

ORGANISED CRIME IN WEST AFRICA

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West Africa is generally regarded as an example of a humanitarian tragedy characterised by grand corruption, brutal civil wars and criminal anarchy. The history of dictators in the sub-region is among the factors that have contributed to the fuelling of this perception. Dictators such as Sani Abacha of Nigeria have sunk their countries deep into the bottomless pit of poverty and underdevelopment. Diamond trade, as well as trade in other natural resources such as oil has, in the public eye, been turned into a dirty affair. This article explores the development of organised crime in West Africa and the political, economic and social conditions that encouraged the growth of this phenomenon. In particular, it considers the major forms of organised crime in the region.

Introduction

To outsiders, West Africa exemplifies a humanitarian tragedy characterised by grand corruption, brutal civil wars and criminal anarchy. Venal dictators, such as Sani Abacha of Nigeria, have stripped their countries bare, while the population is mired in poverty. Notorious international organised crime figures such as Leonard Minin and Viktor Bout have plied their trade in the region, providing arms to governments and rebels alike, frequently in return for diamonds. The trade in illicit commodities, timber, gold and diamonds has received a great deal of attention from the international community in its efforts to stem resource flows to armed combatants in the region. Today most law enforcement agencies regard West African criminal networks as dangerous adversaries. Their global reach, flexibility and amorphous structure have ensured their success in drug trafficking and fraud.

Unfortunately, within West Africa the

incidence and nature of organised crime is poorly understood. Police agencies seldom record crime statistics and when they do, they fail to distinguish between conventional and organised criminal activity. Although activist civil society organisations recognise the links between organised crime and corruption, they find it difficult to gain access to information on these sensitive matters. In contrast, the broader society views organised crime as a phenomenon of little immediate relevance to their lives. It assumes significance and enters the public discourse only when powerful interest groups are affected. (For example, an urban elite targeted by predatory armed robbers may be vocal in demanding that the police provide adequate counter-measures.) In addition, the trade in prohibited, restricted or regulated commodities is often linked to a powerful elite. These offences are based on a consensual exchange that provides benefits to parts of the community, and they are thus unlikely to jeopardise their

livelihoods. Otherwise legitimate businesses may maximise their profits by trading in legal goods in an illicit manner. Regrettably, both large corporate companies and small traders frequently perceive these commercial offences as acceptable business practice, where widespread corruption, excessive regulation and tariffs, and generally high costs are common.

This article explores the development of organised crime in West Africa and the political, economic and social conditions that encouraged the growth of this phenomenon. In particular, it considers the major forms of organised crime in the region. In view of the substantial literature on transnational West African crime networks operating outside the region, this aspect will not be examined in detail in this article.

The development of organised crime in West Africa

The colonial era

Organised crime, as we now understand it, has been prevalent in West Africa for centuries. Malian, Berber and European traders came to exploit the riches of the region, particularly gold and ivory. The ubiquitous trade in human beings for the plantations in the Americas, in which an estimated 13 million people were enslaved, came to represent the ugly face of imperialism. Parts of West Africa were colonised by the British, French, Belgians and Portuguese, and were systematically stripped of their natural resources, with few benefits accruing to the local population. The colonialists sanctioned the entry of a group of 'middlemen' that linked European companies in the capitals with producers in the hinterland. In West Africa, the middlemen were mainly Lebanese nationals who became a market-dominant minority that owned most of the productive sectors of the economy.¹

Owing to their position, this group was frequently accused of involvement in illicit trade (for example diamond trading). After World War II, demand for precious minerals escalated and many West African countries experienced a proliferation of illegal mining.

It brought about a sharp increase in crime and violence with large bands of men attacking caravans of goods. Local communities, who viewed commercial mining initiatives as attempts to exploit the inhabitants, regarded these bandits as heroes.

The early independence period, 1960-1970s

The situation was exacerbated by a period of severe political and economic crises soon after the independence of many West African countries. Nascent ethnic conflict emerged from the failure of these governments to manage conflicts effectively and to distribute national resources equitably. In the 1960s, Togo, Benin, Burkina Faso, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Ghana, Guinea-Bissau, Guinea, Equatorial Guinea, Niger and Mali experienced military coups that toppled civilian governments. Between 1967 and 1970 civil war also erupted in Nigeria's Biafran region. In addition, West Africa became a site for the proxy struggles of the Cold War. Socialism was introduced in Ghana, Guinea, Mali and Senegal, ushering in an era of one-party rule. Other countries, such as Nigeria and Côte d'Ivoire, aligned themselves with the West, but state power was effectively personalised. All these countries advocated increased state intervention in the economy, hoping to redistribute wealth from an expatriate or resident minority to the indigenous population.

At independence, most West African countries had underdeveloped economies dominated by the extraction of natural resources or agriculture. While many countries experienced economic growth after independence, urban-biased economic policies and exogenous commodity shocks culminated in a severe economic recession in the 1970s. The region experienced a domestic and external debt crisis. Manufacturing concerns collapsed because governments were unable to pay for imports. While Nigeria initially benefited from increases in oil prices, it was negatively affected when the oil boom collapsed in the 1980s.

The illegal trade in gold, diamonds and other natural resources, prevalent during the colonial period, continued. Many governments

relied on patronage to co-opt and emasculate dissenters, which frequently involved obtaining control over the natural resource or agricultural sector. Others formed alliances with dominant minority groups or multinational corporations that had more extensive business networks in the international markets. In exchange for political protection, these groups generated enormous profits that bolstered failing economies and enriched a small indigenous elite. Alluvial miners, frequently an important constituency for these governments, were licensed, and some encroached on large corporate mining concessions. In some countries the natural resource trade was eventually nationalised by the government. Multinationals and entrepreneurs countered these setbacks by venturing into the marketing of these commodities and establishing price cartels. Because countries in the region imposed differential tariffs on these goods or sanctioned the use of foreign currency (a hedge against unstable local currencies), there were still incentives for many people to smuggle these goods out of the country to the international market.

A similar criminalisation process occurred in the consumer goods market. Governments were concerned that higher food prices in urban areas would precipitate urban unrest and opposition to government. Price controls were instituted and marketing boards established to buy agricultural products, with much of the surplus going into government coffers. Private farmers and traders received very low prices for their produce and either cut their output or smuggled their goods to more attractive markets (often to neighbouring countries). In some countries, such as Guinea and Ghana, unauthorised trading or exports attracted stiff penalties. In spite of this, many countries experienced food shortages. Where governments responded by imposing rationing or other controls, as in Ghana, the black market expanded. Government officials could be bribed for additional rations or could augment their salaries by selling restricted goods on the black market.² A barter trade in consumer products, which enjoyed a comparative advantage in different parts of the region, became prevalent and promoted tax evasion.

After the collapse of the West African Currency Board in the 1960s, many Anglophone countries experienced increased economic crime. The government supplied foreign currency at a set, but continually increasing, official exchange rate. This led to the development of a black market for foreign currency. Government benefited by manipulating exchange rates, with the assistance of central banks, but smuggling of goods also increased as producers preferred to sell both currency and goods on the black market where preferable rates could be obtained. During the economic recession some countries laundered their revenue from natural resources through the black market to purchase petroleum and other essentials. Black markets for foreign currency are still common, except in Francophone countries that use the *franc de la Communauté financière de l'Afrique* (CFA franc) pegged at a fixed rate to the euro.³

The economies of most West African countries became increasingly informal and progressively dominated by criminal networks. The formal sector employed few indigenous people and many educated people emigrated. Small and medium businesses and traders found it difficult to compete in an environment where inflation was high and their prices were undercut by competitors from the informal sector. Most informal traders, on the other hand, eked out a subsistence livelihood. To give an indication of this trend, the informal economy currently employs 65 per cent of the population and contributes 60 per cent of the gross domestic product (GDP) of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) countries. It makes up 50 per cent of all intra-regional trade.⁴ The main beneficiaries of the national underground economy were criminal networks, located within government, the political or military elite, or minority communities. Large corporate companies were able to control the prices of goods in the international market, without having to cater for the welfare of workers. Where they had a presence in the country, losses owing to corruption were largely sufficiently centralised and predictable to ensure high returns.

At this time many governments, concerned with growing opposition to their policies,

recruited informal youth militias to intimidate and terrorise opposition supporters. They were often associated with the excessive use of cannabis and petty crime. When harder drugs such as cocaine and heroin entered African cities in the 1980s, this drug sub-culture contributed to the extreme brutality of the civil wars that followed, as in Sierra Leone. In addition, the informal nature of the economy proved vulnerable to capture by armed groups.

The post-independence era, 1980-2005

Organised crime became more visible in the West African region in the late 1980s and early 1990s. While the most common crimes were theft, burglaries and assault, the cities of West Africa experienced an increase in predatory organised crime such as armed robberies and car hijackings. Unlike economic organised crime, which relied on voluntary exchange, it was violent and resulted in the proliferation of private militias, security companies and vigilante groups. This trend predated most civil wars in the region, but may be attributed to prolonged political and economic decline.

Over the next 15 years, nine members of ECOWAS experienced civil wars.⁵ Armed combatants frequently expropriated or displaced older criminal networks or came to agreements with them about the payment of informal taxes or sharing the profits from this activity. Big corporate concerns, involved in large-scale extraction of natural resources, were compelled to stop production. Consequently, civil wars changed the make-up and hierarchies of the society and the distribution and rewards of economic activity. In some countries the extensive criminalisation of key sectors of the economy continues to plague governments attempting to institute better governance.

The crime wave in the 1980s and early 1990s was most evident in the dominant economic centres of the region, such as Lagos, Abidjan and later Accra and Dakar. The countries of the Gulf of Guinea, including Nigeria, have 70 per cent of the region's population and 80 per cent of its economy (Nigeria alone accounts for 50 per cent of this population and economy). The landlocked countries, including Burkina Faso

and Mali, have 17 per cent of the population in the region and contribute 9 per cent to its economy. The Atlantic coastal countries, including the countries of the Mano River Union (Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone) and Senegal, are home to 12 per cent of the region's population, while generating only 10 per cent of its economy. It has been suggested that some countries in West Africa are so disadvantaged by their geography and extreme climate that they may have no viable path out of mass poverty. For the population, this means that small-scale smuggling of commodities is the only viable means of earning a living.

Civil wars and political instability have reportedly stripped West African countries of a further two percentage points of GDP growth per year and have also affected neighbouring countries in the region.⁶ In the period from 1970 to 1997, Benin, Burkina Faso, Gabon, The Gambia and Mali were the only countries in West Africa that recorded increases in their GDP. Nigeria, Senegal, Togo, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana and Sierra Leone experienced negative economic growth.⁷ Civil wars in Guinea-Bissau, Liberia and Sierra Leone led to poor their gross domestic product economic growth and the destruction of economic infrastructure and markets.⁸ The recent conflict in Côte d'Ivoire has crippled exports from countries such as Mali (43 per cent) and Burkina Faso (77 per cent) that pass through Abidjan. Economic growth in the West African Economic and Monetary Union, of which Côte d'Ivoire is a member, fell from 3.7 per cent to 1.2 per cent in 2003.⁹

High rates of poverty and inequality are strongly correlated with some forms of crime, such as burglaries and armed robberies. Fifteen of the 50 least developed countries in the world are in West Africa, with an estimated 55 per cent of the regional population living on less than \$1 per day.¹⁰ Inequality is also very high with an average Gini coefficient of 45 per cent (South Africa with its legacy of apartheid and racially based policies has a ratio of 58 per cent). It is estimated that the poorest 20 per cent of households may consume less than 4 per cent of GDP.¹¹

International studies show that rapid and unplanned urbanisation creates conditions

for the escalation of crime. In many African countries, despairing young males living in terrible conditions are the 'shock troops' of crime and political instability. The West African region is the most populous one on the continent, accounting for two out of every four Africans (one in every five Africans lives in Nigeria). The share of young people in the population constitutes just under half of the population in these countries.¹² Secondary school enrolment is calculated at an average of 7 per cent, with just less than half of children attending school in urban and higher income areas.¹³

The anonymity of city life can dissolve the bonds between people and weaken social organisation. In West Africa, urbanisation has escalated from 14 per cent of the population in 1960 to 40 per cent in 1990.¹⁴ Civil wars and conflict have compounded urbanisation and the humanitarian crisis. West Africa has the highest number of migrants (4.7 per cent of the population) in the world.¹⁵ One third of the rural population have moved from their rural homes, and 12 per cent of non-Nigerians do not live in their country of birth, frequently owing to insecurity or the lure of better economic prospects. Between 1989 and 1996 an estimated 80 per cent of the Liberian population was displaced. In 1991 civil war broke out in Sierra Leone and precipitated a flow of refugees into Guinea (which hosted 650,000 refugees), Côte d'Ivoire and other countries in the region. This precipitated instability in Guinea with military incursions into that country in 2000–2001, frequently blamed on the refugees, who were then displaced for a second time. Since the political crisis in Côte d'Ivoire, many immigrants from West Africa have been expelled or forced to flee the violence. Fighters have used refugee camps to regroup and rearm. These camps have also become crime hotspots with refugees or combatants preying on the local population or other refugees.¹⁶

As stated before, markets for firearms and drugs (cocaine and heroin) developed, coinciding with the increase in violent organised crime. Weapons used in the internal and liberation wars in Nigeria, Cape Verde and Guinea-Bissau did not circulate widely in the region. With the emergence of civilian politi-

cal armed movements in Senegal, Mali, Niger, Liberia and Sierra Leone which procured shipments of weapons, the situation changed. Later, Charles Taylor's National Patriotic Front of Liberia received weapons from various countries through Côte d'Ivoire, as did the Tuareg groups in Mali and Niger. In Sierra Leone, several countries armed the civil defence structures (the Kamajors) fighting the rebels. In the mid-1980s, the government of Burkina Faso issued automatic weapons without maintaining records of their destinations and was later unable to trace them.¹⁷

In many West African countries, the weakness or illegitimacy of the criminal justice system hampered the response to crime. In Sierra Leone and Liberia, where the state imploded during civil wars, the rebel movements destroyed police stations and courts – symbols of the state's authority. In the post-conflict period, the criminal justice system has to be re-established, but progress is slow. Many West African states are emerging from authoritarian rule, where the security agencies and the courts have been used to subvert justice and repress dissent. Corruption is rife in the public service, which contributes to public distrust.

However, alternative systems of governance play a significant role. In some countries, traditional institutions administer justice in rural areas. In other countries, vigilante groups have been established to respond to widespread insecurity, arising partly because of disillusionment with the criminal justice system. Political party militias, as discussed, contest political territories. In many instances the latter groups have degenerated into criminal gangs. This has escalated conflict and exacerbated criminal violence. In addition, these groups have been contiguous with and enjoyed the support of neighbouring states, thus extending instability and crime into the region.

The United Nations Document Index (UNDOC) has suggested those countries emerging from civil war experience an exponential increase in crime in its aftermath. One of the reasons is that civil wars, aimed largely at the civilian population, rupture the fabric of society and its institutions. UN agencies and international institutions have documented the intergenerational impact of

widespread psychological trauma, humanitarian disaster and displacement on levels of crime on the continent. This includes the use by ex-combatants of the skills of war in criminal activity.¹⁸

Forms of organised crime in West Africa

The illicit trade in natural resources and other commodities

The illicit trade of diamonds from Sierra Leone, largely through Liberia and Guinea to the world market, has attracted the most international attention. The illicit diamond trade reportedly funded the armed rebellion of the Revolutionary United Front and may have funded the operations of Hezbollah. While official exports have increased in Sierra Leone with the creation of the certificate of origin scheme (the Kimberley process), criminal networks are still able to smuggle diamonds with the complicity of neighbouring countries and international crime syndicates based in the cutting, polishing or marketing centres for these gems.

Communal violence in oil-producing countries such as Nigeria has sparked a growth of organised crime activity – oil bunkering, piracy and kidnappings.¹⁹ Oil bunkering is a very lucrative activity. It is estimated that 100,000 barrels of oil are stolen each day in the Niger Delta, amounting to \$15 per barrel. The official oil price is in the region of \$40 a barrel.²⁰ Because fuel is subsidised and cheaper in Nigeria, crime syndicates and smaller traders sell fuel on the black market to its neighbours. The latter pay official US dollar-based world oil prices. In addition, international crime syndicates transport oil to world markets. It has been reported that between 2001 and 2004 the Nigerian navy apprehended 17 ships and 56 badges involved in bunkering.²¹

In Ghana, as in many other countries in Africa, miners operating illegally in large-scale mining shafts provide gold to the illicit market. In Liberia, militia groups are now involved in organising the extraction and sale of artisanal gold, which transits through Côte d'Ivoire before it is sold on world markets. In Côte

d'Ivoire itself government-backed militias are mining gold in the west of the country and control border crossings to Liberia.²²

Former Movement for Democracy in Liberia (MODEL) fighters are involved in tapping rubber in eastern Liberia, which is transported to Côte d'Ivoire for processing and shipment. In Liberia, logging operations have continued despite the imposition of international sanctions against the trade. The logs have been stockpiled for shipment once sanctions are lifted; others are transported to militias operating in Côte d'Ivoire.²³ In Equatorial Guinea, the illicit trade in timber and ivory is reported to be extensive.²⁴ Many of the coastal countries of West Africa rely on fishing as a key source of foreign exchange (23.6 per cent of exports in Senegal) and employment.²⁵ Illicit and over-fishing by large trawlers from Europe, Asia and Russia have undermined this industry. In Sierra Leone, representatives of the Mano River Union estimate that these ships catch most of the fishing stock.

Some crime practitioners describe Benin as one of the major smuggling transit routes of the West African region, owing to its proximity to Nigeria and its status as a transit point for a large variety of goods. Smugglers export commodities such as tobacco, alcohol, second-hand cars and textiles to Nigeria in exchange for petrol, cacao and palm oil.²⁶

Côte d'Ivoire remains a dominant economic power among its neighbours. With the partitioning of the country, the northern area of Côte d'Ivoire has effectively become a free trade zone. Cigarettes produced in Guinea are sold extensively in the north, while cigarettes produced in the tobacco factory in the north of Côte d'Ivoire, which are more expensive, are sold to consumers in the south. While cotton is illegally exported from the north to Burkina Faso and Mali, goods such as sugar from these countries are sold in Côte d'Ivoire. Cotton farmers in the north of the country sell their crop to Burkinabe dealers, who in turn export motorbikes, which are cheap because no duties are payable.²⁷

In the Sahelian countries that form part of ECOWAS, Mali and Niger, drought and famine have compelled many people to resort

to smuggling to earn a livelihood.

Cigarette smuggling is among the most common forms of illicit trafficking in this region, and is transiting through Kidal (Mali). Other forms of illicit trafficking, such as the trade in diesel and other goods originating in Algeria, occur because of the shortages of these goods in Mali and the lack of border controls between the two countries. Army patrols and customs posts were dismantled as part of the peace accord with the Tuareg population after the 1990 rebellion. Some analysts link this illicit trade to the Algerian Salafi Group for Preaching and Combat, which reportedly claims allegiance to Al-Qa'eda. Well-connected Nigerien businessmen smuggle goods (including cigarettes) in containers between Cotonou, Gaya, Agadez and Sirte, but face aggressive security force action, including helicopter attacks on their vehicles.²⁸

Lastly, in many West African countries legitimate and criminal enterprises evade corporate and customs taxes. Some companies pay revenue officials a bribes to reduce their official tax bills. Others receive exemptions on the customs duties normally required.

Drug trafficking

Studies from all over the world indicate that drug use is associated with crime and violence. The UN has said that drug production and trafficking is financing rebellions in West Africa. In Côte d'Ivoire, Liberia and Senegal it is alleged that cannabis production provides the finance for arms. Farmers grow cannabis as an alternative to other crops, such as cocoa, because prices for the latter are volatile on the world market. The leading producers are Nigeria, Ghana, Senegal and Côte d'Ivoire.

Some African countries have experienced an influx of hard drugs such as heroin and cocaine. In West Africa, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana and Senegal have experienced an increase in drug seizures.²⁹ Heroin and cocaine are used in the cities of Liberia, Sierra Leone, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Togo, Benin and Nigeria. However, indigenous cannabis production is

still the main substance of abuse in Africa.³⁰ Cannabis production largely services the local and regional drug markets. Youthful urban dwellers sell this cannabis in the cities,³¹ although some of the Nigerian cannabis production may be sold in Europe.³²

It is well known that West African criminal networks, in conjunction with other syndicates, use the ports of West Africa as transit routes for drugs to the US and Europe. Cocaine and heroin have been seized en route to the US and Europe from Nigeria, Togo, Ghana, Côte d'Ivoire and Senegal. While Nigeria was a favoured route for drug traffickers in the past, the cancellation of flights from its cities and increased law enforcement activity appear to have had an impact on the trade. Many Nigerian crime networks now operate from neighbouring countries. There is little information on drug trafficking within the region because this type of crime depends on detection by the authorities. Most of the reported seizures originating in West Africa occur in developed countries. Transnational West African criminal networks have a presence in 80 countries around the world, including the countries in which these drugs are produced (Asia and South America), and are thought to be the secondary distributors of cocaine and heroin in many countries in Africa and elsewhere.³³ For this reason it is suspected that the West African region may be a more significant transit route for drugs than the actual seizures would suggest. The vast and porous land, riverine and seaports and extensive corruption among government and customs officials provide an ideal environment for illicit trade.

Human trafficking

Organised crime groups are infiltrating networks that smuggle women, children (for labour or sexual exploitation) and undocumented persons.³⁴ In West Africa, this phenomenon is exacerbated by civil wars, refugees, internal displacement, the recruitment of child soldiers and economic conditions. Within West Africa, established trafficking routes involve Benin,

Côte d'Ivoire, Gabon, Ghana, Mali, Nigeria, Togo, Cameroon, Burkina Faso, Guinea and Niger.³⁵ Victims may also be transported to Chad and Senegal. Trafficking victims are frequently from rural areas near the highways between Côte d'Ivoire, Togo, Benin and Nigeria. In West Africa, experts suggest that prior to the political crisis, Côte d'Ivoire was a receiving state for Malian and Burkinabe children. Cameroon, on the other hand, is a transit state for Togolese, Nigerian and Beninese children going to Gabon.³⁶ In Burkina Faso, children have been trafficked to Saudi Arabia, Nigeria, Germany and Côte d'Ivoire. In the region between Nigeria and Chad, traditional nomads enslave young women. In Mali, Gao is a reportedly a transit point for human trafficking. People may be conveyed to Algeria, through Mauritania, Western Sahara and Morocco to Spain or through Mali, Algeria and Tunisia to Italy/Malta.³⁷

Nigerian groups dominate the organised human trafficking networks. It is reported that they have expanded their operations into Benin, Togo, Ghana, Mali and South Africa. They have established safe houses, which are used to transport the victims overland to West and southern Africa and Europe. These traffickers can receive \$10,000–20,000 for a child and \$12,000–50,000 for a woman, depending on the purpose they will serve and the rates that can be earned in a country.³⁸ The International Labour Organisation (ILO) estimated that 200,000–300,000 children are trafficked within West Africa each year. UNICEF calculates that 10,000–15,000 West African children work in the cocoa plantations, having been sold by middlemen to farmers for the sum of \$340 each.³⁹ Victims suggest that these crime networks also carry out other forms of organised crime.

Firearms trafficking

The regional nature of the conflicts in Sierra Leone and Liberia has contributed to the widespread ownership of both legal and illegal firearms. In 1993 a UN mission concluded that about seven million firearms were in

circulation and that the problem had to be addressed on a regional level as weapons were traded over such long distances in the region. In the mid-1990s, the UN Mission in Liberia (UNOMIL) indicated that the extent of small arms proliferation had been overstated. They found that the ratio between fighters and functioning weapons was 2.6:1 in Liberia, with about 80,000–100,000 weapons circulating in the country.⁴⁰ However, the situation has not been contained as many governments have provided false end-user certificates or supplied some of the regimes in West Africa with weaponry. The Chinese are reportedly providing weapons to these countries in exchange for trade agreements.⁴¹

However, there is insufficient evidence to draw any conclusions about the involvement of organised crime groups in the weapons trade. It is known that small arms circulate in the Sahel region where pastoral societies are experiencing extreme environmental stress and conflict related to food security. In Niger, arms are reportedly trafficked between it and its neighbours. In conflict-ridden regions such as the Niger Delta, weapons are also readily available. Communities have large stocks of automatic rifles and small arms, which are used in communal violence, piracy and other crimes.⁴² Weapons circulate between Mali and Côte d'Ivoire, notably in the territory held by the Forces Nouvelles rebels.⁴³ In 2004 armed fighters from the Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD) supported Mandingo groups in violent clashes with the Guerze community in the Guinea Forest region. It is claimed that the Guinean government, in turn, is recruiting these combatants to work with pro-government militias in Côte d'Ivoire.⁴⁴

Senegal, Ghana, Guinea and Nigeria manufacture weapons with some indications that they may be sold in the region. Government and private security agencies (and even peacekeepers) are alleged to hire out or sell their weapons to criminals.⁴⁵ In many of the cities, firearms are used in murders, armed robberies and vehicle hijackings. For example, in Lagos handguns and long guns were used in 75 per

cent and 18 per cent of vehicle robberies and 72 per cent of non-automobile robberies.⁴⁶

Armed robberies, vehicle hijackings and piracy

Many West African countries have experienced increased banditry and armed robberies in the aftermath of conflict in the region. Owing to their random and violent nature, most people in crime surveys perceive these as major threats to their security.

In the Nigerian City of Lagos, in 28 per cent of car robberies and 57 per cent of other robberies (including bank robberies) there were more than three offenders and assault rifles or handguns firearms were used, fitting the UN definition of organised crime.⁴⁷ Between 1991 and 1994 Abidjan experienced an average of just over 5,000 armed robberies annually.⁴⁸ In Ghana, armed robberies have reportedly increased in the capital, Accra, and on the border between Ghana and Togo. Ghanaians attribute the crime wave to large numbers of refugees and undocumented migrants from Liberia, Togo and Côte d'Ivoire, notably ex-combatants. On the borders of Côte d'Ivoire with Mali and Burkina Faso, banditry is common. In Côte d'Ivoire itself, vehicles are being stolen and dismantled for spare parts – a trend apparent elsewhere in the region.⁴⁹ In the Niger Delta, criminal groups steal vehicles and conduct other criminal activity. Since 2004 car hijackings have also occurred in Freetown, Sierra Leone.

Piracy and armed robberies against ships are a feature in the 3,000 riverine waterways of Nigeria, as well as in other parts of West Africa. The International Maritime Bureau recorded 55 incidents of piracy in West Africa in 2004. Twenty eight of the incidents took place in Nigeria, while others occurred in the Gulf of Guinea, and off the coasts of Senegal and Mauritania.⁵⁰

Advance fee and other frauds

The 'advance fee' fraud (419 scam) has largely been targeted at developed countries in the form of paper-based and electronic letters. Victims receive a letter in which they are

requested to assist in transferring large sums of fictional money. If the victim agrees to be involved in the transaction, the fraudsters request payment of various 'advance fees', such as administration costs or bribes. These types of fraud were initially strongly associated with West African criminal networks. They are thought to have originated in Nigeria in the 1980s. Many other nationals, imitating them, have become involved in these scams.

Variations on these scams are becoming more common in West Africa and other parts of Africa. They have taken place in Senegal, Nigeria, The Gambia, Ghana, Togo, and Sierra Leone. In the period from 1998 to 2002 the Nigerian police recorded 113 complaints from victims of 419 scams in Nigeria.⁵¹

These crimes have become increasingly sophisticated, with the perpetrators using the documentation of legitimate or non-existent financial institutions to convince prospective 'clients' of their standing. For example, police arrested a syndicate of Nigerian nationals with forged letterheads and documents of the Bank of Ghana and other financial institutions in Ghana, Nigeria and South Africa. Some of these documents authorised syndicate members to carry large sums of money in cash out of these countries. The group allegedly used these letters to lure foreigners into the country to defraud them. This group allegedly directed some of the victims to their colleagues in exchange for a proportion of the profits. Victims are frequently convinced of the authenticity of these scams because the crime network pays for all their travel expenses.⁵²

In many African countries the scam artists conduct these frauds in person. They may approach a prospective client on the street or at a busy market. They offer the victim precious stones, such as diamonds, at below market prices. The prospective client is asked to assist the conman by giving him the funds to buy a further consignment of stones, with the profits being shared equally. This type of crime is known to have taken place in several mineral-rich African countries, such as Sierra Leone. In other versions of the fraud, a potential customer is persuaded to buy blackened bank notes (purportedly US dollars) with a special cleaning fluid that will clean these notes and

make them usable. This scheme is known as the 'black dollar' scam in some countries.

Credit card use has not been widespread in many West African countries. However, financial fraud and identity theft are becoming more common. West African crime networks are involved in reshipment fraud. They recruit people to purchase goods from on-line vendors with fraudulent or stolen credit cards. The recruits use their domestic addresses to receive the goods and reship the merchandise to other countries. They may be paid with merchandise or counterfeit financial instruments. In 2004, in cooperation with Ghanaian and Nigerian authorities, US law enforcement agencies arrested 31 people involved in the theft of an estimated \$1 million of merchandise.⁵³

Conclusion

Political and economic governance is in flux in West Africa. The underlying conditions, apparent in earlier periods, for the growth of organised crime are still of relevance. West African countries score badly on measures of good governance, including political participation and stability, government effectiveness and accountability, control of corruption and regulatory quality.⁵⁴ This, combined with the profound economic challenges facing the region, means that the incidence and nature of organised crime, and related corruption, is unlikely to be reduced in the short term.

In Liberia, to the consternation of the transitional government, the International Crisis Group has suggested that foreign experts be placed in key departments (for example Ports and Forestry) to monitor revenue inflows and allocation.⁵⁵ In their view, the only other alternative is to reconstruct all the institutions of government, which will take between 15 and 25 years. These types of solution are expected to meet stiff opposition from African nations who insist on their sovereignty. One of the ways to overcome this is for the African Mining Partnership and the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) to play a constructive role in ensuring better oversight and accountability. This could be done through the African Peer Review Mechanism

or technical assistance.

At national level, civil society groups (especially the media) and independent state institutions involved in combating organised crime and corruption should receive more support. These interventions should take into account that recent research suggests that the popular Hong Kong type of anti-corruption agencies, when implanted in the African context, may not be the most effective model. Many of the anti-corruption commissions (ACC) are simply ignored by governments, who point to their mere presence as a sign of commitment to accountability. Interventions could involve strengthening the ACC, with donor pressure, or locating these initiatives within the office of the Auditor General, who may have greater political support.

Further, existing regional and international legal regimes aimed at combating these phenomena (corruption, arms and human trafficking and the illicit exploitation of natural resources) may assist in curtailing some of the benefits of this trade. An international convention that clearly defines what constitutes illicit and unacceptable trade, including enforceable principles of corporate governance, would be essential to ensure practical enforcement.

However, more research is required to assess the extent to which ordinary civilians rely on this trade for their livelihoods. West African regional organisations have suggested that spatial economic mapping exercises be conducted in the region. This could inform more effective and targeted action against the organised crime and corruption networks involved, which are largely located in the more affluent and influential sectors of society.

Notes

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 - 37 *Islamist terrorism in the Sabel*, op cit, p 8. It is claimed Malian traffickers receive \$90 for a Sahara crossing.
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 - 40 Meek, op cit, Section One.
 - 41 D Farah, *Salafists, China and West Africa's growing anarchy*, International Assessment and Strategy Center, Washington, DC, 7 December 2004, p 3, <www.strategycenter.net>.
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