



IN THE DOCK: Kenyan lawyer Cliff Ombeta briefs his clients (from left to right) Baktash Akasha, Gulam Hussein, Ibrahim Akasha and Vijaygiri Goswami, during a February court appearance in Mombasa. **REUTERS/JOSEPH OKANGA**

KENYA

The Mombasa sting

As Africa's heroin trade grows, a U.S.-backed raid in Kenya tries to stem the flow

BY DRAZEN JORGIC

KENYA THE MOMBASA STING

MOMBASA, MARCH 5, 2015

One evening last November, a handful of policemen in Kenya's sweltering port city of Mombasa were handpicked to help in the final stages of a U.S.-led drugs sting that spanned three continents.

The target was a mansion in the wealthy beach suburb of Nyali. The policemen were banned from using their mobile phones and the names of the men they wanted were kept from them until two hours before the raid. Secrecy was deemed vital in a region known for its corruption.

The quarry that night were the alleged leaders of the "Akasha organisation." The U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) had spent years infiltrating Akasha and alleges that the gang is part of a heroin supply chain that stretches from the poppy fields of Afghanistan through east Africa to the cities of Europe and the United States.

Inside a mansion girded by palm trees and a two-metre cobblestone wall, police captured the alleged leader of the crime syndicate, Baktash Akasha, his brother Ibrahim, and two other men. Kenyan police charged them with trafficking narcotics to the United States. Prosecutors in the United States subsequently indicted all four on charges including conspiracy to import heroin.

In documents filed in a court in the Southern District of New York on Nov. 10, the U.S. prosecutors alleged that the Akasha organisation was responsible for the "production and distribution" of large quantities of narcotics in Kenya, Africa and beyond.

All the men deny the Kenyan charges and are fighting a U.S. request to have them extradited. Instead, they want their case heard in Kenya.

The raid was part of a wider effort by the DEA and Kenya to counter the growing power of drug cartels operating in east Africa. But while the raid was a success, the story of the operation highlights the many



BIG HAUL: Bags of heroin (left) found by the Kenyan navy on the vessel *Mv Bushehr* last year. Above, an undated photo of Ibrahim Akasha, father of Baktash Akasha. U.S. Embassy cables published by WikiLeaks described Ibrahim, who was killed in 2000, as a drug baron. **REUTERS/STRINGER (2)**

hurdles to slowing drug flows: corruption, porous land borders, poor maritime surveillance and a weak judiciary.

The operation, revealed in court documents and interviews, came at a crucial time. Law enforcement agencies are worried that a record opium harvest in Afghanistan will flood global heroin markets this year. The United Nations reported Afghan opium cultivation rose 7 percent in 2014. Western drug agencies are worried this will grow further following the withdrawal of all British and many American troops from Afghanistan.

Western officials are concerned that increased drug trafficking in east Africa could destabilise the region. They fear a repeat of what happened on the other side of Africa in Guinea-Bissau, which has been flooded with South American drugs. The United States has called that west African country Africa's first "narco state."

Most Europe-bound Afghan heroin still goes through the established "Balkan route"

via Iran and southeast Europe. But a spate of seizures along the Kenyan and Tanzanian coastline over the past few years points to a switch to a "southern route" via Africa.

Short of funds and anti-trafficking expertise, east African countries rely on the Combined Maritime Force (CMF) to go after drug traffickers. While the 30-nation naval force was set up to protect busy shipping lanes from Somali pirates, it is intercepting more and more drug deliveries. Last year it seized 3.4 tonnes of heroin, a 66 percent increase on 2013.

To help, Western law enforcement agencies are stepping up operations in east Africa and countries closer to Afghanistan. The DEA says it plans to re-open its office in Karachi, Pakistan, to work with DEA agents in Nairobi and with Pakistani authorities.

Britain, which estimates it is the destination for about 20 percent of the heroin shipped through east Africa, has also stepped up its presence in the region.

"Now it is not just about us here in

Kenya,” Hamisi Masa, the head of Kenya’s elite Anti-Narcotics Unit, told Reuters. “The whole world is concerned.”

THE FAMILY BUSINESS

The Akasha family has been involved in the drug trade for years, Western diplomats allege.

In the 1990s, the clan was led by Baktash’s father Ibrahim. U.S. Embassy cables published by WikiLeaks describe Ibrahim Akasha as a drug baron. “The Akasha family long controlled drugs (then mostly hashish, heroin, cannabis) along Mombasa to Europe,” said a cable dated Jan. 9, 2006.

In 2000, Ibrahim Akasha was killed in a drive-by shooting in Amsterdam’s Red Light district, according to the cables. That dented the business and split the family. Baktash and his half-brother Nurdin, better known as Tinta, Ibrahim’s son with another of his wives, accused each other of murder plots against the family.

Tinta could not be reached for comment.

The DEA had been monitoring the Akashas for years, according to Cliff Ombeta, a lawyer representing the Akashas in Kenya.

By 2014, when the agency began the operation to catch the Akashas, Baktash had taken over the family business. A burly man with a receding hairline, he had built close links with major Pakistani heroin traffickers, the DEA alleges.

One such contact, the U.S. indictment states, was Gulam Hussein, also known as the “Old Man.” Hussein had lived on and off in Kenya since 2012. The indictment describes him as “the head of a transportation network that distributes massive quantities of narcotics throughout the Middle East and Africa.”

Another alleged contact was Vijaygiri Goswami, an Indian businessman who had spent more than a decade in a Dubai jail for drug trafficking offences. Goswami is married to 1990s Bollywood star Mamta

Kulkarni and had built business empires in Zambia and South Africa.

Goswami and Hussein were captured with the Akasha brothers in the Mombasa raid. As well as the heroin charges, U.S. prosecutors have charged the Akashas and Goswami with conspiracy to import meth-amphetamines, according to the indictment in the New York court.

None of the men have pleaded to the U.S. charges, according to Daniel Arshack, a New York-based lawyer for Goswami. He said he was confident all four men will not be extradited. “We have no reason to believe that the allegations in the U.S. indictment are supported by facts,” he said.

PRIVATE JET

According to U.S. court documents and to Kenyan lawyer Ombeta, who represents not just the Akashas but also Goswami and Hussein, the DEA sting started in March last year.

Ombeta told Reuters the sting against his clients amounted to entrapment.

An undercover DEA source posing as a member of a Colombian drugs cartel was introduced to Baktash by a friend of the Akashas. The friend “was also a DEA agent,” Ombeta said.

The DEA would not discuss details of its operatives or informants. Ombeta said the man pretending to work for the Colombians was a Moroccan national who had been jailed for a drug trafficking offence in the United States. Peppering his conversation with talk of a private jet and ambitious business plans, the man cultivated an image of opulence, Ombeta said.

Soon after their first meeting, the Moroccan man gave 3 million Kenyan shillings (\$32,870) in cash to the Akashas as a goodwill gesture, Ombeta said. “He was flashing money so they could see this was someone who has money and is ready to buy.”

The Moroccan man told Baktash

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Kenya’s own drug addiction

Drug use in Kenya has risen fast in the past few years, according to religious leaders, politicians and charities working to tackle the problem. They say domestic use has soared as international drug cartels have turned east Africa into a major transit route for narcotics from Afghanistan. Some of the drugs spill onto the local market, they say.

Juma Ngao, a director at Kenya’s National Authority for Campaign against Alcohol and Drug Abuse (NACADA) said the Indian Ocean port towns of Mombasa, Malindi and Lamu (see photos this page and next) have been hardest hit because most drug shipments come by sea.

“There is an easy market for drugs on the coast,” said Phylis Mwema, who runs a youth rehabilitation organisation in Mombasa.

“Youth are uneducated, idle and jobless, and the only thing they can do is drugs.”

The problem has become a political issue, with many Kenyans concerned it will fuel the region’s rising crime and poor security.

A spate of Islamist attacks on bars, non-Muslims and other targets has already dented the coastal region’s tourism industry.

The growing drug problem could further harm an area best known for sun and sand. Yet with Mombasa’s police and some politicians often accused of corruption and involvement in the drugs trade, many Kenyans are despondent about the country’s prospects of kicking its new addiction.

By Drazen Jorgic in Mombasa



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DOMESTIC DEMAND: Heroin addicts in the coastal town of Lamu. Drug use in Kenya is growing. REUTERS/GORAN TOMASEVIC

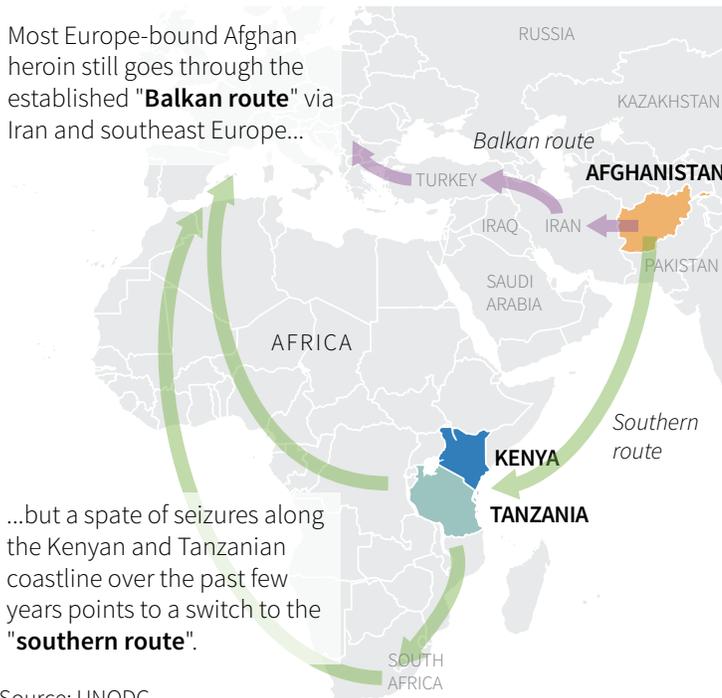


Drug flows through east Africa

Drug agencies are concerned that a record opium harvest in Afghanistan this year will turn east Africa into a major transit point for heroin.

Heroin trafficking routes

Most Europe-bound Afghan heroin still goes through the established "Balkan route" via Iran and southeast Europe...

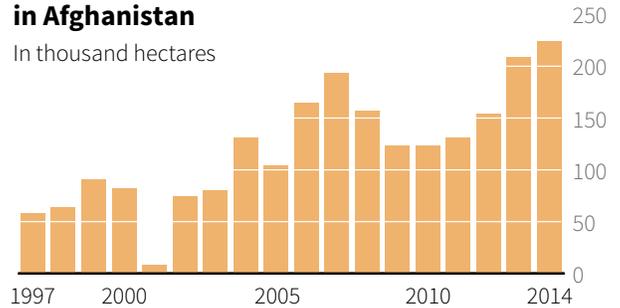


...but a spate of seizures along the Kenyan and Tanzanian coastline over the past few years points to a switch to the "southern route".

Source: UNODC

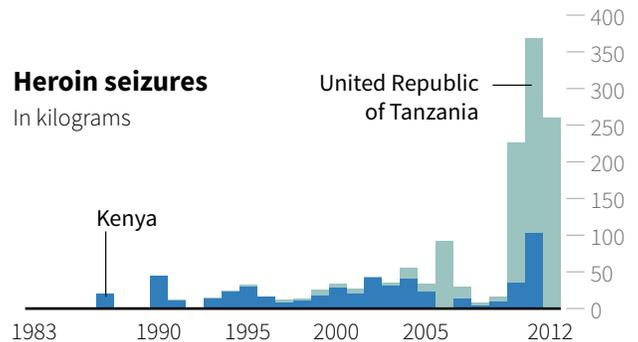
Opium poppy cultivation in Afghanistan

In thousand hectares



Heroin seizures

In kilograms



Akasha that the Colombians wanted to buy high-quality heroin to sell in the United States, according to prosecutors. In one of many conversations recorded by the DEA, Baktash allegedly said that he could get them unlimited amounts of "white crystal," a reference to pure heroin.

Weeks later, Baktash allegedly told one of his Pakistani suppliers that the Colombians wanted 500 kg (1,100 lb) of "carat diamond," a reference to high quality heroin.

The supplier replied the heroin would cost them about \$12,000 per kg and said that he had 420 kg of pure heroin.

"THE SULTAN"

As the DEA source was negotiating with the Akashas, the CMF naval force made a

series of seizures in Indian Ocean waters off Kenya, Tanzania and the island of Zanzibar. The U.S. extradition document links at least one of these shipments to Hussein.

In April 2014, CMF forces boarded a traditional wooden dhow and found a tonne of heroin stashed among cement bags. That was roughly equal to all the heroin that 11 east African governments had seized between 1990 and 2009, according to the U.N. Office on Drugs and Crime.

Then in July, for the first time ever, Kenya's navy made a major heroin seizure. Tipped off by a Western agency, it intercepted a rusting vessel that had set off from Pakistan. A week after they towed the ship into port in Mombasa, officials discovered nearly 800 kg of heroin in its diesel tank.

According to a U.S. extradition

document, the man responsible for that second shipment was Gulam Hussein. U.S. court documents allege Hussein told undercover DEA sources he had transported "tons of kilograms of heroin by sea."

Undeterred by the seizure, Hussein, the Akashas and Goswami allegedly set about agreeing a deal on their upcoming shipment.

In mid-September, Baktash told the Moroccan man that a heroin supplier known as "The Sultan" had sent a representative with a one kilogram sample of heroin for the Colombians to test, court documents allege.

The shipment arrived in Kenya in October. Goswami allegedly told the Moroccan that he was working with Baktash to get another 500 kg.

POLYGRAPH TESTS

As the sting neared its end, the DEA and Kenyan authorities grew worried that word would leak.

Junior officers in the Kenyan police earn less than \$200 a month. Such low pay helps fuel corruption, according to Kenyan officials. “Drugs barons have bought some of our officers and this is very sad,” Mombasa County Commissioner Nelson Marwa told journalists in December. “We have information that police vehicles and ambulances are being used to transport drugs within (Mombasa) county and the coast region.”

The Mombasa police rejected this claim. It said Marwa’s statement was “shocking” but promised to conduct an internal investigation.

In the days leading up to the raid, Kenya’s Anti-Narcotics Unit (ANU) suddenly transferred nearly 30 police officers, including some of its own men, away from the Mombasa region.

Local media linked the redeployments to the Akasha bust, saying most of the policemen were moved because of corruption fears. Hamisi Masa, the ANU chief, told Kenyan press he was behind the transfers, but called it a “regular” move.

Fearful of possible corruption, the DEA has in the last three years helped set up a special “vetted” unit within the ANU. Officers who want to join the inner circle have to pass extra checks including polygraph tests. Britain’s National Crime Agency (NCA) carries out similar vetting and due diligence checks with local security officials. It is also beefing up its Kenya team.

THE RAID

In early November, Baktash’s brother Ibrahim allegedly delivered 98 kg of heroin to the man from the Colombian cartel in Nairobi, unaware that the DEA was clandestinely recording their meetings. A couple of days later, he allegedly delivered 1 kg



POPPY FIELDS: A farmer works his crop in Afghanistan’s Jalalabad province last year. Afghanistan is the world’s top cultivator of poppies, from which opium and heroin are produced. Despite more than a decade of efforts to wean farmers off the crop, poppy production has exploded. **REUTERS/PARWIZ**

of methamphetamines.

Soon after, Ibrahim left Nairobi on a commercial flight to Mombasa, and the DEA and ANU made their move.

ANU officers handpicked several regular policemen to provide back-up and then hid in a mansion opposite the Akasha home. At about 1.30 am on Nov. 10, they launched their raid, arresting the men and confiscating laptops, tablets, mobile phones and cars.

“There was no resistance ... just shock that they had been caught completely unaware,” said one member of the Anti-Narcotics Unit.

Ombeta, the Kenyan lawyer representing the four men, said Baktash has told him that he suspects his estranged brother Tinta collaborated with the DEA.

The four men have also told their lawyer that their initial mistrust of the Moroccan man had receded as he splashed more and more cash around.

The men deny any involvement in drug trafficking, Ombeta said, but were tempted by the sight of all that money.

“They were taken over by greed,” Ombeta said.

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