

GUINEA-BISSAU

# Cocaine and coups haunt gagged nation



**REPORTERS  
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**K**ids in the French national team's blue shirts play soccer with a threadbare ball, weaving in and out of deep ruts in the asphalt. Goats snooze under an acacia bush. The capital of a small West African country a bit bigger than Belgium, Bissau is sleepy, antiquated African city, a former Portuguese trading post that is slowing disintegrating as the years pass. A strange calm reigns. But everyone talks only of the drug trafficking, which apparently is eating at the country like a cancer.

There are two Guinea-Bissaus. The one that starts at Osvaldo Vieira international airport, consisting of ramshackle taxis, bizarre shops and an informal economy, overseen by a cash-strapped government. And the one pursued by the international press and Interpol investigators. The one referred to with a lowered voice, peopled by "Colombians driving around in Jaguars" and "military officers with thousand-dollar mobile phones." The one in which large cocaine consignments are delivered by night to jungle air-strips on one or other of the 88 islands that make up the Bijagos archipelago. Everyone mutters about this Guinea-Bissau and lots of people are supposed to "know things" but no one says anything specific.

And for good reason. The few Guinea-Bissau journalists who got too close to the drug traffickers and their civilian and military accomplices have had problems. Two have had to flee the country this year although the press seems relatively free. Aside from the serious threat to their own safety, they knew from hearing it repeated that overly embarrassing revelations about the involvement of senior army officers in international cocaine trafficking could revive old and cruel demons.

Then army chief of staff Gen. Ansumane Mané raised a force in June 1998 with the aim of ousting President João Bernardo "Nino" Vieira, who had accused him of trafficking in



arms for the benefit of rebels in Casamance. The country was plunged into 11 months of armed clashes with ethnic and criminal undertones in which at least 15,000 civilians and soldiers died. What journalist would, for a miserable wage, risk being gunned down or thrusting his loved-ones into this kind of hell? To avoid a vendetta or a coup, most of Bissau's journalists have opted for omertà.

### The "best journalist" had to flee

Allen Yéro Emballo, the local correspondent of *Agence France-Presse* and *Radio France Internationale*, went further than the others and paid the price by being forced into exile. "Allen's departure is a great loss as he was the country's best journalist," said a foreign reporter who has been to Guinea-Bissau many times in recent years. No doubt this was why Rear-Admiral José Américo Bubo Na Tchut, the navy chief of staff, said to him in May: "Shut up or die, it's up to the journalist to choose." Emballo had told him that some of his men were giving the Colombians protection.

A group of armed, masked men in combat fatigues stormed into his home in his absence on the evening of 24 June. While guns were trained on his terrified wife, children and young brother, they searched the house from top to bottom, taking his computer, notebooks, camera and a packet of photos. Before leaving, one of them stopped in front of his brother and said: "This time we are taking his things. The next time we will take his head."

Emballo's legalistic response did not bear fruit. No action was taken on the complaint he filed the next day at Bissau police headquarters. And that evening his mysterious intruders gave him a new warning. At around 11 p.m., an anonymous caller repeated the threats: "Did your wife tell you what we told her? The next time we will take your head away with us." Emballo received an identical call at the same hour on 3 July. His attempts to find out who owned the phone from which the calls were made were in vain. The telephone operator referred him to the police, who promised him they would do what was necessary. In reality, nothing was done.

Warned by several sources, including one in police intelligence, that it was time to "lie low," Emballo got all his savings, sent his family to Dakar, and then left the country himself by bush taxi to Casamance, in southern Senegal. "I have decided not to go back to my country as long as there are no guarantees for my safety and that of my family," says Emballo, now in Paris, where he is waiting for the French Office for the Protection of Refugees and Stateless Persons (OFPRO) to decide whether to grant him political asylum. "Nowadays, the police are unable to guarantee anyone's safety," he insisted.

### A dangerous summer

This summer had been a tense one for the country's journalists. The case of leading human rights defender Mario Sá Gomes of the Liga Guineense dos Direitos Humanos (LGDH) raised new fears and alerted the foreign media and international community to the danger of a new "narco-state" in the making. This high-profile activist, who heads a group that "defends the victims of judicial errors," said on national radio on 11 July that President Nino Vieira should "definitely dismiss" armed forces chief of staff Gen. Batista Tagm Na Wai and "completely overhaul" the entire army.

"Gen. Batista Tagm Na Wai has completely lost control of the various military corps since senior officers became rich by selling drugs," he said. "The same goes for the president, Nino Vieira, who has ended up becoming a hostage of his military officers. What's more, the armed forces chief of staff is not unaware of the fact that senior officers are involved in drug trafficking, but so far no decision has been taken to arrest them."

An enraged Gen. Tagm Na Wai demanded an apology from Gomes, who refused. The general's response was that of a soldier who considered he had been gravely insulted. He issued an "arrest warrant" for Gomes, forcing him to go into hiding for several days and then seek refuge inside the local UN mission's headquarters, a large building in an otherwise undeveloped area on the outskirts of the capital.

"We accommodated him on the fifth floor for several days, while a solution was found with the protagonists of this case," said Vladimir Monteiro, the spokesman of the United Nations Peace-building Support Office in Guinea-Bissau (UNOGBIS). The solution consisted of assurances by the military and the police that Gomes would be left alone. After the interior minister promised he would not be arrested, Gomes finally emerged from UNOGBIS headquarters on 23 August. And he has been left alone.



Batista Tagm Na Wai (© AFP / SEYLOU DIALO)

In a country without an effective administration, with an exceedingly shaky judicial system and where there is no longer even a prison, arrest means being held in a cramped police cell or shut away somewhere in an army barracks, far from any control by civilian officials. It is understandable that someone would seek refuge with the UN even if the military were not angry about the possibility of being unmasked. "We are a country that is still learning democracy, one where the police and military have not assimilated the rules properly," said a Guinea-Bissau academic on condition of anonymity. "There are these big gaps in the practices of so-called state servants

which are dangerous for our citizens but which, paradoxically, also constitutes spaces in which everyone is free to do as they please... including criminals. We do not really know how to tackle this.”

An example of this ignorance or contempt for the democratic rules is *Reuters* stringer Albert Dabo’s ordeal of being hunted for an entire day by a unit led by the navy’s feared commander, Rear Admiral Bubo Na Tchut. Dabo, who is also a fixer and interpreter for foreign journalists visiting Guinea-Bissau, received a call on the morning of 16 July from Tchut, asking him in an apparently cordial manner to report to his office in the course of the day.



Albert Dabo

Cautioned by his wife, he decided instead to go to the studios of *Rádio Bombolom*, a privately-owned station he also works for. After his colleagues there told him that 20 marines were looking for him, he sought refuge at the UN headquarters, where Tchut called him again and promised to “do nothing” to him. He said he had to go abroad in a few hours and wanted to see him “to settle a problem together.” When Dabo again declined, Tchut replied: “If I get you, you will know who you are dealing with. I know what you told the English.”

Tchut was furious about an article in the Portuguese newspaper *Diário de Notícias* citing a *Time* magazine story that quoted Tchut as acknowledging that senior military officers were involved in drug trafficking. Tchut assumed that Dabo was at the origin of this quote attributed to him, because Dabo was the fixer of a British *ITN* television news crew to

whom Tchut had given an interview on 13 July. In fact, Dabo had nothing to do with it. Tchabo had not realised that the original *Time* magazine story had been published months before the *ITN* interview.

“The navy chief of staff then went to *Rádio Bombolom* with his men,” Dabo told Reporters Without Borders. There he was confronted by the calm firmness of Agnello Regala, this respected radio station’s founder and director, who says the station’s aim is to “let everyone speak.” After three hours, Dabo left the UN headquarters. “Agnello reassured me, explaining that he had convinced Tchut it would be better to file a lawsuit,” said Dabo, who is now being sued for defamation, violating state secrets, abuse of press freedom, slander and “colluding” with foreign journalists. “Yes, Guinea-Bissau law provides for prison sentences, but I don’t mind that,” added Dabo. “It is the permanent threats that are unbearable.”

### “The politicians and military are scared of the media”

“The situation is clearly deteriorating,” says public *Rádio Nacional* programme director Ricardo Semedo with concern. Semedo was the target of repeated telephone threats on 7 September, while on a trip to Senegal. “The military and drug trafficking are the two topics that systematically earn this kind of response, anonymous or otherwise,” he said.

Even national Interpol director Carvalho Aucarie has publicly recognised that “on an individual basis, certain senior Guinea-Bissau officials strike deals with drug traffickers.” But it is not the state apparatus itself is affected, he added, “if that were the case, the government would be paying salaries.”

Life is nonetheless calm for the capital’s inhabitants. Unlike many of its West African counterparts, the city’s streets are not patrolled by trucks full of heavily armed soldiers or lawless militiamen. *Rádio Bombolom* director Regala addressed this paradox. “We are free and oppressed at the same time,” he said, sitting at his desk, next to a copy of an ancestral talking drum, a bombolom, after his radio station is named. “This contrast is very strange. I cannot deny that there is a significant level of anxiety but I think the politicians and military are scared of the media.”

Information minister from 1990 to 1992, Regala is familiar with the workings of the state apparatus. He says the military do not frighten him. "The military raided the station in 2002, threatening to bombard it if anything happened in the country," he said. "I advised them not to miss. A few days later, the heads of several privately-owned media and I were invited to the TV station. The army chief of staff ran his thumb across his throat while referring to us. I told him it was easy to make that kind of gesture when you wear a uniform." The unrelenting Regala often tells the military that if he ever has proof of their involvement in drug trafficking, he will publish it. While Dabo was holed up at the UN office, Regala told Tchut: "Don't threaten me, you don't scare me."

The city of Bissau is calm, and media executives and editors do not seem frightened. Like all the journalists Reporters Without Borders met, Fafali Koudawo, the editor of the privately-owned weekly *Kansaré*, refers to the "permanent threats" that are meant to let journalists know they "talk too much." But Koudawo, who does not hesitate to refer to military collusion with Colombians in his headlines, blames this climate on the fact that Bissau is a microcosm. "Everyone knows everyone else, so everyone knows what their neighbours are doing," he said. "So if you started to name people involved in corruption or drug trafficking, they would come and take direct revenge. This taboo is enormously frustrating for us." The obligatory restraint adopted by the local media when reporting on the army's murky links with drug trafficking was summarised by an UNOGBIS official with these words: "Basic facts, but no follow-up."

In Regala's view, the best way to "get one's message across" is to use language that is as martial as that used by the military. A former teacher who began running a radio station during the independence war, Regala said Guinea-Bissau's military operate according to the "psychology of former guerrilla fighters." *Kansaré* editor Koudawo feels strangely protected by the impunity prevailing in this poor and forgotten country, a cashew nut producer whose Atlantic coastline is fringed by an archipelago of jungle and savanna. "If the judicial system worked, and began to enforce real penalties, we would be more exposed to danger," he said. "But in Guinea-Bissau as it is, criminals and their accomplices know that those who might expose them would have to face their revenge, and that their revenge would remain unpunished. "It's the scarecrow effect."



Agnello Regala

Anyway, with average monthly salaries of 25,000 to 35,000 CFA francs (38 to 53 euros), Bissau's journalists are not inclined to play hero. "It is not the courage that we lack but the reward," said former *Rádio Bombolom* journalist Enfamara Cassama, who now works for the UN mission. "Why should we risk our skins for peanuts?" Another Bissau journalist pointed out that, "for a kilo of cocaine you can get a Mercedes."

### Plain-clothes police with no handcuffs

This dilemma nags at many people in Guinea-Bissau, including the members of the plain-clothes Judicial Police (PJ). It is another paradox of this disturbing paradise that the people theoretically in charge of combatting the extremely wealthy drug traffickers work in utter destitution. No handcuffs, just one vehicle, two filthy cells and about 60 investigators for a country of 1.6 million inhabitants and 36,000 square kilometres. Not to mention the biggest of flow of cocaine to reach Africa from the Colombian jungles, organised by the world's most dangerous and best armed cartels.

"The traffickers are very familiar with the coasts, enclaves and many river branches criss-crossing the country and are beginning to invade them," said PJ chief Lucinde Gomes Barbosa Aucarie in her dilapidated office in downtown Bissau. A cheerful woman in her 40s, she said the situation was all the more "worrying" as the police had received no word from the authorities in Colombia, the world's biggest cocaine exporter. "No contact, not a word, nothing," she told a visiting reporter from the privately-owned Colombian radio station, *Radio Caracol*. The young journalist, Ismael Trivino, heads the station's Miami

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bureau. He went to Bissau to try to understand “why people in my country couldn’t find Guinea-Bissau on the map but several Colombians have been arrested here and the Colombian traffickers have clearly found this country to be an ideal way station.”

The news of the arrest of two more Colombians in August in possession of 95,000 euros, 1.5 million CFA francs, two grenades, a pistol, an AK-47 assault rifle and pepper spray clearly did not reach Bogotá. Juan Pablo Camacho and Luis Ferando Ortega Mejia, supposedly the employees of a construction company, were arrested by the PJ in the working-class neighbourhood of Barrio Militar.

A quick visit to the PJ’s almost deserted complex on an avenue linking the city to the airport revealed the impotence of this department, in charge of combatting drug trafficking. What is supposed to be its headquarters consists of a handful of poorly-furnished offices giving on to a dirt courtyard where a few unarmed police officers wait. Adjoining a bare room where the public is received and which is open to the street, there is in steel gate with a double lock in the middle of a violet-coloured wall. The order “Stop at 5 metres” is painted on the concrete. “These are the only two cells we have,” a police officer explained. “One for the men, one for the women. Each can hold about 20 people. It is their families who bring them food.”

A few prisoners were taken out of the cell in the clammy afternoon heat. Bare-torsoed, they were lined up against a wall and allowed to take plates of rice brought by relatives. Sweating and with stony expressions, the men ate, washed their faces and then returned to the stifling, foul-smelling cell to continue awaiting developments in their case, with no illusions. On the far side of the courtyard, an inspector drank a beer while holding rifle in



one hand, the only visible sign of armed force in the almost empty compound.

The PJ chief insisted that the Colombians were “treated like any suspect” and that her men followed legal procedures throughout. After being held for 12 days, Camacho was released on 4 September on payment of 15 million CFA francs (23,000 euros) in bail. His accomplice was freed five days later in similar conditions. They still openly live in Barrio Militar.

When it is not Colombians being arrested in the fight against drug trafficking, it is Guinea-Bissau military personnel. And the police apparatus is perhaps even more powerless in such sensitive cases as military complicity in international trafficking. Capt. Rui Na Flack and Lt. Augusto Armando Balanta were arrested by the PJ in the possession of 635 kg of cocaine on 4 April. After being held for several hours, they were freed on the orders of the armed forces chief of staff, Gen. Tagm Na Wai, who had mysteriously acquired extraordinary judicial powers for the occasion.

Destitute, without money to pay informers or buy petrol for its investigators, the judicial police copes with everyday business as best it can. “The judicial police has specific investigative powers and nothing else,” said justice minister Carmelita Barbosa Pires, who oversees the PJ. “The Colombians were released on the basis of an independent court decision,” she added.

Like other echelons of the state apparatus, the ministry she runs is penniless even if it occupies a vast colonial palace with cracked walls. “We have to cope with immense difficulties in order to render justice,” she said. “A complete overhaul is necessary, and I hope to carry it out successfully.” An energetic woman who is much respected by the diplomatic corps, the minister has had police protection since the arrest of the Colombians and, like overcurious journalists, she has received telephone death threats. “We addressed specific requests to the international community in April that would enable us to operate in a more or less appropriate manner,” she said, adding: “Since then, despite repeated appeals, we have received nothing.” Asked why she thought the aid was taking so long to materialize, she replied: “Maybe it is a question of trust, I don’t know.”

## The country of chameleons

It is true that the international community acts with the utmost prudence. Western diplo-



omats based in Bissau describe what they hear from their local partners as a very complex mix of honest admissions and lies, reflecting a situation in which relations between civilian and military officials is affected by matters of family, ethnicity and other interests. Influential rivals look daggers at each other without taking action. There may be a degree of stability but the situation is dangerous and any pressure from the international community must subtly combine delicacy with firmness.

"Everyone is against drug trafficking in this country of chameleons," said Cassama, the former *Rádio Bombolom* journalist now working for UNOGBIS. In the ministries and barracks of this abandoned city, foreign journalists are often hard put to know "who is who and who does what," as the old refrain puts it. Asking direct questions often proves to be unproductive. Drug trafficking is everywhere and nowhere at the same time.

It is true, as social communication minister João de Barros says, that there is no "institutional repression," no "government curbs on press freedom" despite a few "isolated cases." The main problem for the press is its poverty, its struggle to survive financially. For a small African country, Guinea-Bissau has a remarkable number of independent news media. The popular state-owned weekly *Nô Pintcha* competes in the clutches of the street vendors with *Diário de Bissau* (the minister's newspaper), *Gazeta de Notícias*, *Batanba de Nôbas* (a weekly created in late 2006 that has managed to survive, despite the

limited size of the market) and *Kansaré* (which takes investigative reporting a bit further than the others).

State-owned *Radio Nacional*, *Rádio Pinjiguiti* (a private station that supports the president) and *Rádio Bombolom* dominate the airwaves along with *A Voz de Kélélé* (regarded as the "mother of community radio stations"), *Rádio Jovem* and *Rádio Nova* (the Brazilian church station). To this relatively diverse array should be added the state television, the Portuguese-language programmes for Africa of Portugal's public broadcaster *RTP*, the Portuguese-language services of the major international radio stations (*RFI*, *VOA* and *BBC*), and the score of community radio stations, which sometimes relay the news programmes of the national stations.

Like all media owners and editors in Bissau, social communication minister Barros stresses the media's dire lack of resources. "We have considerable needs in equipment, training and logistics," he told Reporters Without Borders. "Salaries need to be increased, or at least paid regularly. The situation of the media reflects that of the country. If nothing is done, we will end up being financed by drug trafficking." The same appeal for help, for material assistance above all, was made by *Kansaré* editor Koudawo. "We are isolated," he said. "We need material and contacts with the outside world." UNOGBIS spokesman Vladimir Monteiro agreed. The needs were "an echo [from the outside world] and resources," he said.

So, as well as the permanent threat from drug traffickers, there is a "lack of resources." This nuance may seem simplistic. But a degree of prosperity can ensure a news media's independence from those who might try to intimidate it. Barros acknowledges that his ministry, as it is housed in a naval facility next to a barracks full of idle soldiers, is subject to "pressure from within its own building." Waving wearily towards the courtyard of the barracks, he referred euphemistically to "institutional confusion." But this was not the biggest issue, he insisted. The simple fact of getting a newspaper printed in a country in which the National Press employees were 14 months behind in their pay was a major achievement, he said.

Regala of *Rádio Bombolom* said: "I have always told the military that, if I had proof of their involvement in drug trafficking, I would publish it, but we do not have the resources

for investigative journalism.” His station has around 20 employees, half of them journalists. Just keeping it going, in a country that has no national power grid, is a challenge and Regala has to be inventive to raise the necessary resources. Half of *Rádio Bombolom*’s income comes from advertising. To supplement this, it rents out part of its airtime to civil society organisations and NGOs, including international ones.

When Reporters Without Borders visited the station, two young foreign women were presenting a programme for children in one of its two tiny, air-conditioned studios inside a small house in a vast garden overshadowed by a large antenna. Partly in order to support *Rádio Bombolom*, the public radio station and eight community radio stations, UNOGBIS pays them to broadcast programmes in Portuguese Creole which it produces. “We do this in order to get messages out to the public and to provide these stations with regular income,” said Monteiro, himself a journalist from Cape Verde.

“To be really effective as a news media, including on drug trafficking, we would need to combine three essential elements that we currently lack,” said Regala. “Firstly, we would need to extend our antennae throughout the country in order to make the public aware of the dangers of the cocaine trade. Secondly, our best journalists would need to be properly trained in conducting investigations and in protecting themselves. Finally, more financial resources would be necessary to enable the journalists to work in decent conditions.” Sincere appeals for help or PR ploys by media owners? Mistrust is second nature in Bissau and nothing is certain. And “chameleons” are everywhere.



João de Barros

This year has been bad for press freedom in Guinea-Bissau. All the country’s journalists realize this. One of the most determined ones, Fernando Jorge Pereira, the correspondent of the Portuguese weekly *Expresso*, decided along with several colleagues to try to unite the profession in order to better protect it. A meeting of the country’s journalists was held on 5 and 6 October in the auditorium of the Brazilian cultural centre with the support of the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) and the International Organisation of Francophone Countries (OIF) with the aim of reaching agreement on the creation of a Press Freedom and Journalistic Ethics Monitoring Centre (OLIEJ). But the two days of often stormy discussions resulted in no more than a minimal agreement on a future action plan. Unity is not easy.

## Conclusions and recommendations

There is a national taboo about openly discussing the cocaine trade, despite the threat it poses to Guinea-Bissau. The press is ill-equipped to meet this challenge. A heterogeneous government fears head-on confrontation with the army because of the danger of plunging the country into another civil war or triggering a major inter-ethnic conflict. But the government is under pressure from the international community, which sees the small, Portuguese-speaking country slowly falling into the grip of the Colombian cartels.

For the drug traffickers, Guinea-Bissau has become a relatively reliable and practical West African depot and distribution centre thanks to the active complicity of certain ministers and military officers and the sorry state of its administration and social fabric. Destitute and fearful, the local news media shed no more than a feeble light on this embryonic narco-state.

To help Guinea-Bissau extricate itself from this dangerous situation of a “country of silence,” Reporters Without Borders recommends that:

## Guinea-Bissau’s journalists

Should persevere with the goal of unity and professional self-regulation started by the OLIEJ and should understand that, since they are facing great dangers, such a tool would serve as an effective mouthpiece so that their views can be heard both at home and abroad;

## Guinea-Bissau's government

Should provide tangible and serious evidence of its determination to combat drug trafficking effectively, inter alia by ensuring that the drug traffickers already arrested, both civilian and military, are tried in a fair and transparent manner;

Should speak out when journalists are threatened by members of the armed forces and should ensure that the law is scrupulously respected when there are disputes between the press and the authorities;

Should amend the 1991 press law, which is hardly applied any more, making it more democratic by suppressing prison sentences for press offences, providing substantial budgetary assistance for the privately-owned press and by setting up a media regulatory authority that is respected by the media and is given adequate resources;

## Guinea-Bissau's armed forces

Should comply strictly with the law in cases of conflict with the press, and should ensure that those responsible for threats and acts of intimidation against journalists are identified and punished;

Should publicly acknowledge that privately-owned news media that are vigorous, free and well informed have a decisive role to play in the successful reconstruction of Guinea-Bissau and in guaranteeing its security;

## The international community

Should continue to exercise gradually increasing pressure on the transition's various protagonists and, in particular, should step up demands for the law to be respected in any conflict between the press and the (civil or military) authorities;

## The international press

Should continue to take a close interest in Guinea-Bissau's dangerous situation and in the growing influence of drug trafficking in the nation's life, with the aim of maintaining constant pressure on the cartels and threatening the way station they have created there.



Ismael Trivino and Agnelo Regala