

# OBSERVATORY OF ILLICIT ECONOMIES IN WEST AFRICA

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## Summary highlights

### 1. Northern Côte d'Ivoire: new jihadist threats, old criminal networks.

A surge in jihadist activity in northern Côte d'Ivoire since June 2020 has come alongside a rise in criminal activity in the border region of Bounkani. Although there have been reports that jihadists are leveraging local criminal economies for funding (particularly in the wake of declining external contributions), experts in violent extremism in Côte d'Ivoire caution that it is easy to overstate the links between jihadist groups and criminal networks, highlighting the differences between various illicit markets. That said, some links have been ascertained, which, combined with alleged targeting of vulnerable communities for extremist recruitment, point to a growing entrenchment of jihadist actors in northern Côte d'Ivoire.

### 2. Criminal economies are a key factor in Burkina Faso's Solhan massacre.

On 5 June 2021, at least 132 civilians – and perhaps many more – were killed when armed attackers assaulted an informal gold-mining site near the village of Solhan. The massacre marked not only a grim

milestone amid ongoing intercommunal violence in Burkina Faso, but further reinforces the extent to which places like Solhan can become violent flashpoints as various actors compete for control over access to natural resources, such as gold. It also underscores an emerging dynamic in which child soldiers and female combatants have become directly involved in violent extremist activities in the country.

### 3. In north-western Nigeria, violence carried out by bandit groups has escalated so fast that killings now rival those that take place in Borno state, where extremist groups hold sway.

On 18 July, gunfire from bandits caused a Nigerian fighter jet to crash in Zamfara state, the latest incident in Nigeria's violent and escalating bandit crisis, which has killed hundreds and forced thousands to flee their homes over the past six months. Cross-border arms smuggling supplies the bandits, who increasingly rely on kidnapping as a main source of revenue, with extensive weaponry. Amid mass displacement and growing concerns over food shortages, this attack highlights not only the magnitude of the crisis, but



also the increasing boldness and sophistication of the criminal actors involved.

**4. The release from prison of drug traffickers convicted of coordinating Guinea-Bissau's largest ever cocaine consignments seized by local authorities undermines any hopes of a brave new dawn in the country's stance on drug trafficking offences.**

Two record-breaking cocaine seizures in Guinea-Bissau in March and September 2019 brought the near-drought of cocaine seizures in West Africa since 2013 to an abrupt end. In a country where apparent

state protection means the vast majority of cocaine shipments pass unimpeded, and drug traffickers enjoy almost complete impunity, these seizures and the ensuing convictions of the traffickers involved, which saw heavy sentences handed down, were interpreted by elements of the international community as evidence of a newly strengthened criminal justice stance in Bissau against drug trafficking. In May 2021, it was revealed that six individuals behind these imports had been released on seemingly spurious medical grounds, highlighting corruption in the criminal justice system and severe shortcomings in the country's response to organized crime.

## ABOUT THIS ISSUE

In this issue, articles scrutinize the relationship between jihadist violence and local illicit economies in Burkina Faso and Côte d'Ivoire, the revenue sources of bandit groups behind the upsurge in violence in north-western Nigeria, and the implications of the unlawful temporary release of cocaine traffickers imprisoned for coordinating two bumper cocaine imports in Guinea-Bissau.

A spate of attacks by jihadist groups in Côte d'Ivoire's Bounkani region, which borders Burkina Faso, since June 2020 have raised fears that Burkina Faso is increasingly operating as a launchpad for jihadist operations into the coastal states of the Gulf of Guinea. Ivorian law enforcement interviewees the GI-TOC spoke to in July 2021 attribute the expansion of criminal economies in Bounkani to the growing presence of jihadist groups, pointing to their increasing reliance on Ivorian sources of financing. While it is key to avoid overstating this causal relationship, it is clear that as jihadist-fuelled violence in northern Burkina Faso has spread southward over the borders, jihadist and criminal actors in Bounkani are increasingly operating in the same space.

A jihadist attack on an informal gold-mining site near Solhan, Burkina Faso, in June 2021 was the worst terrorist attack experienced by the country since 2015, and appears linked to groups vying for control over criminal economies. As jihadist groups look to exploit criminal economies to finance their operations, the role of Solhan as one of the most profitable gold mines in the province likely shaped its emergence as a flashpoint for

violence between extremist groups and government-backed militias. Researchers confirmed the deployment of child soldiers and female combatants in the Solhan attack, making it the first confirmed major case of child soldiers being used in the country's conflict.

Kidnapping attacks perpetrated by bandits in north-western regions of Nigeria have escalated as revenues from kidnapping have become increasingly instrumental in the wake of diminishing returns from cattle rustling, previously their financial mainstay. Interviews with former arms traffickers also reveal regional cross-border smuggling routes for trafficking weapons used by the bandits. These illicit supply chains continue despite border closures imposed due to insecurity, and more recently COVID-19.

Finally, ongoing weaknesses in Guinea-Bissau's criminal justice response to cocaine trafficking indicate that the country remains a safe haven for regional illicit actors in the drug trade. The temporary release from prison of drug traffickers convicted of coordinating two 2019 cocaine import deals, which subsequently led to Guinea-Bissau's largest ever seizures, would indicate that signs of the country's earlier vigorous criminal justice action taken against traffickers have waned. The prisoners' release – arguably another indication of corruption among elements of the criminal justice infrastructure – comes amidst a renewed drought in major cocaine seizures, as Judicial Police operations would appear increasingly influenced by Bissau's political agenda.

# 1. Northern Côte d'Ivoire: new jihadist threats, old criminal networks

June 2020 marked the beginning of a spate of attacks by jihadist groups in the Bounkani region of Côte d'Ivoire, which borders Burkina Faso. At least 18 members of the Ivorian defence forces have been killed in attacks, including those in Kafolo on 11 June 2020 and 29 March 2021, in Kolobougou on 29 March 2021 and in Tougbo on 7 June 2021. The tactics and weaponry of violent extremist groups in Bounkani have also evolved, with groups beginning to use improvised explosive devices (IEDs). On 12 June 2021, three soldiers were killed when a military vehicle hit an IED on the road between Téhini and Togolokaye, near the border with Burkina Faso.<sup>1</sup>

These incidents illustrate the growing presence of violent extremism in northern Côte d'Ivoire and point to an apparent strategy by jihadist groups to expand their influence outside of their strongholds in landlocked Sahelian states such as Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger to coastal states in West Africa.<sup>2</sup>

Local law enforcement have attributed the increase in a range of criminal activities in the Bounkani region since 2017 to the growing presence of jihadist groups in the area and their increasing reliance on Ivorian revenue sources.<sup>3</sup> However, while connections between jihadist actors and certain criminal economies, such as cattle rustling, have been ascertained, the extent to which the growth of criminal markets in the Bounkani region has been driven by jihadist actors remains unclear.

## **New actors access entrenched criminal economies**

Northern Côte d'Ivoire has long been a significant zone of trafficking due to its porous borders with Mali and Burkina Faso.<sup>4</sup> Criminal markets developed and matured with impunity over the course of a decade as civil war in the early 2000s diminished state control of the area. With Côte d'Ivoire de facto divided into north and south between 2002 and 2011, rebels in the north have profited from lucrative cross-border criminal activities.<sup>5</sup> Triangular trafficking networks began moving fuel, wood, cannabis and other types of contraband between Mali, Burkina Faso and Côte d'Ivoire, as well as gold from Côte d'Ivoire – where rebel commanders controlled specific mining sites – to Burkina Faso.

The partial return of Ivorian state authority in 2011 limited but did not stop trafficking activities in the far north of the country. Trafficking markets continued to flourish, and the southern border of Burkina Faso is currently known to be a lucrative zone for numerous trafficking activities, including arms, narcotics, gold, motorized vehicles and contraband cigarettes.<sup>6</sup>

The mix of patchy state control, borderland communities, who feel neglected in the country's economic progress and flourishing criminal markets, presented an opportunity for jihadist groups in the cross-border region.<sup>7</sup> Analysis of data collected by the Armed Violence and Conflict Location and Event Data Project points to a 'jihadization of banditry' in southern Burkina Faso in recent years, with a number of violent extremist groups, including Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM) and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), recruiting a range of armed actors involved in illicit markets.<sup>8</sup> Ivorian law enforcement working in northern Côte d'Ivoire, and Lassina Diarra, author of a recent report on extremist dynamics in Northern Cote D'Ivoire, point to a similar evolution in the north of the country, particularly in Bounkani, with jihadist elements, predominantly from Mali and Burkina Faso, inserting themselves into local criminal economies to generate funding.<sup>9</sup> However, many links between jihadist groups and illicit activities in the area are still tenuous or only just developing,<sup>10</sup> and entrenched local criminal gangs have resisted jihadist attempts to encroach on their turf. Furthermore, there are important differences between criminal markets as to the extent of jihadi involvement.

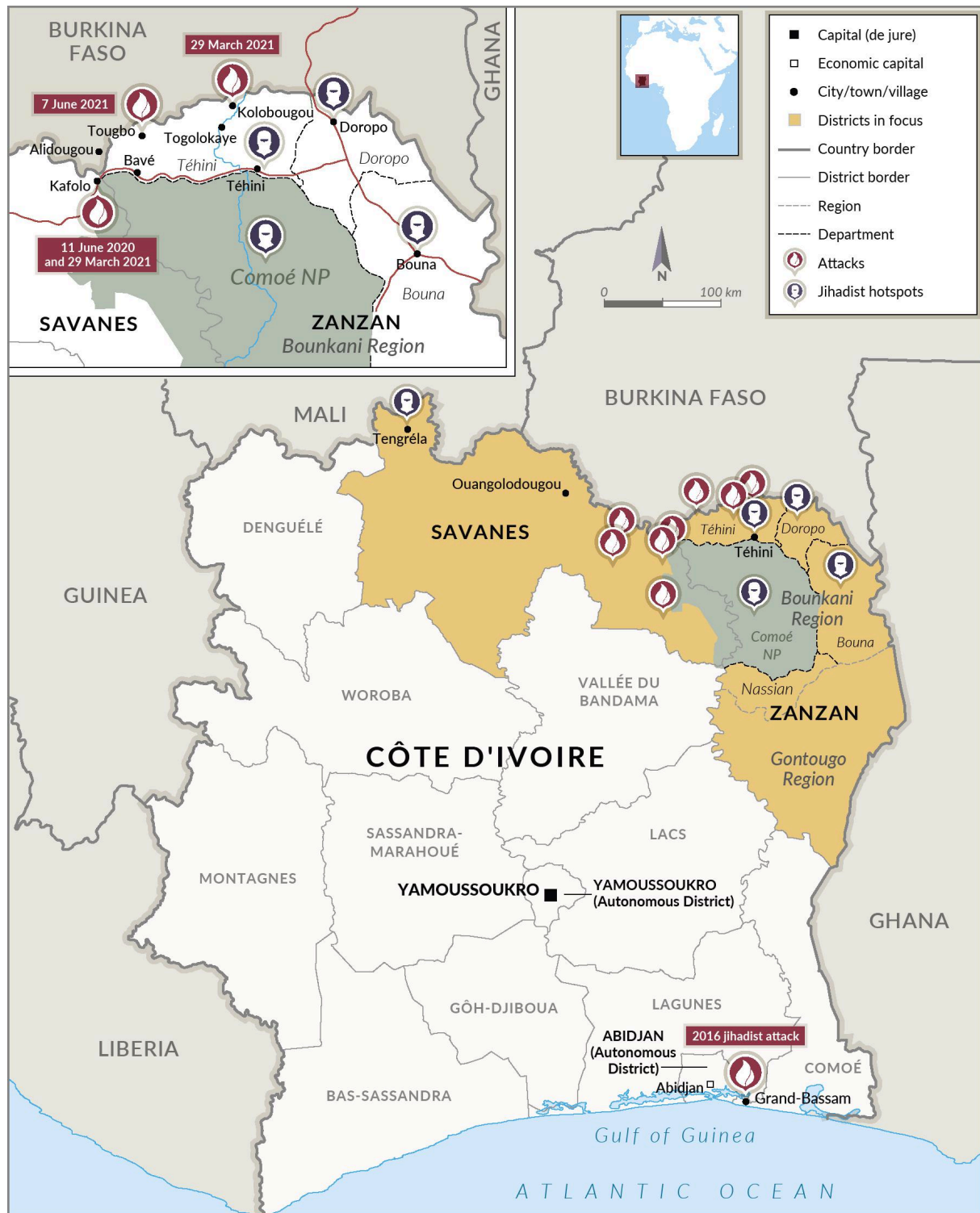
## **Extent of the links between criminal and jihadist groups**

The presence of jihadist groups in Côte d'Ivoire is believed to be concentrated in the Bounkani region, which is among the poorest in the country, with the towns of Bouna, Doropo and Téhini, close to the border with Burkina Faso, highlighted as particular hotspots. Jihadist movements and activities have also been reported in the Tengréla area, close to the Malian border, in Savanes district.<sup>11</sup>

Law enforcement officers in Bounkani link increases in three illicit markets – namely armed robberies of individuals and shops, armed highway robberies and kidnapping for ransom – to jihadist groups. It is key to exercise caution in making such linkages, as these illicit activities also take place in other regions, and the frequency of these acts can depend on a variety of factors, including economic hardship due to the

COVID-19 pandemic and reduced capacity of local law enforcement.<sup>12</sup>

During research for this bulletin, Ivorian intelligence officers in Ouangolodougou, a town 30 kilometres from the Burkina Faso border, reported an increase in attacks on homes and shops in the Doropo and Bouna districts of Bounkani from late 2020,<sup>13</sup> with at least 20 separate



**Figure 1** Sites of jihadist attacks in Côte d'Ivoire, 2016–2021.



## THE 2020 KAFOLO ATTACK AND HAMZA

On 11 June 2020, a group of militants attacked a joint military and police station in Kafolo, marking a clear escalation of violence in northern Côte d'Ivoire. While Ivorian authorities had long feared jihadist attacks in the

area,<sup>15</sup> the scale, sophistication and strategic focus of the attack – a night-time operation involving 30 men equipped with radios for communication – took authorities by surprise.<sup>16</sup>



A town near Kafolo, in northern Côte d'Ivoire, where the June 2020 attack occurred.

*Photo: Issouf Sanogo/AFP via Getty Images*

The attack – thought to be carried out by Katiba Macina militants affiliated with JNIM – killed 14 members of the Ivorian military and police, and was thought to be an act of retaliation for a joint Burkinabè-Ivorian operation of the previous month.<sup>17</sup> That operation had targeted a jihadist group consisting of about 50 members led by Burkinabè Rasmane Dramane Sidibé, known by the alias of 'Hamza'.<sup>18</sup> Hamza is close to Malian Amadou Koufa, who

leads Katiba Macina and reportedly sent Hamza to Côte d'Ivoire in 2019 to recruit and develop a local jihadist cell.<sup>19</sup> The goal of Hamza's efforts, local military officials say, is to create a sanctuary for jihadists along the Ivorian, Burkinabè and Malian borders, similar to the tri-border zone of Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger, where jihadist groups have made considerable inroads enmeshing themselves within local populations and economies.<sup>20</sup>

incidents occurring between October 2020 and March 2021. Intelligence officials in Abidjan believe these attacks have a dual purpose: to generate funds for the jihadist perpetrators – estimated amounts are as high as 14 million CFA (about 21 000 euros) – and to intimidate influential local figures who collaborate with the state defence forces.<sup>14</sup>

Since 2018 there has also been an increase in road blocks being used on certain routes in Bounkani to rob travellers by actors known as 'coupeurs de route' ('road

cutters').<sup>21</sup> Between 2018 and 2021, more than 20 incidents of armed robbery on roads were reported to law enforcement in the Bounkani region, mainly in the departments of Doropo, Bouna and Téhini.<sup>22</sup> Investigations by intelligence officers in Côte d'Ivoire claim that these attacks were mainly organized by jihadists attempting to compensate for financing shortfalls due to a lack of financial aid from their affiliates abroad.<sup>23</sup> Further evidence for this link came in the shape of testimony of victims of attacks in September 2020, who alleged that the perpetrators were armed

with Kalashnikovs and emerged from Comoé National Park (where jihadist groups are known to shelter).<sup>24</sup> However, some perpetrators, such as Kambiré Samuel, who was sentenced to 10 years' imprisonment in 2019 for multiple counts of armed highway robbery on the road between Téhini and Bave in Bounkani region, have no reported links to jihadist groups.<sup>25</sup>

Law enforcement in Ouangolodougou also reported a rise in kidnappings since September 2020 in Doropo, Bouna and Téhini departments, with five cases of abductions detected between September 2020 and July 2021.<sup>26</sup> All five kidnapping incidents targeted local traders, and are believed to have generated at least 45 million CFA (€68 500) in total.<sup>27</sup> An intelligence service officer in Abidjan, the economic engine of the country, supports the allegations by regional law enforcement that the kidnappers are affiliated with jihadist groups.<sup>28</sup>

In northern Côte d'Ivoire more broadly, gold-mining sites have been targeted by jihadist groups, reflecting a trend also seen in neighbouring Mali and Burkina Faso.<sup>29</sup> Since July 2021, jihadists have reportedly taken control of gold-mining sites in the triangle of Kologbo, Zepô and Hentira (Burkina Faso),<sup>30</sup> and have increased activities around artisanal gold-mining in the villages of Togolokaye and Lorogbo (Téhini department).<sup>31</sup> The gold extracted from these sites leverages purchasing networks based in Burkina Faso. According to one local gold buyer in Ouangolodougou, jihadist groups are not involved in extraction themselves, and the miners include both Ivorians and Burkinabè.<sup>32</sup> Jihadists reportedly offer metal detectors to miners in exchange for cooperation.<sup>33</sup>

*Ivorian investigations have also found links between the ringleader of a large network involved in cattle rustling activities ... and regional jihadist figures.*

Ivorian investigations have also found links between the ringleader of a large network involved in cattle rustling activities (among the most lucrative regional illicit economies) and regional jihadist figures.<sup>34</sup> Until his arrest in 2019, the suspected ringleader, an ethnic Fulani from Burkina Faso known as 'Hadou', was based in Ouangolodougou, from where he allegedly coordinated a large cattle-rustling network operating in northern Côte d'Ivoire. Intelligence sources believe that, between 2017 and Hadou's arrest in 2019, the network was behind the illegal trade of about 400 oxen and 200

sheep, generating about 60 million CFA (€91 400) in revenue.<sup>35</sup> The stolen heads of cattle were sold to Ivorian butcheries, mainly for consumption in large cities such as Abidjan.

Hadou was reportedly in contact with individuals close to key regional jihadist figures such as Hamza (see above) and Hamza's cousin, Ali Sidibé, known as 'Sofiane', who was arrested by Ivorian officials for his alleged coordination of the attack on Kafolo in June 2020.<sup>36</sup> Although cattle rustling continues, it has not reached the scale or level of organization of the Hadou gang. Local testimonies still report links between cattle rustling activities and jihadist groups,<sup>37</sup> but law enforcement officers in the region argue that these remain unproven.<sup>38</sup>

There are also concerns that jihadists may exploit the illegal wildlife trade. As mentioned above, a range of jihadist and criminal actors inhabit the Comoé National Park, a thick forest area of 1 million hectares in the north-east of Côte d'Ivoire, although recent military operations have prevented them from completely settling in the area.<sup>39</sup> To date, there have been no reports that groups are exploiting the park's natural resources, such as precious wood and endangered species, but one intelligence officer in Ouangolodougou reported that jihadists have promised local inhabitants that they could exploit these resources as soon as the jihadists chase away security forces.<sup>40</sup> Similar developments have taken place in natural reserves across Burkina Faso<sup>41</sup> and enable jihadist groups to woo communities by providing access to resources forbidden by the state, driving alternative governance arrangements. Jihadists have reportedly already targeted vulnerable elements of the community, particularly unemployed youth, for recruitment, offering cash and motorbikes as incentives.<sup>42</sup>

### **Easy to overstate, dangerous to underestimate**

While jihadist activity in Côte d'Ivoire is often presented as a 'foreign' challenge by authorities,<sup>43</sup> regional Ivorian intelligence repeatedly points to an escalation in jihadist groups leveraging domestic illicit economies as sources of revenue.<sup>44</sup> Instead, these arguments should be carefully assessed: on the one hand, those who treat the threat as external may underestimate the involvement, and even integration, of jihadist groups in domestic illicit markets, whereas on the other, Ivorian authorities may have an interest in highlighting the jihadist threat in order to mobilize resources from foreign partners.

Philippe Assale, an expert in violent extremism with over 15 years' experience focussing on Côte d'Ivoire, warns against oversimplifying such links.<sup>45</sup>

Nuance is therefore important: while some jihadist groups in Côte d'Ivoire certainly appear to be drawing resources from domestic illicit markets, such links are easy to overstate and differ between markets.

Furthermore, the balance between external and domestic financing for jihadist groups is unclear, and it should not be assumed that jihadist groups are exclusively funded by illicit activities in Côte d'Ivoire. Nevertheless, should jihadist groups be successful in establishing a steady

revenue from these illicit markets, they may be able to sustain and potentially increase their capacity to launch sophisticated attacks, such as the one at Kafolo. The increasing involvement of jihadist actors in criminal networks could also bring heightened levels of violence to criminal activity, while their cohabitation with local communities could also drive extremist recruitment. As extremist actors and criminal networks increasingly operate in the same space, and seek to benefit from similar resources, distinctions between the two sets of actors are likely to become increasingly blurred, and the role of illicit economies in northern Côte d'Ivoire in resourcing extremist groups strengthened.

## Notes

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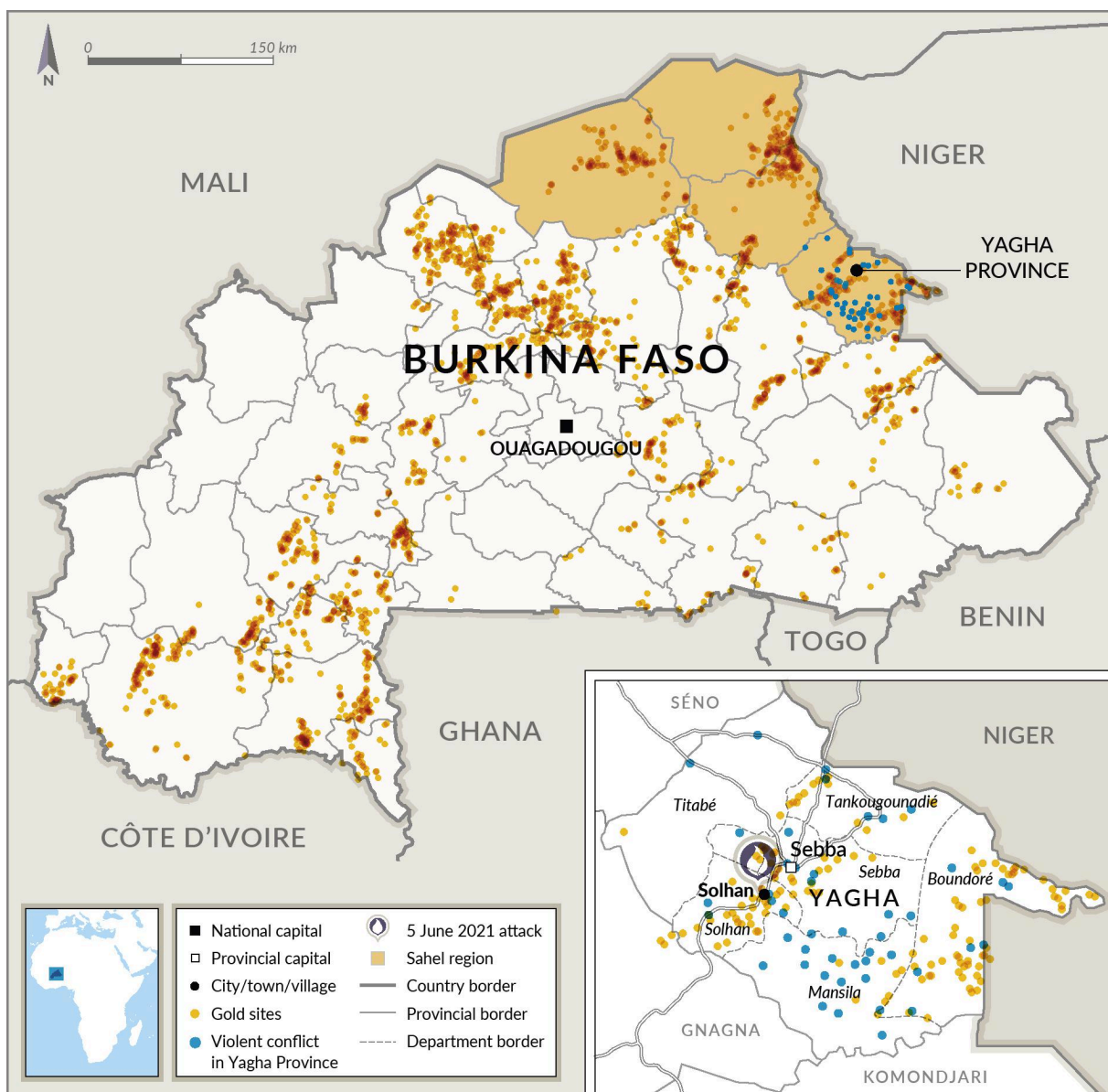
## 2. Criminal economies are a key factor in Burkina Faso's Solhan massacre

In the early hours of 5 June 2021, armed attackers arrived at an informal gold-mining site near the village of Solhan, Burkina Faso, and proceeded to murder 132 civilians according to official figures, though local sources reported at least 160.<sup>1</sup>

One survivor, 'Alassane', whose name has been changed, awoke to the sound of gunfire at around 2 a.m. As others dived into the narrow mine shafts, he tried to hide in a house, but the attackers soon discovered him and shot

him twice at point blank range. One bullet went through his arm and he lost a testicle as the other travelled through both legs. He survived by playing dead.<sup>2</sup>

The massacre is Burkina Faso's worst terrorist attack since 2015, when the latest cycle of jihadist violence began. Since that time, Burkina Faso's state forces and government-backed militias, known as Volunteers for the Defence of the Homeland (VDP), have been battling against various armed group actors, some linked to



**Figure 2** Site of the Solhan attack, areas of violent conflict in Yagha Province and gold mines across Burkina Faso.

Source: L'Agence Nationale d'Encadrement des Exploitations Minières Artisanales et Semi-mécanisées (ANEEMAS)

JNIM, which is affiliated with al-Qaeda, and against ISGS. Other actors, including bandits and criminal gangs, operate within this milieu, often in conjunction with VDPs and jihadist groups. Citizens have reportedly often been targeted by VDPs, jihadist groups and even state security forces.<sup>3</sup>

Troublingly, the Solhan massacre is also the first confirmed major case of child soldiers being used in Burkina Faso's conflict. Alassane says his attackers were young teenagers, around the age of 15,<sup>4</sup> and the GI-TOC has spoken to four witnesses who all corroborate that child soldiers constituted the majority of the assailants.<sup>5</sup> A statement by Burkina Faso's Minister of Communication, Ousenni Tamboura, also confirmed that most of the combatants who carried out the attack in Solhan were children.<sup>6</sup> This appears to reflect a larger trend, with the number of child soldiers detected in Burkina Faso having grown considerably in 2021.<sup>7</sup>

At the time this bulletin was being prepared, it was not possible to verify where or how the children were recruited, but one member of the VDP in Yagha province, where Solhan is located, said the child soldiers had been drawn from the local area.<sup>8</sup> Women were also confirmed by witnesses to be among the Solhan attackers,<sup>9</sup> with a VDP member and a local expert on extremist groups telling the GI-TOC that in some cases,

children and women join extremist groups along with a household patriarch and participate in fighting as well.<sup>10</sup>

At the time of writing, it was unclear which armed group was responsible for the massacre. Locals rarely distinguish between ISGS and JNIM on the ground, and affiliations are often murky. Available evidence indicates that a group loosely affiliated with JNIM carried out the attack.<sup>11</sup> The fact that JNIM released a statement denying responsibility for and condemning the attack<sup>12</sup> could be an attempt to maintain JNIM's image as a more moderate extremist group compared to ISGS.<sup>13</sup>

There are competing theories as to the motive behind the attack. Multiple commentators on Burkina Faso's conflict, including Human Rights Watch, have said the Solhan massacre was an act of jihadist vengeance for VDP recruitment at the mine,<sup>14</sup> but the reality is more complex and tied to criminal economies in the province.<sup>15</sup>

### **Criminal economies in Yagha province**

The relationship between armed groups and criminal networks is complicated and varied. Extremist groups sometimes run protection rackets, while bandits with no ideological motivations regularly join extremist groups to carry out criminal activities, and also enjoy the support of larger criminal networks.<sup>16</sup> According to Ousseni Nacanabo, a representative of an artisanal mining

## **KEY NON STATE ARMED GROUPS IN BURKINA FASO**

### **JNIM (Jama'at al-Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin)**

Official branch of al-Qaeda in the region and the result of a 2017 merger between Ansar Dine, the Front de Libération du Macina, al-Mourabitoun, and al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). Although the group only formed in 2017, JNIM's antecedents, AQIM and al-Mourabitoun, claimed responsibility for the January 2016 attacks at the Cappuccino restaurant and Splendid Hotel in Ouagadougou, killing 30 and temporarily holding more than 170 people hostage.

### **ISGS (Islamic State in the Greater Sahara)**

Regional Islamic State affiliate that emerged after a split within the Mouvement pour l'Unité et le Jihad en Afrique de l'Ouest. The group pledged allegiance to ISIS in 2015 and was officially recognized by the Islamic State in 2016. ISGS has claimed responsibility for a spate

of attacks in Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso. In addition to targeting state security forces, international troops present in the region and civilian populations who refuse to collaborate, ISGS also began targeting rival JNIM fighters in Burkina Faso in 2020.

### **VDP (Volunteers for the Defence of the Homeland)**

Created by the Burkinabè government by law in January 2020, the Volunteers for the Defence of the Homeland, known by their French acronym VDP, were initially made up of self-proclaimed self-defence militias such as the Kogleweogo. Volunteers receive two weeks of training from state security services, and in some cases are provided automatic weapons. VDPs have been accused of multiple human rights violations, as documented by several human rights organizations.

association in Yagha, 'there are three types among the jihadists: armed robbers, those who just want money and are ready to do anything and those who really believe in the jihadist purpose'.<sup>17</sup> Siaka Coulibaly, an analyst with the Center for Public Policy Monitoring by Citizens in Burkina Faso, estimates that the percentage of fighters in Burkina Faso's armed groups who could be regarded as genuine ideological jihadists could be as low as 15%.<sup>18</sup>

All the conflict actors in Yagha – JNIM, ISGS and the VDPs – generate income from criminal activities. According to Hédi Nsaibia, a senior researcher at the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED), the main criminal economic activities in Yagha province are 'illegal mining, cattle theft and fuel smuggling, as well as smuggling and trading in other goods and contraband'.<sup>19</sup>

Fuel smuggling is common across West Africa, with much of the smuggled fuel coming into Burkina Faso from bordering coastal countries, such as Ghana and Togo. In Yagha, extremist groups extract money from criminals in exchange for the safe passage of fuel through the province. But it is artisanal gold mines that are thought to be the largest source of income for extremist groups in Yagha, and by some margin. Armed groups extract zakat (tax) from the miners or simply rob them for cash or gold. Armed group members are also known to work the mines themselves to extract gold. This also provides them with the ability to blend in with the local civilian population, while mines are convenient places to hide weapons and give jihadists ready access to explosives that can be repurposed for IEDs.

While the size of these criminal economies in Yagha is unclear, armed groups have largely succeeded in tapping

into them in order to procure food, small arms, motorcycles (the mode of transport favoured by extremist groups in the Sahel) and fuel. Analysts note, however, that these dynamics are by no means fixed, with control of the criminal economies constantly shifting between the groups. Competition over control of these economies is likely to have played a central role in recent clashes between JNIM and ISGS in Yagha province, according to local security experts and diplomatic sources.<sup>20</sup> Nsaibia estimates that there are around 500–600 armed jihadist group members in Yagha province.<sup>21</sup>

*'We've recently noticed that there is a financial shortage among criminal organizations. Finance is drying out, leading some terrorists to assault school canteens to get food'*

This heightened competition may be driven by a period of scarcity of resources among armed groups. 'We've recently noticed that there is a financial shortage among criminal organizations. Finance is drying out, leading some terrorists to assault school canteens to get food,' said Jacob Yaredebatioula, an expert on extremist groups at Ouagadougou University.<sup>22</sup> One of the reasons jihadist groups are opening up new fronts in Burkina Faso, such as in the vicinity of the southern city of Banfora, and on the border with Côte d'Ivoire, Yaredebatioula explained, is because they are going through 'hard times in terms of finance'.<sup>23</sup>

Mass displacement caused by the conflict has also had a negative impact on gold mining and other economic activities in Yagha province, resulting in fewer citizens and diminished economic activity from which violent



View of an artisanal gold mine in the centre-north region of Burkina Faso and a mine shaft opening, 17 February 2020.

Photo: Henry Wilkins





A newspaper vendor in Ouagadougou sells a local newspaper headlining the story of the Solhan massacre of 5 June 2021.

Photo: Olympia de Maismont/AFP via Getty Images

extremist groups can extract zakat.<sup>24</sup> Government measures and extremist attacks have also damaged local livelihoods, increasing unemployment rates and consequently the pool of individuals vulnerable to recruitment by armed groups.

### Battle over a gold mine

In this context of straitened finances, the role of Solhan as one of the most profitable gold mines in the province made it a vital node in the battle between the VDPs and extremist groups – and may have driven the massacre. Nacanabo, the representative from the artisanal mining association, estimates that gold mines in Yagha could potentially yield 2 billion CFA (approximately €3 million) in revenue per year.<sup>25</sup>

Yaredebatioula suggests that the VDPs were able to secure the area of Solhan and mining sites, undermining

the extremist groups' criminal activities. 'I think this is one of the reasons that VDPs and their families were directly targeted.'<sup>26</sup> Siaka Coulibaly, from the aforementioned Center for Public Policy Monitoring by Citizens, also believes the massacre was an attempt by extremist groups to gain control of the mine for profit.<sup>27</sup>

In the aftermath of Solhan, the government has closed all artisanal gold mines in Yagha province, further underscoring the extent to which local authorities believe gold-mining represents a key revenue stream for violent extremism in the region. According to Nacanabo, mining in Yagha has largely ceased, although some small-scale mining is still going on illegally.<sup>28</sup> But such moves are likely to only displace the battle for criminal resources elsewhere, and as conflict spreads, the criminal economy is likely to expand in sync.

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  24. The displacement caused by the conflict in Burkina Faso has reached 1.3 million nationwide.
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  26. Interview with Jacob Yaredebatioula, expert on extremist groups at Ouagadougou University, 23 July 2021.
  27. Interview with Siaka Coulibaly, Burkinabè analyst and activist, 2 July 2021.
  28. Interview with Ousseni Nacanabo, artisanal mining association, Burkina Faso, 24 July 2021.



### 3. In north-western Nigeria, violence carried out by bandit groups has escalated so fast that killings now rival those that take place in Borno state, where extremist groups hold sway

The 18 July incident of a Nigerian air force jet shot down by bandit gunfire has brought sharply to the fore the escalating 'bandit crisis', as the current waves of violence in the country's north-west are generally referred to.<sup>1</sup> What began as sporadic attacks carried out in rural communities in Zamfara state a decade ago<sup>2</sup> has now enveloped the entire geopolitical region known as North West, which has experienced frequent raids on villages, mass kidnappings for ransom and cattle rustling not just in Zamfara, but also the states of Katsina, Kaduna, Kebbi and Sokoto (see Figure 3).

The roots of the bandit crisis can be traced back to 2011, when vigilantes in Zamfara sought to eradicate criminal groups who were stealing cattle and robbing villagers in Dansadau, an administrative division in Zamfara. These efforts unleashed a round of reprisals on villages after the criminals regrouped and acquired more sophisticated weapons. Their rebuttals were brutal – they razed villages and killed locals whom they suspected of collaborating with the vigilantes.<sup>3</sup>

After what one Nigerian security official described as 'years of not paying attention to the problem', the Nigerian government has only just started to approach the bandit problem as a crisis of its own, and not one that should be conflated with ongoing intercommunal violence between predominantly Fulani herders and Hausa farmers.<sup>4</sup>

Fuelling the violence, the bandits have been able to increasingly access heavy weaponry, which has proliferated in the Sahel, sourcing materiel throughout the subregion from arms dealers acting as middlemen.<sup>5</sup> This heavyweight military advantage has changed the game by allowing the bandits to outgun local vigilante members and, over time, extend their criminal activities beyond Zamfara into neighbouring states where they have continued to raid villages, rustle cattle and organize mass kidnappings to boost revenue.<sup>6</sup>

Taking advantage of the limited capacity and inefficacy of law enforcement and military forces in the region and



**Figure 3** Areas of mass kidnappings and raids by bandit groups in north-west Nigeria.

the sluggish response by the state to the violence, criminal groups have entrenched themselves in vast forested areas, which they use as cover from which to stage attacks.<sup>7</sup> The bandits reportedly operate from camps established in forests in Dansadau, Dajin Rugu, Kamuku and Sububu. In these encampments, as many as 200 to 1 000 men can be associated with a group under a single leader, with some gang leaders running several camps across states in the North West.<sup>8</sup>

Violence linked to banditry has increased so fast that killings now rival those that take place in Borno state, where Boko Haram and the Islamic State's West Africa Province, are most active.<sup>9</sup>

The Nigerian state has pursued a militarized response since 2015, reinforced by major military operations in 2019 and largely ineffective attempts at peace negotiations in 2020. But these interventions have done little to halt the ever-growing problem posed by the bandits, and attacks have merely continued to escalate, with heavy casualties on both sides.<sup>10</sup> In March 2021, for example, bandits launched a raid on a forestry institute near the Nigerian Defence Academy in Kaduna state, kidnapping dozens of students in the process.<sup>11</sup> Only two days before the July attack on the military jet,

another group killed 13 policemen during an attack on a village in Zamfara.<sup>12</sup>

### **Mass kidnappings on the rise as cattle rustling reaps diminishing returns**

From the outset of the crisis, criminal gangs have raked in large revenues, initially from the proceeds of selling stolen cattle.<sup>13</sup> But cattle rustling started to become less lucrative as herds became depleted over time and owners moved their livestock to safer areas. At the same time, buyers grew reluctant to buy what were known to be stolen cattle, which drove down prices from 2016 (see Figure 4).<sup>14</sup>

In the face of this steady revenue decline, bandit groups increasingly turned to kidnapping for ransom since 2019, which generates more money and now serves as the most lucrative activity for nearly all the groups.<sup>15</sup> Kidnapping for ransom has been a key source of revenue for other criminal networks and jihadist groups throughout the Sahel for the better part of two decades. In the case of North West Nigeria, individuals, companies and even elements of the Nigerian state have paid ransoms.<sup>16</sup>

A review of cases in North West Nigeria between 2019 and the first half of 2021 shows a clear upwards trend in






A bandit leader named Shehu Rekeb (centre right) flanked by gunmen from the Kachalla Halilu group operating in the Sububu forest, 22 February 2021.

*Photo: A Abdulaziz*

the numbers of people being kidnapped and a parallel increase in ransoms being paid (see Figure 5).





This year has also seen a staggeringly high number of cases of kidnappings of schoolchildren. As of the first week of July, 748 students had been reported

kidnapped from eight schools in Kaduna, Katsina, Zamfara and the state of Niger.<sup>17</sup> Parents have opted not to send their children to educational facilities for fear that they will be targeted, while some schools have shut down.<sup>18</sup>

	PRE-2011		2016+
 <b>LARGE CATTLE</b>	600 000–750 000 naira (€1 235–1 544)	>	450 000–500 000 naira (€926–1 029)
 <b>MEDIUM-SIZED CATTLE</b>	400 000–450 000 naira (€823–926)	>	200 000–250 000 naira (€412–515)
 <b>SMALL CATTLE</b>	250 000 naira (€515)	>	100 000–150 000 (€206–309)

**Figure 4** Falling market prices for stolen cattle since 2011.

Source: Interview with Alhaji Aminu Garba Gusau, chairman of the Cattle Dealers' Association of Nigeria in Zamfara state, 28 July 2021

<b>NIGERIA</b>	 People kidnapped	1 090	2 339	3 001 (January–14 June)
	 Ransom fees paid to kidnappers*	291 million naira (€599 084)	358 million naira (€737 017)	400 million naira (€823 483)
<b>NORTH WEST NIGERIA**</b>	 People kidnapped	385	1 225	2 011 (January–23 August)
	 Ransom fees paid to kidnappers	167 million naira (€340 255)	82.4 million naira (€169 921)	255.5 million naira (€526 879)

**Figure 5** Escalating incidents of kidnappings and rising ransoms, North West Nigeria, 2019 to June 2021.

Source: Estimates from review of reported cases in Nigerian media for 2019, 2020, 2021

NOTE: There are methodological limitations to data collated from press reports – many incidents are not reported, and inaccuracies in reporting are common. The figures presented should therefore be seen as indicative rather than exhaustive.

\* Many kidnapping incidents are reported by the press with no reports about the ransoms paid. As many ransom payments are not disclosed, the figures provided here, collated from press reporting, are likely to be significantly below the total amounts paid in ransom.

\*\* North West Nigeria here includes Sokoto, Kebbi, Zamfara, Katsina, Jigawa, Kano, Kaduna.

## REGIONAL WEAPONS FLOWS

Bandits and other criminal groups source weapons through individuals involved in the cross-border arms trade. One former arms supplier, Modu, (not his real name) explained how he would smuggle weapons into Nigeria sourced in northern Mali via Niger and Benin. Modu, who was recently arrested while ferrying ammunition to the criminals, said that over the last five years, he had procured weapons from Mali and delivered them to local agents, who then passed them on to the gangs in their hideouts. All the weapons were AK-47s.

The bandits paid between 400 000 and 500 000 naira (€823–1 029) per gun, from which Modu would make a profit of between 60 000 and 100 000 naira (€124–206). 'I have sold weapons to [three bandit leaders, names redacted], but I have never met them physically. They would call me on the phone and send money through intermediaries. The pickup point was usually around Gadan Manyu in Anka, Zamfara state,' Modu said.<sup>19</sup>



**Figure 6** Weapons flows from Mali and Niger arming Nigeria's bandit gangs.

Source: Interview with 'Modu', 20 July 2021, Zamfara, Nigeria; reported interview with arrested gun runner in February 2021, Katsina state.

Note: The route between some of the named locations on the map may vary.



Another gun runner, who was arrested by the police in February 2021, said he sourced his weapons from Damagaram, Niger. According to this arms trafficker, one general-purpose machine gun sold for 4 million naira (€8 234), and an AK-47 for around 600 000 naira (€1 235). He made a profit of between 70 000 and 100 000 naira (€144–206) for each AK-47 he sold.<sup>20</sup>

Despite border closures in recent years in response to insecurity, and the COVID-19 pandemic, arms smugglers appear to have had little difficulty continuing their activities.<sup>21</sup> A Nigerian security official indicated that bandits are also able to source weapons and ammunition from corrupt members of Nigerian security agencies, and by attacking military and police facilities, and looting the armouries.<sup>22</sup> Either way, the bandits have become very well armed. A journalist who interviewed a bandit leader called Shehu Rekeb (see the photo on page 12) at his forest camp in Zurmi, Zamfara, in February 2021 said

over 40 of the bandits present were armed with AK-47s, AK-49s, general-purpose machine guns and rocket-propelled grenades.<sup>23</sup>

Some bandit leaders retain control of their groups' weapons stock, hiring out guns to members prior to conducting operations. A former bandit who had taken part in deadly raids on communities in parts of Zamfara revealed that his leader charged 100 000 naira (€206) for use of an AK-47. 'We pay for them after the operations,' he said, with the hire fee deducted from the profits they would make from the operation.<sup>24</sup> 'A bandit leader [name redacted] at the time had about 57 rifles in his possession. Whenever we were going to attack a community or abduct someone, we hired the rifles from him,' he said.<sup>25</sup> Although such dynamics are likely to vary from group to group, instances of leaders retaining ownership of weapons may be an attempt to stave off leadership challenges and centralize control over the group.

Furthermore, a gold dealer, who gave the pseudonym Belal, said that gold-miners in Zamfara are regularly robbed and killed by bandits.<sup>26</sup> In March 2021, the Nigerian government imposed a no-fly zone and announced a ban on gold-mining in Zamfara in response to a spate of kidnappings and attacks by bandit groups.<sup>27</sup> According to this gold dealer, however, the measure has done little to curb illegal mining activities.<sup>28</sup>

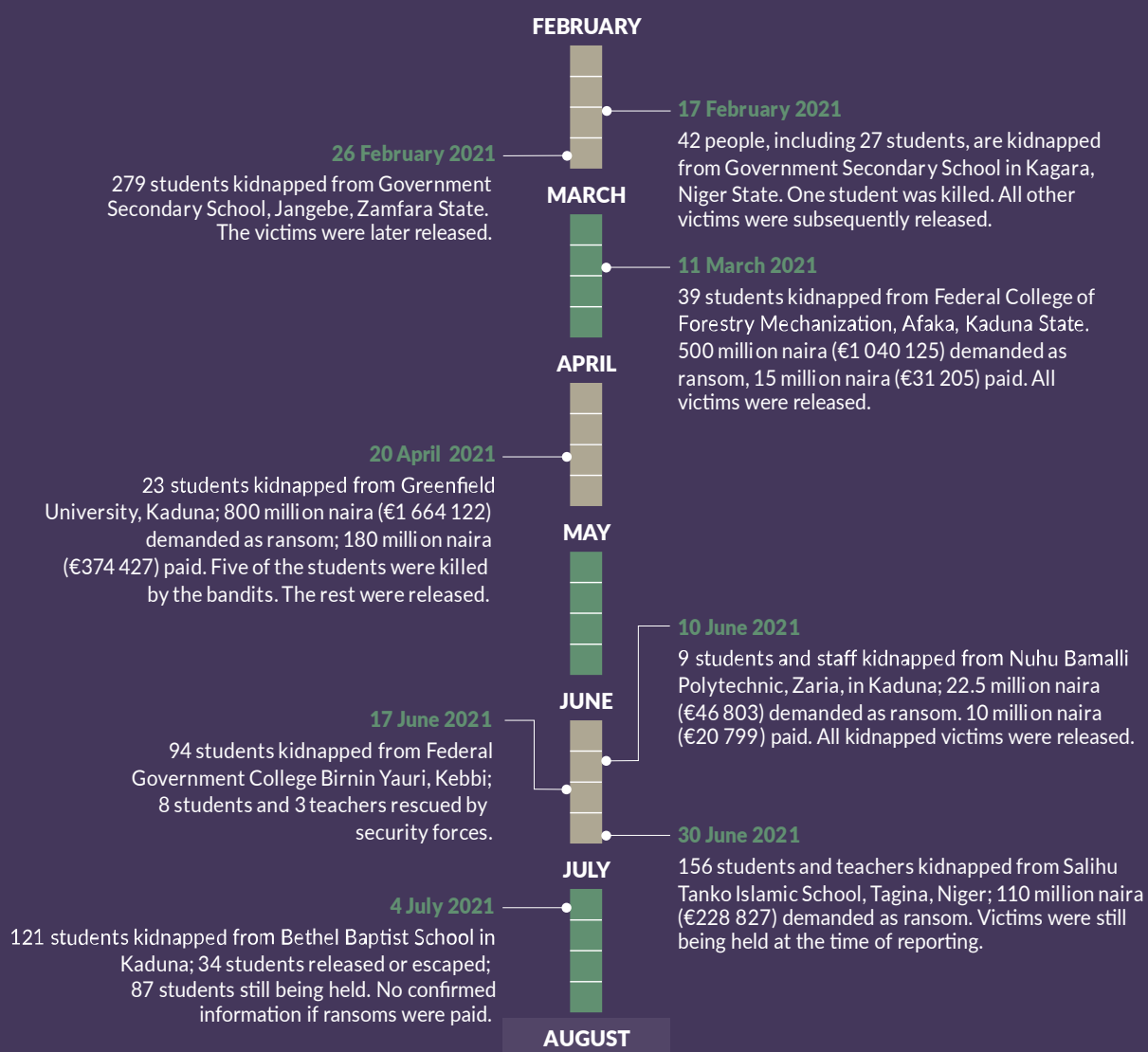
### **Better responses to an ongoing threat**

Despite the Nigerian government's militarized approach to combating banditry,<sup>29</sup> violent bandit groups operating in the north-west have managed to diversify their revenue streams, tapping into a range of different criminal markets, and consolidating their hold over illicit

economies such as kidnapping and artisanal gold-mining. At the same time, there is a risk of conflating the bandit crisis with ongoing tensions between ethnically divided herding and farming communities, as well as with the growing presence of various jihadist groups in the region.<sup>30</sup> Tackling the bandit crisis does need to entail a military component, but will also require interventions that consider the criminal markets on which the groups rely, address the growing weaponization of the region, and incorporate a careful understanding of the ways in which these groups interact with and are separate from other drivers of insecurity and violent extremism in the region. The downed jet should be a stark wake-up call to the authorities for more focused action.



## HIGH PROFILE KIDNAPPINGS IN NORTH-WEST NIGERIA IN 2021



NOTE: The figures provided are based on reporting from credible newsgathering outlets, including Daily Trust, The Nation, Vanguard and Punch. For any given event listed above, the reported number of people kidnapped and released, and the amounts paid in ransom may vary, or be in dispute.

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## 4. The release from prison of drug traffickers convicted of coordinating Guinea-Bissau's largest ever cocaine consignments seized by local authorities undermines any hopes of a brave new dawn in the country's stance on drug trafficking offences

In March and September 2019, two major cocaine seizures – weighing in at 789 kilograms and 1 869 kilograms – were made in Guinea-Bissau, bringing the near-drought of significant cocaine seizures in West Africa since 2013 to an abrupt end. The seizures seemed to indicate that Guinea-Bissau's institutions were adopting a hardened stance towards drug trafficking.<sup>1</sup> And the fact that lengthy prison sentences were even handed down for those convicted (between 14 and 16 years for the ringleaders) was unprecedented for cocaine traffickers in Bissau, and was cited by INTERPOL as evidence of a newfound political will to finally tackle drug trafficking.<sup>2</sup>

But in May 2021, an investigation by the Judicial Police found that six of the individuals imprisoned on drug trafficking charges following the two bumper seizures in 2019 had been quietly released, allegedly with the collusion of elements of the state apparatus.<sup>3</sup> The story of how the traffickers behind Bissau's largest ever cocaine heists manoeuvred their way out of jail, albeit temporarily, is another instance of the corruption within the Guinea-Bissau criminal justice system and underscores how the briefly toughened measures against drug trafficking have eroded, with the focus switching to political considerations.

### Crime and no punishment?

In March 2019, officials seized 789 kilograms of cocaine in the false bottom of a truck transporting fish that was en route to Mali from Bissau. The operation, dubbed 'Carapau', resulted in the conviction of three individuals, each receiving lengthy sentences.<sup>4</sup> Shortly after, Operation Navara led to the September seizure of 1 869 kilograms of cocaine – the largest in the country's history – and conviction of 12 individuals on 31 March

2020. The convictions and lengthy sentences broke with tradition in Bissau, where impunity is rife.

Notably, however, the ringleaders of the network responsible for the September drug shipment – Braima Seidi Bá and Ricardo Monje – each sentenced to 16 years, were never detained. Bá, believed to be among the country's most prominent drug traffickers, and the suspected mastermind of the March 2019 import, likely escaped arrest due to protection from elements of the Bissau-Guinean state infrastructure.<sup>5</sup> One Bissau-Guinean businessman who regularly travels to Gambia reported that in mid-2021 Bá was residing in a hotel that he owns in Senegambia, a tourist beach half an hour from Banjul, the capital of Gambia.<sup>6</sup> This businessman claimed that Bá is visible at the front desk of the hotel and at various restaurants in the area, suggesting that he believes his arrest, which would require coordination between Bissau-Guinean and Gambian law enforcement, to be extremely unlikely.<sup>7</sup>

This sense of impunity was reinforced in October 2020, when the sentences of those behind the September 2019 drug consignment were drastically diluted in a judgment handed down by the Court of Appeal.<sup>8</sup> (Bá's sentence, for example, was reduced from 16 years to six<sup>9</sup>). Former minister of justice Ruth Monteiro described the judgment as a 'cloaked acquittal',<sup>10</sup> while local sources suspect that the determination was driven by bribes paid to the judges who handed down the majority judgment (Judge Aimadu Sauané issued a dissenting judgment, seen as a courageous stand against the majority).<sup>11</sup> Abílio Có, president of the Drugs Observatory, a civil society organization seeking to collect data on drug use in Guinea-Bissau, criticized the judiciary's decision to 'lower the penalties' and said that the successful investigations

conducted by the Judicial Police were being undermined by corruption in the judiciary.<sup>12</sup>

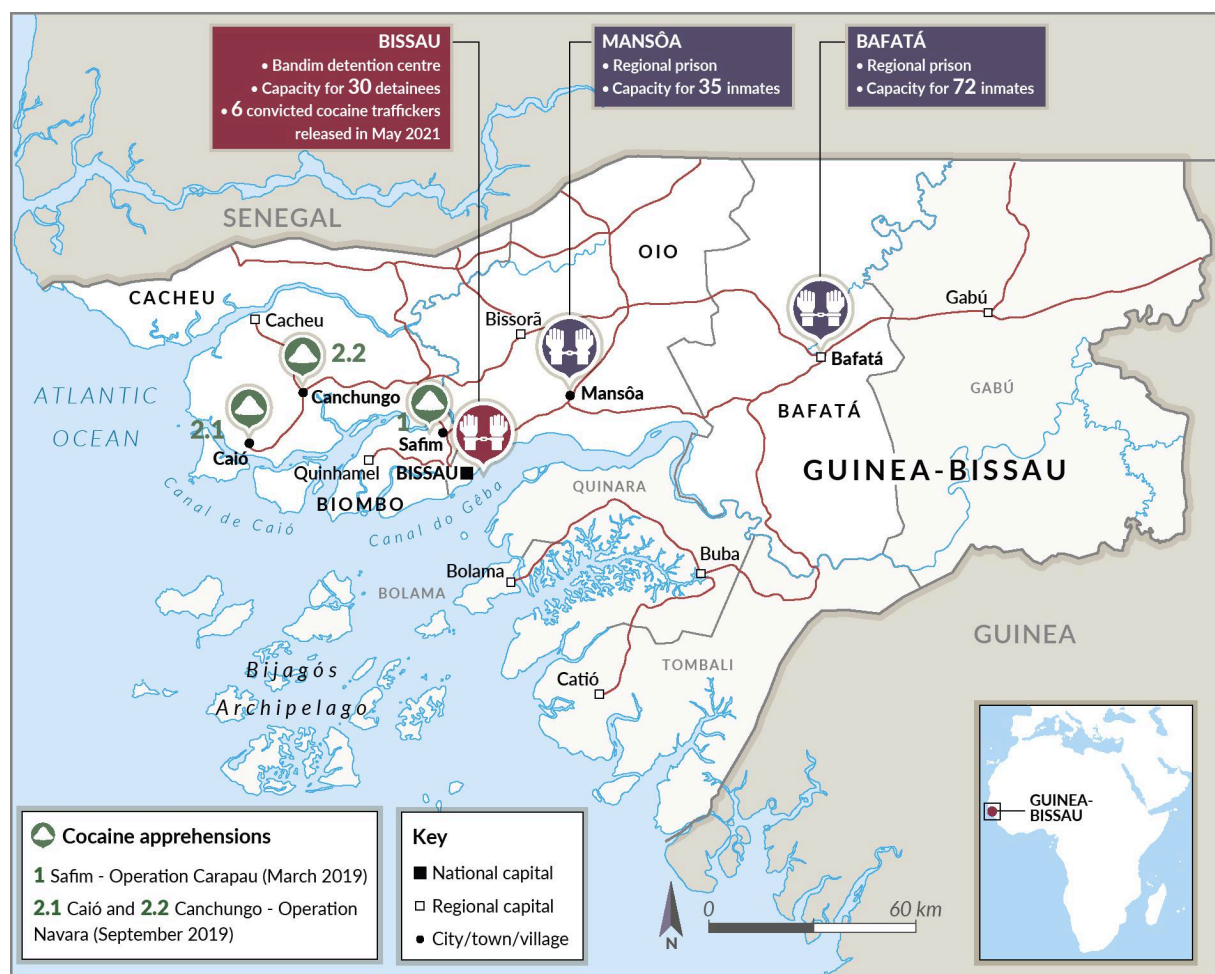
### Sick note

More troubling evidence emerged on 12 May 2021, when the Judicial Police received information that some of the prisoners convicted following operations Carapau and Navara had been released from Bandim Prison. The following day, it was confirmed that two of those convicted under Operation Carapau (Sidi Ahmed Mohamed and El Adji Marguei) and four convicted under Operation Navara (John Fredy Valencia Duque, Avito Domingos Vaz, Saido António Seidi Bá and Mussa Seidi Bá, the latter two being relatives of the ringleader, Braima Seidi Bá) had been released on medical grounds.<sup>13</sup> While most of the prisoners had been released in April and May 2021, one individual, Saido António Seidi Bá, had been released in the first quarter of 2020.<sup>14</sup>

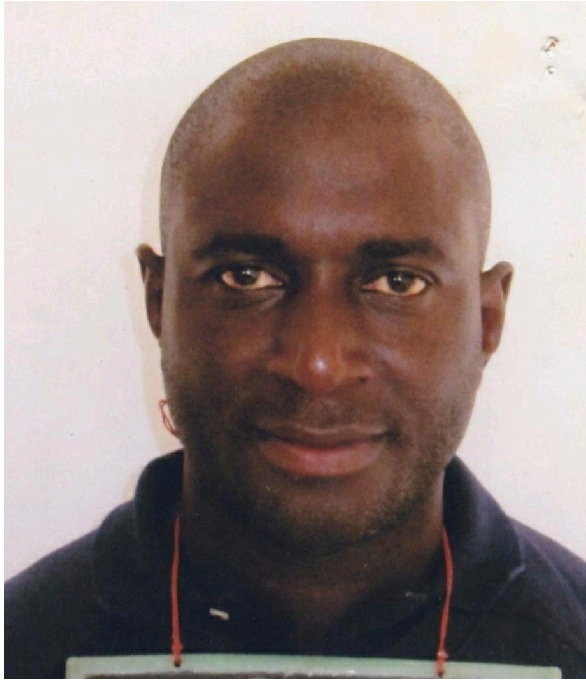
Suspecting wrongdoing, on 13 May the Judicial Police tracked down and once again detained the released

prisoners, with the exception of one prisoner, who was not found. Statements given to the Judicial Police by each of the detained individuals apparently cited a number of different medical conditions that required urgent medical treatment and indefinite stays outside of prison. The prisoners claimed they were escorted out of the prison by prison officers, with some claiming they maintained contact with the head of the prison throughout their time outside the prison walls.

The head prison guard officer confirmed knowledge of the release of each prisoner and claimed that proper procedures had been followed, including judicial authorization for the treatment of the prisoners.<sup>15</sup> Two doctors employed at two hospitals in which the prisoners had reportedly received treatment confirmed the medical conditions of each of the prisoners. Law enforcement officers reported that the vice president of the Supreme Court of Justice had authorized the temporary release of the prisoners.<sup>16</sup>



**Figure 7** Guinea-Bissau, showing the locations of the 2019 cocaine seizures.



Braima Seidi Bá was sentenced in Guinea-Bissau's Regional Court for his involvement in a cocaine trans-shipment to 16 years' imprisonment, later commuted in the Appeal Court to six.

*Photo supplied*

*Those involved had taken extensive steps to cover their tracks, including using a scalpel to give one of the prisoners a scar to simulate the operation he reportedly received.*

Subsequent Judicial Police investigations, however, found that the accounts given by the prisoners, prison staff and doctors were false and that the ailments had been fabricated. It was reportedly also discovered that those involved had taken extensive steps to cover their tracks, including using a scalpel to give one of the prisoners a scar to simulate the operation he reportedly received. On 24 May 2021, the Criminal Instruction Judge authorized the preliminary detention of the junior prison officials and doctors believed to have colluded in the prisoners' release,<sup>17</sup> but as of August 2021, officials and doctors were still at liberty as they awaited their trial, for which a date has not yet been set.<sup>18</sup>

#### **A return to blanket impunity for drug traffickers?**

Guinea-Bissau has long operated as a platform for instability in the region, functioning as a safe haven for key illicit actors, as well as an important entry point for cocaine from South America.<sup>19</sup> The circumstances around the release of those convicted of drug trafficking underscores how corruption in the criminal justice

infrastructure in Guinea-Bissau undermines the work of elements of the Judicial Police and judiciary.

The Judicial Police investigation into the release of prisoners on alleged medical grounds indicates a degree of continuing focus on organized crime, at least by certain elements of the body. This is especially noteworthy given the growing politicization of the Judicial Police under President Umaro Sissoco Embaló, who came to power in early 2020 and whose focus is reportedly on weakening political opposition rather than investigating drug trafficking.<sup>20</sup> According to sources in the Judicial Police interviewed by Bissau Digital in February 2021, the force has not conducted any investigations into drug trafficking since early 2020 and organized crime is no longer a strategic priority.<sup>21</sup>

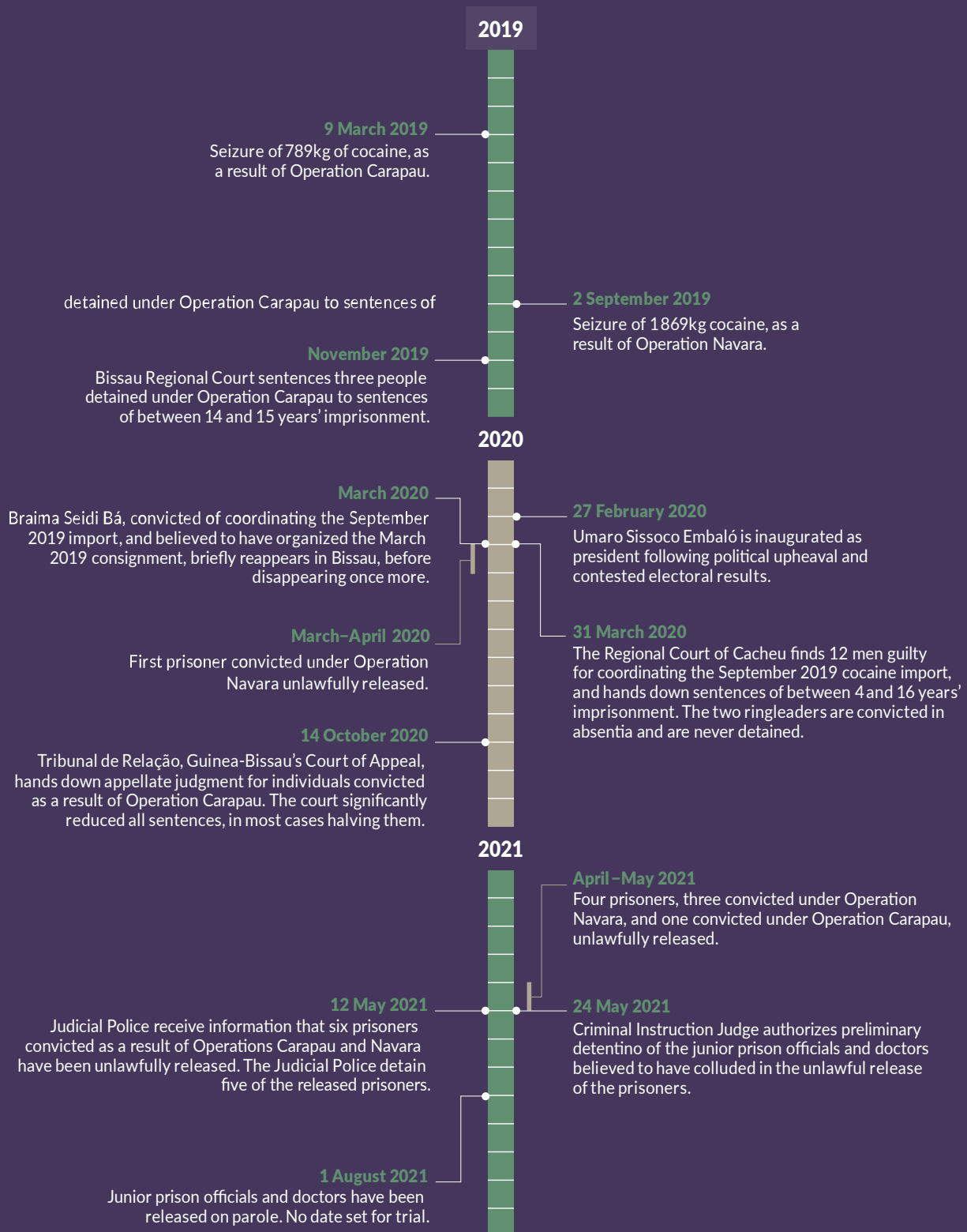
Bissau-Guinean civil society organizations, including the Guinean Human Rights League, and media outlets have expressed concern about the growing use of the Judicial Police for political rather than criminal justice aims.<sup>22</sup>

The apparent lack of Bissau-Guinean state focus on responding to drug trafficking may be one factor behind the August 2021 designation of General Antonio Indjai, the leader of the 2012 coup and the target of previous US DEA sting investigations due to his involvement in drugs trafficking, as a new target under the US Government's Narcotics Rewards Program. This designation, which offers a US\$5 million reward for information leading to the arrest of Indjai, who has been on US, UN and EU sanctions lists since 2012, constitutes a unilateral step by the US in targeting key players in the Bissau-Guinean drugs market.<sup>23</sup>

These events indicate that the seizures and sentences of 2019–2020 did not mark the beginning of a strengthened response to drug trafficking, but rather a brief spell of independence in investigations by the Judicial Police. There have been no major seizures since – unlikely in itself a sign of diminished flows through the country, but rather a return to blanket impunity for drug traffickers.



## TIMELINE OF CRIMINAL JUSTICE PROCESSES OF OPERATIONS CARAPAU AND NAVARA



## Notes

1. Sidi Ahmed Mohamed, ringleader of the March seizure, was convicted on charges of drug trafficking in November 2019, together with two associates. Mohamed was sentenced to 15 years in prison and his associates to 14. UNODC, Guinea-Bissau: Drug smugglers receive record 16-year-jail sentences as justice system strengthened by UNODC, 10 April 2020, <https://www.unodc.org/westandcentralafrica/en/2020-04-02-jugement-navara-guinee-bissau.html>.
2. For example, see INTERPOL, Guinea-Bissau: Triple prison conviction marks new era of anti-drug action with INTERPOL, 27 December 2019, <https://www.interpol.int/en/News-and-Events/News/2019/Guinea-Bissau-triple-prison-conviction-marks-new-era-of-anti-drug-action-with-INTERPOL>; UNODC, Guinea-Bissau: Drug smugglers receive record 16-year-jail sentences as justice system strengthened by UNODC, 10 April 2020, <https://www.unodc.org/westandcentralafrica/en/2020-04-02-jugement-navara-guinee-bissau.html>.
3. Information regarding this investigation was shared with the GI-TOC through case reports, together with a series of interviews with lawyers and law enforcement officers in Bissau between May and July 2021.
4. UNODC, Bissau-Guinean authorities achieve largest ever drug seizure in the history of Guinea-Bissau, <https://www.unodc.org/westandcentralafrica/en/2019-03-15-seizure-guinea-bissau.html>.
5. For example, during a brief stay in Bissau in March 2020, as the trial was ongoing, Bá was highly visible, clearly unafraid of arrest. Bá was hosted in the house of Danielson Francisco Gomes, director of Petroguin, a large public company. Mark Shaw and A Gomes, Breaking the vicious cycle: Cocaine politics in Guinea-Bissau, May 2020, Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, [https://globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Guinea-Bissau\\_Policy-Brief\\_Final2.pdf](https://globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Guinea-Bissau_Policy-Brief_Final2.pdf).
6. Interview, Bissau, May 2021. This was corroborated by two other sources based in Bissau with good knowledge of Seidi Ba's movements in interviews, Bissau, June 2021.
7. While there were reports of ongoing investigations in late 2020, these have not materialized to date.
8. The Seidi Bá cocaine trial: A smokescreen for impunity?, Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, 20 January 2021, <https://globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Guinea-Bissau-RB1.pdf>.
9. Ibid.
10. Interview with Ruth Monteiro, former minister of justice of Guinea Bissau, December 2020.
11. The Seidi Bá cocaine trial: A smokescreen for impunity?, Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, January 2021, <https://globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Guinea-Bissau-RB1.pdf>.
12. Interview with Abílio Có, president of the Drugs Observatory, Bissau, December 2020.
13. Notably, the relatives of Braima Seidi Bá were among those released.
14. The sequence of events following the release of the prisoners outlined in this section is based on interviews with lawyers and law enforcement officers in Bissau between May and July 2021, and analysis of case reports.
15. These statements were broadly corroborated by two other officials at Bandim prison.
16. Interviews with law enforcement officers, Bissau, June 2021.
17. Tribunal Regional de Bissau-Vara Crime, Juízo de Instrução Criminal, Processo No 465/2021.
18. Interview with members of judiciary and law enforcement, Bissau, 28 July 2021.
19. For example, Banta Keita, a Dakar resident who holds a French passport and is believed to be a key figure behind the January 2021 three-tonne seizure in Banjul, is reported to have fled to Guinea-Bissau, suspected to be under protection of the military. Drug Law enforcement Agency, the Gambia, Ministry of Interior, Information note on the seizure of 2ton, 952kg, 850g of cocaine, 8 January 2021; Ditadura do Consenso, Cocaína-3 Toneladas Apreendidas Na Gâmbia, 18 January 2021, <http://ditaduraeconsenso.blogspot.com/2021/01/cocaina-3-toneladas-apreendidas-na.html>; Atlanticactu, Gambie: Saisie de 3 tonnes de cocaïne, un enquêteur de la DLEAG écarté pour avoir interpellé un proche d'un chef d'état, 13 January 2021, <https://atlanticactu.com/gambie-saisie-de-3-tonnes-de-cocaine-un-enqueteur-de-la-dleag-ecarte-pour-avoir-interpelle-un-proche-dun-chef-detat>. Telephone interview with source in Guinea-Bissau, 20 January 2021. This is one of a number of examples; an additional illustration of Guinea-Bissau's role as a 'safe haven' is that one of the three Senegalese men identified by local police to be behind the import of 4 kg of cocaine seized in dakar fled to Guinea-Bissau to avoid arrest. United Nations Security Council, report of the Secretary- General on the Activities of the United Nations Office for West Africa and the Sahel, 24 december 2020, [https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/S\\_2020\\_1293\\_e.pdf](https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/S_2020_1293_e.pdf). Benjamin roger, dakar cocaine seizure shows West African ports are easy transit hubs, The Africa report, 17 October 2019, <https://www.theafricareport.com/18839/dakar-cocaine-seizure-shows-west-african-ports-are-easy-transit-hubs>.
20. The legally dubious closure of the Petroleum Regulation Agency by the Judicial Police at the behest of the president is cited as evidence of the politicization of the force by the Guinean Human Rights League. Interview, Bissau, 2 February 2021. On the deprioritization of drug trafficking, the president is reported to have repeatedly told the Judicial Police that drug trafficking is not a priority. Instead, he is reported to have ordered the Judicial Police to focus on political opposition and dissent. Interviews, Bissau, January 2021– July 2021.
21. Guinean Judicial Police on the brink of explosion, Bissau Digital, 25 February 2021.
22. Public statement made by the Guinean Human Rights League, 23 January 2021, <http://www.lgdh.org>.
23. US Department of State, Antonio Indjai – New Target, 19 August 2021, <https://www.state.gov/antonio-indjai-new-target>.

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