



**"Improving Responses to Organised Crime and  
Drug Trafficking Along the Cocaine Route"**

*Conference organized by the European Commission, the  
European Union External Action Service,  
And the Italian Foreign Ministry  
Rome 28-30 May, 2013*

**KeynoteAddress**

H.E.Olusegun Obasanjo

Former President of Nigeria  
Chairman of the Commission on the Impact of Drug  
Trafficking on Governance,  
Security and Development in West Africa

Allow me first to thank the European Commission, the European External Action Service, the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Institute for Strategic Studies for inviting me to this important and timely conference.

Earlier this year, I was asked by Kofi Annan to chair a Commission he was convening on the impact of drug trafficking on governance, security and development in West Africa.

Perhaps he knew that I had some personal experience of the drug scene. But that's a story I'll come to in a moment.

I agreed to chair the Commission because during my years in public office I became acutely aware of the growing challenges that drug trafficking and organized crime pose for West Africa, including my own country Nigeria and Africa in general.

The Commission, which comprises West Africans, young and old, from various walks of life, began its work at the end of January. We expect to deliver our findings and recommendations early next year.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Organized crime and drug trafficking is a shadowy business so available statistics do not give us a complete picture. Nevertheless, an estimate from the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) puts the retail market value of illicit drugs as well in excess of 300 billion US dollars with cocaine representing about a quarter of that market.

Of course, trafficking and organized crime are world-wide problems. But the dangers are especially acute in West Africa, a region only now recovering from decades of turbulence. You will understand, therefore, if I focus quite a lot on my own backyard.

West Africa faces a growing threat to stability and social well-being from cocaine trafficking.

The UNODC estimates that cocaine worth about 1.25 billion US dollars at wholesale prices was trafficked through West Africa in

2010. The trend is that we will have seen more in 2011 and 2012.

That amount far exceeds the national security budget of many countries in the region, which gives you an indication of how ill-equipped they are to tackle this problem on their own.

Across West Africa, the numbers of people using crack cocaine and other hard drugs are increasing with limited, if any, treatment options.

So, how can we respond to these clear and present dangers?

First and foremost, West Africans have to recognize that this is a problem for our region and not only for Europeans and Americans alone.

We are no longer a transit point: we are becoming a significant consumer as well.

As we know from the examples provided by Central America or Central Asia, a country that traffics drugs is a country that eventually consumes drugs. When significant quantities of illicit drugs pass through countries, worrisome quantities are left behind.

West Africa's political leadership has therefore to galvanize the will and determination to tackle drug trafficking and its consequences.

We have to acknowledge that drug money is affecting our societies and politicians and highly placed government officials are involved.

Governments must take the lead to ensure that trafficking does not fatally corrode our institutions and that consumption does not reach epidemic proportions.

This is not a job for governments alone. Civil society, traditional leaders, the religious communities, educators and the business sector all have a vital part to play.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Drug trafficking affects many countries, on all continents. There are

producers and consumers in just about every region of the world. But West Africa has become - by virtue of proximity and porous borders - the “middle passage” between Latin America and Europe.

Cocaine trafficking is a major concern for West Africa but by no means the only drug of concern.

According to UNODC, and law enforcement agencies, there is substantial growth in heroin flows into and through West Africa as well as other drugs.

And the region itself is a producer of drugs, traditionally marijuana but also now of synthetic drugs such as methamphetamines.

The region is being drawn ever deeper into the global web of drug trafficking, and suffering the consequences – increasing drug consumption, money laundering, arms trafficking, increased corruption and the subversion of democratic governance.

Unfortunately, West Africa is not well equipped to face these threats all by itself. Our judicial and security institutions are fragile and, despite the upbeat economic news, deep poverty and ignorance are still widespread.

Traffickers – local and foreign – exploit these weaknesses for their benefit.

So the strengthening of governance is imperative – government and governance institutions.

Traffickers seek out fragile regimes as bases for operation. They know how to shift their operations from country to country when one avenue is closed off. Close cooperation and coordination among states is very vital. No loophole must be left of provided

In West Africa, a regional architecture sponsored by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), has been put in place to respond to drug trafficking and consumption. Despite initial implementation challenges, ECOWAS Heads of State recently committed themselves to giving the framework a new lease of life.

Earlier this year, the African Union adopted a forward-looking drug policy. It builds on the successes and failures of past attempts at dealing with drug problems on the continent.

I am pleased to hear that the European Union and has already committed substantial resources and is ready to commit more to support the ECOWAS initiatives through the Stability Instrument and other means.

Individual states in Europe and beyond are contributing to this work too.

The United Nations, including the Security Council, has also been engaged through its different departments and agencies, ensuring that continued attention is paid to the potentially destabilizing aspects of the trade.

I hope that all these laudable initiatives will translate into early action on the ground as soon as possible because West Africa is particularly vulnerable to the illicit drug trade and its handmaiden, organized crime.

But African countries cannot be expected to bear the impact of trafficking alone, particularly when the main producers and the majority of consumers are located elsewhere.

This is a shared problem and there must be a shared and collective response.

We shall need the cooperation and assistance of both drug producing and drug consuming countries if we are to successfully confront the menace of drug trafficking and organized crime in Africa.

We do not want successful interdiction in other regions to simply shift the trafficking routes to unprotected countries in Africa and elsewhere. Stronger international coordination on law enforcement is crucial to help mitigate this displacement effect.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Drug trafficking, like other forms of organized crime, is a global phenomenon, requiring a global and shared response.

Because of globalisation we face common threats, which we have to confront together if we are to resolve them. Thanks to the Latin American and Global Drug Commissions, we can learn from the experiences of other parts of the world that have already faced similar challenges.

These challenges have become more complex because of the transnational nature of a tightly connected world.

Drug trafficking is part of the dark side of globalisation. The traffickers are working together across borders, and so must we if we are going to be successful in fighting the menace.

Public and private sector corruption, and the involvement of politicians and law enforcement officials in criminal activity, are fundamental threats to democratic governance, regardless of country.

Building resilience into governance systems to resist organized crime and political and public sector corruption is critical for development and security.

Organized crime is very flexible. We have to ensure that governments are equally adaptable and responsive, not only nationally but also globally.

Events in Guinea Bissau and Mali have reminded us of what can happen when governments are unable or unwilling to prevent the infiltration by organized crime.

Mali and Guinea Bissau are notorious but no West Africa country should be left unprepared.

Evidence on the streets of West Africa's cities indicates that this is not just a security problem. It is also a social and health concern.

I expect the West African Commission on Drugs, which I chair, to shine a light on these threats to governance, security and development.

The people as well as the governments of West Africa need to be brought into this discussion. They must agitate for change. They must all be change agents as well.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I mentioned earlier that I have had some prior acquaintance with the drug world.

At one point in my career, I was the guest of the Nigerian prison service. I was imprisoned for advocating for democracy, which was unpopular with the military regime. I was not in prison for drug offences, but prison brought me into contact with users and dealers.

Two things stand out from that experience.

First, the prisoners I met were mainly incarcerated for minor drug offences – personal consumption and petty peddling.

Second, there were no major traffickers in jail.

During the months since I began chairing the West Africa Commission, I have reflected on my past experience.

Experts working with the Commission tell me that this is the case throughout the region. We lock up the small fry and let the big fish get away. If they are apprehended at all, high target traffickers are prosecuted in jurisdictions outside of the region.

The Commission is asking why this happens and how West African states can work together among themselves and with other countries in investigating and prosecuting major traffickers.

At the same time, our countries do very little to help drug users. We stigmatize and lock them up instead.

The experience of Latin America raises questions about the effectiveness of approaches that focus narrowly on law enforcement. The West Africa Commission will have to ponder what lessons to draw from those experiences and ask our partners to help not only with prosecution but also with drug dependency.

One of them is likely to be that drug dependency should be regarded as a public health issue and not only as a public security problem.

Right now in Africa, prevention and treatment which comply with internationally recognized minimum standards, is practically non-existent.

While it may take time to consider changing legislation, we should in the interim integrate basic harm reduction standards into our public health systems.

Some countries in Africa such as Tanzania are already taking these first steps and the African Union is paying attention.

Prevention and proper treatment also make good economic sense. I am told that one dollar spent on drug treatment can potentially save seven dollars down the line.

I do not want to get ahead of my fellow Commissioners. We still have a lot of work to do.

Nevertheless, I would already urge countries of the region, and their external partners, to focus much more on prevention and treatment, adopting enlightened policies and proven practices that are both effective and humane.

Experience in dealing with HIV/AIDS shows what can be achieved when societies come together to overcome myths and prejudices and find pragmatic and compassionate ways to deal with a grave danger to human society.

Ladies and gentlemen,

If we are to succeed in our struggle to prevent drugs from

overwhelming our societies, we need a balanced, holistic approach.

That approach has to be based on an objective assessment of what works and what does not.

Africa and Europe must work together to develop that approach.

Europe is a close neighbour, and the end market for most of the drugs that pass through West Africa. So we have a common interest in finding effective solutions to the threats posed by drug trafficking and organized crime and work out effective ways to bring to justice, politicians, high officials and traffickers so that there is not escape route.

I can assure you that the West Africa Commission is anxious and ready to work with the European Union, and also partners in the Americas and Asia, to find and advance those solutions.

There is an African proverb which says “If you want to go quickly, go alone; if you want to go far, go together”.

In tackling drug trafficking and drug use, we have far to go and so we must go together. My hope, therefore, is that we shall proceed together and my appeal will not fall on deaf ears!

We look forward with much interest to the outcome of your conference. I wish your deliberations every success.

-----