of trafficking, and added: “In other African countries government officials are part of the problem. In Guinea-Bissau, it is the government itself that is the problem.”

United Nations officials agree. “The coup was perpetrated by people totally embedded in the drugs business,” said one official, who spoke on the condition of anonymity because of the delicacy of the political environment here.

The country’s former prosecutor general, Octávio Inocência Alves, said, “A lot of the traffickers have direct relationships with the military.”

The civilian government and the military leadership that sits watchfully in its headquarters in an old Portuguese fort at the other end of town reject the United Nations drug accusations.

“People say I’m a drug trafficker,” said Gen. Antonio Injai, the army chief of staff, raising his voice in an interview. “Anybody who has the proof, present it! We ask the international community to give us the means to fight drugs.”

Mr. Gonzalez-Ducay, the ambassador, responded, “I can’t believe that the one who controls the drug trafficking is going to fight the drug trafficking.”

Relaxed and wearing a colorful two-piece outfit and gold chains, General Injai sat under a giant kapok tree surrounded by uniformed aides. He laughed when asked whether he was the real power in Guinea-Bissau and blamed the deposed prime minister, Carlos Gomes Jr., for provoking the coup through his military alliance with Angola.

In 2010, the United States government explicitly linked the country’s military to the drug trade: the Treasury Department declared as drug kingpins both the ex-chief of the navy, Rear Adm. Bubo Na Tchuto, and the air force chief of staff, Ibraima Papa Camara, and froze whatever assets they may have had in the United States.

Now, however, American officials are making overtures to the transitional government, despite other Western embassies’ hands-off approach to protest the military’s continued meddling in politics. General Injai expressed appreciation for the American position, and called the United Nations special representative here a “bandito.”

Russell Hanks, the American diplomat responsible for Guinea-Bissau, said: “You will only have an impact on this transition by engagement, not by isolation. These are the people who came in to pick up the pieces after the coup.” Mr. Hanks is based outside the country because the United States closed its embassy here during the civil war in 1998.

Officials point to several indicators, besides the increase in plane flights, to show that Guinea-Bissau has become a major drug transit hub.

They cite photographs of a recently well-cleared stretch of road in a remote rural area near the Senegal border, complete with turning space for small planes. The clearing was created under the supervision of military authorities, officials say. They also note mysterious absences of fuel at the tiny international airport in the capital, presumed stolen by traffickers.

Four months before the coup, a plane, with the aid of uniformed soldiers, landed in a rural area in the center of the country, which is the size of Belgium, said João Biague, head of the judicial police. The landing took place not far from General Injai's farm.

Mr. Biague heads what is nominally the country's antidrug agency, though he made it clear that he and his staff are largely powerless to practice any form of drug interdiction despite receiving frequent tips about small planes landing from abroad. "The traffickers know we can't do much," he said.

The agency is so starved of funds that he does not have money to put gas in its few vehicles, Mr. Biague said. Paint is peeling on the outside of the judicial police's two-story colonial building downtown, and mold blackens the ground-floor pilasters. It is allocated \$85 a week from the country's Justice Ministry.

"The agents we have in the field want to give up because they have nothing to eat," Mr. Biague said.

In the last three years, there have been more than a half-dozen unsolved political assassinations here, including of the longtime president and the former army chief of staff, as well as at least two coup attempts, besides the successful coup. Nobody has been successfully prosecuted, though drugs were linked to many of them.

Last month, the justice minister of the transitional government warned opposition politicians not to speak publicly of "cases that don't concern them," under threat of criminal penalty.

This week, the repression appeared to tighten. General Injai threatened journalists with death if they asked questions about the assassination of the former president, and he warned that there would be many arrests as a result of the countercoup attempt.

There is remarkably little public talk of the unsolved political killings or of the country's relations with the drug business. There have been no demonstrations; no discussion in the Parliament, shut down since July; no news conferences.

"A country that's not capable of discussing its own problems — it's not a country, it's not a state," said Mr. Alves, the former prosecutor general.

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