Guinea-Bissau in West Africa is a “narco-state,” says the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration. Here’s how it hunted suspected smugglers far from American shores

Capture of a ‘drug kingpin’

BY DAVID LEWIS AND RICHARD VALDMANIS
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It was late afternoon as the speedboat cut across the waters off West Africa for its rendezvous with guns and drugs.

Behind lay the steamy shore of Guinea-Bissau, one of the poorest countries on the planet. Ahead lay the Al Saheli, a luxurious 115-foot white motor yacht with tinted black windows.

Riding in the speedboat was Jose Americo Bubo Na Tchuto – a Guinea-Bissau former naval chief and war hero and, according to U.S. investigators, a kingpin of West Africa’s drug trade. Na Tchuto was allegedly hoping to seal a deal involving millions of dollars and tonnes of cocaine. He was also in for a surprise.

“One on board (the Al Saheli), we were offered champagne,” said Vasco Antonio Na Sia, the captain of the speedboat, speaking on Guinea-Bissau state television when he later returned home. As the new arrivals awaited the refreshments, agents from the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) stormed out of the Al Saheli’s hold.

“Instead of champagne, we got 50 heavily armed men running at us shouting ‘Police, Police!'” said Na Sia. The DEA team arrested Na Tchuto and two of his aides, but later let go Na Sia and another man, his uncle Luis Sanha.

“They told me, ‘You and Luis will be freed because your names are not on our list.’ That is how I was saved,” Na Sia said. He and Sanha could not be contacted for further comment.

The sting on April 2 was part of a U.S. operation to lure two prominent figures from Guinea-Bissau into international waters so they could be seized and taken to the United States for trial on allegations of drug smuggling. Court documents and Reuters interviews show the elaborate nature of the operation, which was part of a larger effort by the DEA to counter drug cartels seeking to use weak African states as transit points for smuggling.

“The DEA’s focus in Africa is to disrupt or dismantle the most significant drug, chemical, money laundering, and narco-terrorism organisations on the continent,” Thomas Harrigan, the DEA’s deputy administrator, told a Senate hearing in 2012.

The operation off Guinea-Bissau was the first time the DEA had targeted such high-ranking officials in an African state. Na Tchuto is now facing trial in New York on charges of conspiring to traffic cocaine, including to the United States. The U.S. Department of Justice says his capture has helped to break a transnational drugs ring. Na Tchuto denies the charges.

His two arrested aides were also taken to New York and face charges of conspiracy to import cocaine into the United States. They deny the charges.

Angry officials in Guinea-Bissau say Na Tchuto is the victim of entrapment and was illegally seized in Bissau’s sovereign waters. Government spokesman Fernando Vaz called the sting a “kidnapping” and said if there is evidence of military officials involved in drugs smuggling, they should be tried domestically.

The DEA says Na Tchuto and his two aides were captured in international waters; it declined to provide further details while the court case is pending. It remains firm in its view that certain elements in Guinea-Bissau pose a danger that needs to be countered.

“Guinea-Bissau is a narco-state,” said DEA spokesman Lawrence R. Payne in an email to Reuters. “These drug trafficking organisations are a threat to the security, stability and good governance in West Africa and pose a direct threat not only to the security of West Africans, but also of U.S. citizens.”

The United States is keen to have stable partners in a region rich in commodities but struggling to fend off organised crime, maritime piracy and militant Islamism. But the DEA failed to capture its biggest target, General Antonio Indjai, whom it accuses of conspiracy to smuggle drugs and supporting FARC, a Colombian rebel group.

Indjai grabbed power in Guinea-Bissau in a 2012 coup and remains its top military

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**WEST AFRICA CAPTURE OF A ‘DRUG KINGPIN’**

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**CHIEF-OF-STAFF: General Antonio Indjai, head of Guinea-Bissau’s armed forces, was targeted in a sting by U.S. drug smuggling investigators. Allegations against him are invented, said his spokesman.**

**REUTERS/JOE PENNEY**

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Lawrence R. Payne
spokesman for the
U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration

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**SPECIAL REPORT 2**
Inside an international drug sting
How the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration targeted an alleged suspect across the Atlantic.

official, enjoying extensive influence, though the country also has a president. Lieutenant-Colonel Daha Bana Na Walna, spokesman for Guinea-Bissau’s Armed Forces Chief of Staff, called the DEA operation “regrettable” and said the alleged offences had been invented by the DEA.

He complained that Guinea-Bissau lacked equipment to tackle powerful drug cartels and was being unfairly victimised as a “narco state,” especially when compared with the scale of drug-trafficking in other West African countries.

“We are fighting with the means that we have ... we don’t have helicopters, vessels or vehicles,” he said.

INTERNATIONAL CROSSROADS
The former Portuguese colony of Guinea-Bissau is home to just 1.6 million people and covers a modest 10,800 square miles; but with its array of islands and unpoliced mangrove creeks, it is a smuggler’s paradise.

For years the country has been an important transit point in the lucrative drug trade from South America to Europe. United Nations experts estimate some 50 tonnes of cocaine, mostly from Colombia and Venezuela, pass through West Africa every year.

A Gulfstream jet left sitting on the tarmac at Bissau’s Osvaldo Vieira International Airport is testament to the problem. It landed in July 2008 with what the U.N. believes was a bulk shipment of cocaine. When local police tried to investigate, they were blocked for several days by the army. Once the police did gain access, they found the plane empty – but sniffer dogs confirmed traces of cocaine, according to a former Guinea-Bissau government source and international law enforcement officials.

Two military interventions in the governance of Guinea-Bissau since 2010 – the second a coup in April 2012 – have deepened Western fears that the country is in the grip of suspected drugs barons like Na Tchuto, whom the U.S. added to its list of drug kingpins in 2010.

The decision to target Na Tchuto and Indjai in elaborate stings was taken by the U.S. Department of Justice. Regional diplomats, who better understand the fragile political situation in Guinea-Bissau, had little input, according to some U.S. officials. Some diplomats feared the stings could trigger another coup or spark conflict between rival factions in the country’s armed forces.

One source with knowledge of the operation said a handful of DEA agents set up
a field office in the U.S. embassy in Dakar, the capital of neighbouring Senegal, where they worked huddled away from local embassy staff.

“There was no coordination in policy. The DEA had an opportunity and they took it ... No one thought this through,” said a U.S. official, who asked not to be named, referring to the risk of the operation causing unrest among Guinea-Bissau’s military.

The DEA’s noose began to tighten around Na Tchuto in August last year when the bespectacled ex-navy admiral agreed to a meeting in Senegal with a man the DEA says Na Tchuto thought was a cocaine broker. In fact, he was an undercover DEA operative.

At the meeting Na Tchuto allegedly said he felt it was time for a big narcotics shipment. “Na Tchuto noted that the Guinea-Bissau government was weak in light of the recent coup d’état and that it was therefore a good time for the proposed cocaine transaction,” prosecutors say.

In subsequent meetings Na Tchuto’s aids discussed the practicalities of the deal, which would involve taking delivery of a shipment of cocaine at sea, bringing it to shore and trucking it to an underground bunker for storage, according to prosecutors.

Na Tchuto allegedly told the DEA source he wanted $1 million for each metric tonne of cocaine brought into the country. He offered to use a company he owned as a front to ship the drugs back out when needed, according to prosecutors.

Sabrina Shroff, a lawyer acting for Na Tchuto, declined to comment on the specifics of his case, but said he had pleaded not guilty. She added that the DEA’s tactics amounted to entrapment, that Na Tchuto thought was a cocaine broker. In fact, he was an undercover DEA operative.

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The DEA declined to comment on how it had conducted the case; however, sting operations are a common tactic used by the agency, though they are rarely targeted at such senior foreign officials.

DEA operatives in July 2012, Indjai agreed that FARC cocaine would be shipped to Guinea-Bissau for later distribution to the United States, according to prosecutors. One of his associates said the general would expect to retain 13 percent of the drugs as a “fee” for government officials, prosecutors say.

Indjai also said he would help supply weapons to FARC and would brief Guinea-Bissau’s transitional president, Manuel Serifo Nhamadjo, on the plan, according to prosecutors.

Nhamadjo is acting as interim head of state until elections can be held. His government has vehemently denied any involvement in drug trafficking and has vowed to defend its citizens against the U.S. charges.

Indjai is charged with drug trafficking and providing support for terrorists targeting the United States. His spokesman, Na Walna, said the DEA had used “infiltrators” who had proposed the drugs-for-arms exchange. “If you invent a crime, then there can be no crime,” he said.

Prosecutors allege that during recorded meetings over several months to November 2012, Indjai and his associates agreed to import some 4 tonnes of cocaine, of which 500 kg (1,102 lbs) would go to the United States. A trafficker who operates in Guinea-Bissau listed equipment needed for the work, including trucks with hidden compartments to smuggle the cocaine to the front company’s warehouse, prosecutors allege.

As the stings headed towards their climax, the United States shut down its diplomatic office in Bissau, anticipating staff there would be at risk of a backlash if local officials were seized.

The Al Salehi motor yacht was a key part of the DEA’s plan — but earned itself a reputation as a lemon among U.S. operatives. The DEA had seized the yacht in an earlier operation and grappled with mechanical problems on the way to Guinea-Bissau, according to a U.S. official.

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WEST AFRICA CAPTURE OF A ‘DRUG KINGPIN’

IMPOVERISHED LAND: Farmers in the Boe region of Guinea-Bissau; per capita income in the country is estimated to be just $1,200 a year. Below left: Soldiers, with no connection to the drug sting, pictured on patrol in Guinea-Bissau in 2009; the military have intervened twice in the running of the country since 2010. Below right: A former Portuguese colonial administrative building in the town of Cacheu. REUTERS/JOE PENNEY/LUC GNAGO
Those setbacks had delayed the sting by a month. As the ship waited off the coast for the crucial moment, another delay disrupted plans.

Na Tchuto was suspicious, or cautious, or both. He initially sent Na Sia, the speedboat captain, and his aides to the Al Saheli on their own. The DEA feared their scheme was unravelling. An irate undercover agent who called himself Alex berated the visitors and demanded to deal with Na Tchuto in person, according to Na Sia.

After several hours Na Tchuto was finally lured offshore and seized. But the delay may have cost the DEA its bigger prize. The agency had intended to arrest Na Tchuto first, then attempt to lure out Indjai, a bulky man who enjoys sitting in the shade of the cashew trees at the Amura military base in the capital, by speedboat from another port. The plan failed.

It is not clear why Indjai did not go, but one Western diplomat suggested the lateness of the hour may have been a factor. “By the time they got Na Tchuto it was nearly dark, and they had no chance of getting Indjai offshore,” said the source. Whether Indjai had agreed to a meeting on the Al Saheli is unclear; but it headed off without him.

Exactly where Na Tchuto was seized is disputed. The speedboat captain Na Sia said on local state TV that he had initially met the Al Saheli not far from the island of Caravela and that when he returned later with Na Tchuto, the Al Saheli was in “Guinea-Bissau’s territorial waters.”

The Guinea-Bissau government has supported this view. The DEA says the Al Saheli was in international waters. Either way, the vessel set sail for Cape Verde, where Na Tchuto was put on a plane and flown to New York.

THE Fallout

The semi-successful sting had an immediate political impact, according to locals in Bissau, the country’s capital.

In the days following Na Tchuto’s capture, rival military camps deployed heavily armed soldiers to the streets, setting up roadblocks and searching vehicles heading out of the capital. With President Nhamadjo in Germany for medical treatment for complications from diabetes, fears rose of another coup, or a violent power struggle within the army.

Guinea-Bissau officials hit back at the United States. “The seizure of Jose Americo Bubo Na Tchuto and the accusations against General Antonio Indjai, have hurt Guinea-Bissau ... creating fear in the hearts of our population of another conflict,” said Vaz, the government spokesman.

Some Western diplomats and Bissau-watchers are worried about how Indjai will react to the failed plot to seize him.

“If Mr. Antonio Indjai is guilty of the allegations made against him, I would hope that we find ways to ease him out of the military in a manner that does not paint him and his supporters into a corner,” said U.N. Special Representative to Guinea-Bissau, Jose Ramos-Horta. “A cornered animal would have no choice but to fight.”

Payne, the DEA spokesman, and other U.S. officials said that the United States was generally keen to help local law enforcement agencies strengthen their own capacities to combat organised crime. But direct U.S. intervention reflects the suspicion of international law enforcement officials in the region that little action was taken by local agencies, at least partly because of high-level complicity.

“That was an operation that needed to be done just by us,” said one U.S. official, referring to the capture of Na Tchuto. “There is a sense in some circles that we’ve got commandos lurking offshore ready to pounce. I don’t think this will become a regular occurrence in Guinea-Bissau. But if they think it is, no harm done there.”

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