

In TV confessions, curtain lifted on a narco-state

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CONAKRY, Guinea – When the planes arrived loaded with cocaine, it was Guinea's presidential guard that secured the cargo.

Drug deals were conducted inside the first lady's private residence and in the president's VIP salon at the international airport. To avoid detection, cocaine was sent to Europe in the country's diplomatic pouch.

As the people of Guinea sit transfixed before their TV sets, top government officials one after another are confessing to their role in a lucrative international cocaine trade. Organized by a military junta that seized power three months ago, the confessions offer unprecedented insight into an exploding drug trade in West Africa, one that connects coca leaves grown in South American fields to cocaine in European discos.

The confessions paint a picture of an illicit trade conducted with total impunity, with the help of officials, members of the president's family and security forces. They also show the large role Guinea and other West African countries are playing as drug hubs, and how vulnerable they are to the corrupting influence of drug dollars.

A recent United Nations report found that at least 46 tons of cocaine have been seized en route to Europe via West Africa since 2005, bringing profits that sometimes exceed the entire defense budgets of countries it passes through. Before that time, less than a ton a year was seized from the entire continent.

"The vast majority of cocaine that is destined for Europe is now going through West Africa," said Michael Braun, who was the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration's operations chief when he retired in October.

For years, the drug trade was an open secret in Guinea. The inner circle of former dictator Lansana Conte, who ruled Guinea for 24 years until his death, was deeply corrupt, with officials driving opulent SUVs in a capital where most people live without electricity.

Conte died in December. A day later, Capt. Moussa Dadis Camara, a junior army officer, grabbed power in a coup and promised to crack down on corruption, including on the flagrant drug trade. So far, more than a dozen people have been arrested, but Dadis has failed to arrest well-known members of his own military junta who are believed to deal in drugs.

The confessions began two weeks ago on state television in what is now known in Guinea as "The Dadis Show," broadcasts that have caused a spike in TV viewership and are the constant topic at lunch and over coffee.

First up was Ousmane Conte, the feared eldest son of the deceased dictator, who was untouchable under the previous regime. He admitted what everyone in Guinea knew but did not dare say.

"I acknowledge that I was in the drug business — and I regret it," said Conte, whose confession was taped inside his detention cell.

In a jailhouse interview this week with The Associated Press, Conte explained how he did it. He said a friend brought in "medicine" for his humanitarian foundation, using a Red Cross plane that landed at night at the international airport in the capital, Conakry. When the plane arrived, his friend called to wake him. Conte then went to the airport accompanied by the presidential guard to secure the cargo, he said.

Conte claimed he did not know at first that the cargo contained cocaine. But his friend later told him, he said, and Conte accepted a \$300,000 bribe.

Other officials confessed to equally bold behavior.

The late president's brother-in-law said he met with Latin American drug dealers inside a villa owned by his sister, the former first lady. The head of

the country's intelligence unit said he personally accompanied a convoy of trucks containing drugs to the capital. The former head of the police force was challenged to account for the source of funds for a university he is building.

Even the former head of the country's anti-drug unit was interrogated on state TV for his alleged role. The unit was in charge of seizing drugs when a cache was found. But instead of securing and destroying the drugs, the cocaine was often "recycled," said top police officials and foreign diplomats.

A junior police officer said that on one raid, they discovered a 40-foot container filled with cocaine wrapped in plastic. There was so much that the police could not load it all into the two pickup trucks they had brought, said the officer, who asked not to be named because he was committing a crime.

In the confusion, he said, he hid one of the plastic-wrapped sachets of cocaine inside his uniform. He sold it to a buyer at the port, who gave him \$15,000. He bought a used car, a TV set and the latest generation Nokia cellphone. He also paid to send his mother, a Muslim, to Mecca in Saudi Arabia.

He's not proud of what he did, he said. But he pointed out that his theft was miniscule compared to that of his superiors, several of whom stole enough to buy themselves newly-imported Toyota SUVs.

"Eighty percent of the men in uniform lived off of this — it wasn't just me," he said. "It was everyone."

The anti-drug unit eventually gained such a reputation as a place for easy money that it began to receive transfer applications from other police departments, said current director Moussa Sakho Camara, who was brought in late last year after the former director was sacked.

Camara said that when he took over, a large number of officers drove imported SUVs — \$50,000 cars that would have taken over 50 years to buy on an officer's \$100-a-month salary. So, in an effort to stop officers from

driving their drug trophies to work, Camara ruled that only he could park in the anti-drug unit's parking lot.

The drug business in Guinea feeds into a much larger trade that brings cocaine from South America into Spain and Portugal to serve a booming European market.

As the cocaine market in the United States matured, drug traffickers turned to Europe instead, according to a U.N. report released in October. Over the past decade, cocaine use in Spain and the United Kingdom has grown three and four-fold. One kilogram of cocaine in Europe now sells for twice as much as in the United States, according to the U.N. Office on Drugs and Crime.

To get the cocaine to Europe, traffickers first smuggle it to Africa's west coast, located directly across the ocean from Colombia, Peru and Bolivia, home to the world's entire crop of coca leaves. They bring it in freighter ships and in small, two-engine planes that land at night on deserted air strips. Once ashore, it is parceled out to hundreds of drug dealers, who smuggle it north on boats, in planes and in their own intestines.

In a report earlier this month, the U.S. State Department said cocaine smuggling through Venezuela alone has shot up fivefold since 2002, from 50 metric tons to an estimated 250 metric tons in 2007. It said a rapidly increasing percentage of the flow has begun to be shipped and flown to West Africa, notably to Guinea and Guinea Bissau, and then on toward Europe.

The countries dotting Africa's Atlantic Coast are so mired in poverty that their people — including the governing elite — are often tempted into the drug trade. Guinea alone was the embarkation point for 221 couriers detected since 2006, the single largest national total in the region, according to the U.N. report.

"Africa is under attack," says Antonio Maria Costa, who heads the Vienna-based U.N. Office on Drugs and Crime.

The biggest entry points in Europe are Spain, Portugal and the United Kingdom, but the trade is widespread. In Switzerland alone, the U.N. report noted, 60 percent of foreign drug traffickers arrested were West African.

It's unclear if the crackdown in Guinea will succeed in dislodging the cartels. Even if it does, experts say, the trade will simply move to neighboring countries.

Next door is Sierra Leone, where last June a Cessna piloted by a three-man crew from Latin America was stopped with 700 kilograms of cocaine. To the north is Guinea-Bissau, from where in 2006, 32 people carrying cocaine boarded the same flight for Amsterdam's Schiphol Airport.

But already, the people of Guinea are realizing how much their economy depends on drugs.

Nigerians who acted as go-betweens in the drug trade used to spend freely in Guinea, but they are now gone. Business is down at the capital's discos, where the Nigerians used to order multiple rounds of drinks. For Guineans, a bottle of champagne is worth three months' salary.

Their apparent departure is also being felt at a downtown intersection, where a 14-year-old boy sells telephone charge cards. "Before, selling cards worked. The Nigerians would buy 10 at a time," said Mamadou Diallo. "Now I'm hardly selling any."

There are fewer SUVs, and those who drive expensive cars feel they have been put on notice.

The police officer who admitted to stealing cocaine said he now takes public transport to work. He answers his calls on a beat-up Nokia, and handed over the new one he bought with the cocaine money to his girlfriend.

"Everyone knows that a Guinean can't afford these things," he explained, his knees twitching under the table. "Everybody is afraid. No one could have imagined that they could arrest these people."

Associated Press Writers Veronika Oleksyn and Bill Kole in Vienna, Frank Bajak in Bogota, Paul Haven in Madrid, Barry Hatton in Lisbon and Clarence Roy-Macaulay in Freetown, Sierra Leone, contributed to this report.

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