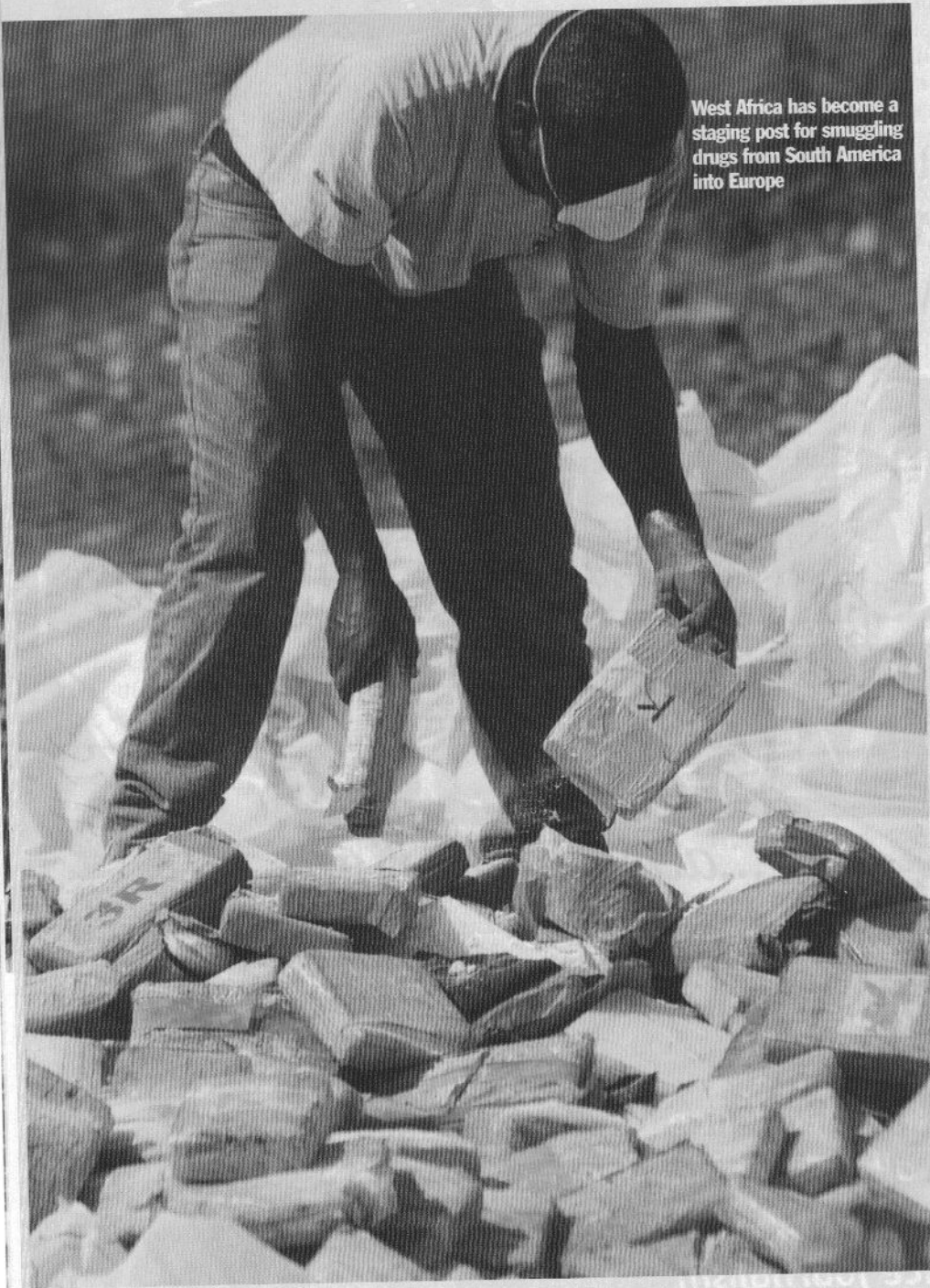


'Criminal' states

What is the nexus between political parties in West Africa and organised crime? This was the question that a roundtable discussion attempted to dissect in Lima, where Desmond Davies was one of the participants

West Africa has become a staging post for smuggling drugs from South America into Europe



FOR QUITE a while now, organised criminals in Latin America, using their massive wealth from the illegal drug trade, have been suspected of influencing politics in the region. It now appears that this is being extended to West Africa, which has become a staging post for smuggling cocaine from South America into Europe to meet the huge demands in the UK and Spain – the two biggest users of the illicit drug.

In the process, their ill-gotten gains are increasingly being used to fund political parties. Indeed, there have been allegations in Sierra Leone that drug money played a major part in the 2007 presidential and parliamentary election campaigns.

A couple of years ago, a plane loaded with cocaine was intercepted at the country's Lungi International Airport – causing a major embarrassment for the All People's Congress government. In one of the documents released by the Wikileaks website, the American ambassador in Freetown claimed that President Ernest Koroma intervened to halt the prosecution of some top names in the government. Koroma denied the allegation.

Sierra Leone's former foreign minister, Zainab Bangura, was more forthcoming on the issue of drug money in politics. In a newspaper interview in 2009, she said, 'The cartels have not yet captured the government's senior level, but sooner or later they will because they have millions of dollars and you have to be a saint to reject them.'

In the case of Ghana, which is now the hub for cocaine traffickers, Wikileaks reported that President John Atta Mills would insist on having members of his delegation security checked at the VIP lounge of Kotoka International Airport before flying out on official visits, saying he did not want to be surprised by a member of his entourage found to be carrying drugs.

The drug business, as Bangura highlighted, is a multibillion dollar business. According to a recent report by the Washington-based Global Financial Integrity (GFI), international crime has been valued at \$650bn, of which the drug trade accounts for a massive \$320bn.

This is the crux of the matter. According to the former executive director of the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), Antonio Maria Costa, Latin American drug cartels are preying on West Africa because countries in the region are vulnerable. 'Drug money is perverting the weak economies in the region,' he said. 'These states are not collapsing. They risk becoming shell-states – sov-

ereign in name, but hollowed out from the inside by criminals in collusion with corrupt officials in the government and the security services.'

Until quite recently, organised criminal activity was confined to a particular country or limited to a small number of global cartels and mafia groups. Things changed in the wake of globalisation and the rise of information and communications technology. Criminals have used these openings to spread their influence globally, using their wealth in the process to suborn governments.

Indeed, the debate is whether organised criminals have contrived to take control of governments or whether governments themselves are in effect using organised criminals to further their own interests: in short, the seemingly mutually advantageous relationships that have developed between organised criminal groups and political/state actors.

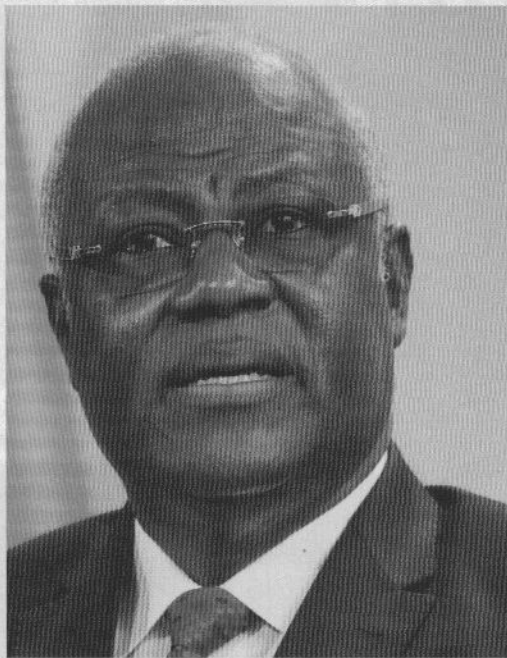
It was in this light that journalists from Latin America and West Africa, as well as independent researchers and analysts from these two regions, were brought together by the Centre on International Cooperation at New York University, the Open Society Foundation, the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, and the Institute for Multiparty Democracy to discuss this thorny issue.

The aim of the Inter-Regional Dialogue on State Capture and Organised Crime or Capture of Organised Crime by the State was to focus on the current challenges and opportunities of international policy and operational responses to the political-criminal nexus. The organisers of the conference pointed out that since time immemorial business – both legitimate and illegitimate – had always attempted 'to distort or displace the state for its own gain'. They added, 'In many contexts, organised criminal groups have become major contenders in these efforts, engaging significantly at the intellectual, political and institutional level with state and social actors.'

The way organised criminals get a foothold into the inner sanctums of governments is through clandestine funding of political parties. Once a party that has accepted funds from criminal cartels wins an election, the government immediately becomes compromised.

In the case of political party funding in Africa, it is shrouded in mystery. Of course, this problem is not confined to Africa. But given the poor state of the finances of many political parties in Africa, more so for those that are in opposition, there is a gap that organised crime could exploit.

If a criminal comes up with a couple of million dollars in a suitcase, it would be difficult for a hard-pressed political party to refuse



Sierra Leone's President Ernest Bai Koroma

this illegal handout. In this regard, there must be a national framework to shield political parties from organised criminals, the Lima conference was told. But there must be full commitment from the various parties not to accept money from organised criminals.

This is the case in Peru, where a presidential election is to be held in April. The country has a huge problem with organised crime that has blossomed on the back of the cocaine industry. Before last year's legislative elections, all the Peruvian political parties signed an ethical commitment against the infiltration of drug money into politics. The commitment allows for the creation of a 'permanent flow of information and knowledge between us regarding the situation of illegal drug trade in Peru and for our organisations to both understand and evade the risks that drug trafficking presents for Peru's democracy'.

What organised criminals do is to look for opportunities to infiltrate political parties and eventually the state. Mu'azu Umaru, a Nigerian law enforcement expert working for the Inter-Governmental Action Group against Money Laundering in West Africa based in Dakar, pointed out that the state had always existed but with some gaps that had allowed organised crime to 'incubate itself'.

He said that organised criminals penetrated states using both the legal and illegal markets. They also penetrated the regulatory institutions, enforcement agencies, the judiciary and defence and security institutions. He called for independent institutions that would hold governments accountable so that the gaps that organised criminals used could be closed.

'Organised criminals are looking for protec-

tion and freedom from punishment, and to achieve these they use bribery and corruption backed by blackmail, intimidation and violence,' Umaru said. He added that politicians were also keen to get their hands on money from organised crime because it was difficult to trace and could be used for whatever purpose.

It is getting more and more difficult to keep tabs on money made from illegal criminal activities because there are facilitators who move the money into legal institutions. This was the key finding of the GFI report, which showed that profits from illicit markets were making their way to transnational crime syndicates through vast international trade networks. The report also emphasised a link between transnational crime and economic underdevelopment.

'The cross-border passage of criminal money is facilitated by the global shadow financial system comprising tax havens, secrecy jurisdictions, disguised corporations, anonymous trust accounts, fake foundations, trade mispricing, and money laundering techniques,' writes GFI director Raymond Baker in the report's introduction:

'This is precisely the same structure that enables the movement of the other two components of illicit proceeds—the corrupt and commercially tax evading money. We cannot succeed in curtailing part of these flows while at the same time facilitating other parts of these flows. The developing countries bear most of the burden of this facilitating global structure, producing impoverishment, violence, and shortened lives for millions of people across the world.'

The Lima conference is part of a new approach to the problem of organised crime in relation to the links between Latin America and West Africa. The meeting prepared the ground for a follow-up meeting with key policy makers dealing with the issues at the regional and international levels on the political dimension of organised crime.

Indeed this is important because experts in the field have argued that organisations such as UNODC with a mandate to work on preventing or mitigating organised crime at the national, regional and international levels tend to focus on technical matters while avoiding the fundamentally political dimension of these issues.

This is the reason why the Lima initiative is so important because the journalists, analysts and researchers involved in the initiative are not worried about the sensitivities of governments. The Inter-Regional Dialogue plans to bring to the fore the nature of the organised crime-political connection in countries and across regions. It will also bring a better understanding to the political nature of organised crime.