

## METHAMPHETAMINE FROM WEST AFRICA TO EAST ASIA

### What is the nature of the market?

West African involvement in transnational drug markets extends back at least as far as the 1970s. Nigerians, particularly those from the southeast of the country, have traditionally shuttled cocaine and heroin from diaspora communities near production areas (such as Karachi, Sao Paulo, and Bangkok) to diaspora communities in consumer countries. The West African sub-region itself played little role, aside from being an air stopover location and as a place to launder the profits. All this changed when the region became a cocaine transshipment zone in the mid-2000s.

Since the cocaine profits have begun to ebb, it is perhaps not surprising that traffickers are looking for new income streams. For the first time, evidence of large-scale drug production in West Africa has emerged. The drug – methamphetamine – has many advantages over plant-based drugs, not the least of which are low start-up costs and the ability to engage in production anywhere.

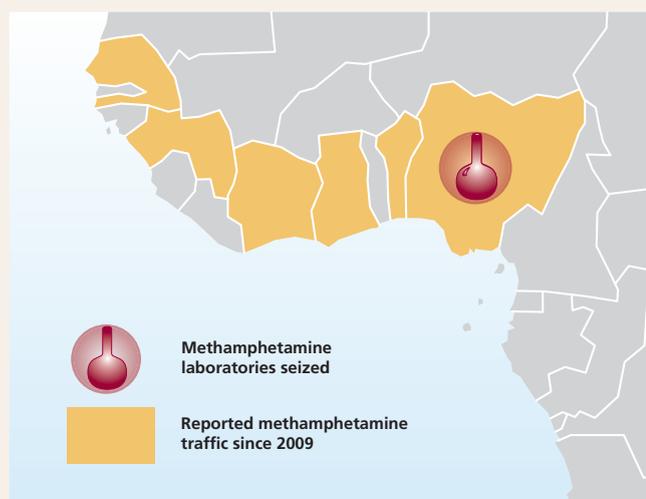
Nigerian smugglers may have gotten their start in methamphetamine in their traditional role as expert transportation and distribution agents. Traffickers could have been exposed to the drug through expat communities in various Asian countries and South Africa, and begun trafficking through West Africa. Detections of large numbers of methamphetamine couriers on flights between West Africa and Asia have been reported since at least 2008, two years before the first production sites were detected in the sub-region. Since then, a number of incidents have demonstrated synthetic drugs production in West Africa:

- Shortly after the 2008 coup in Guinea, the military government invited the international community to inspect a manufacturing operation they alleged had been linked to the Conté regime. More than 5,000 litres of sassafras oil and 80 litres of P2P were discovered – primary precursors for MDMA (ecstasy) synthesis. In one of the two locations where the chemicals were found (Kissosso), forensic analysis confirmed the presence of MDMA in a high-pressure reaction vessel, suggesting that some production had already occurred.
- About a year later, in May 2010, the first evidence of methamphetamine manufacturing in West Africa emerged. The US Government indicted members of a large international cocaine trafficking organization for attempting to establish an illicit laboratory for the large-scale manufacture of methamphetamine in Liberia. The methamphetamine was allegedly destined for the US and Japan.
- In July of 2011, the first operational facility was detected. The Nigerian Drug Law Enforcement Agency discovered a site with the capacity to manufacture 25 to 50-kilogram batches of methamphetamine just outside Lagos. Two men were arrested, both from southeast Nigeria.
- Eight months later, a second facility was identified in Satellite Town, Lagos. Some 41 kg of ephedrine and almost 5 kg of finished methamphetamine were seized. Three Bolivians and one Nigerian, an Igbo, were arrested. The presence of the Bolivians has yet to be explained.

The manufacturing of methamphetamine requires no advanced technology. Addicts have been known to synthesize the drug in their own kitchens using common decongestants. The difficulty lies in gaining access to sufficient

amounts of precursor chemicals (primarily ephedrine) to produce the drug in commercial quantities. Given the loosely regulated pharmaceutical industry in West Africa, this hurdle can be overcome. Once the precursors enter any ECOWAS state, they are easily relocated to whichever spot is most logistically convenient at the time. This makes it difficult to determine whether production is limited to Nigeria or whether it is more widespread.

**Map 3: Methamphetamine in West Africa**



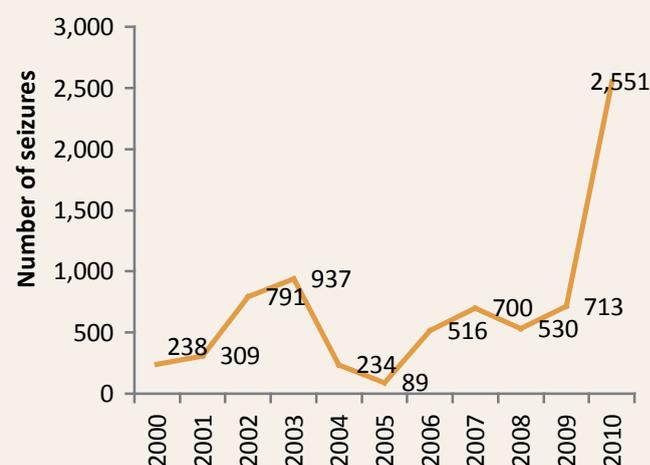
Source: Global SMART programme

Diversion of precursors has been detected in a number of countries in the region. Initially, these chemicals were probably sold to methamphetamine manufacturers abroad, but today these diversions may indicate production activity. In 2010, the International Narcotics Control Board, which regulates precursor imports internationally, reported stopping inappropriate shipments to Guinea, Niger, Nigeria and Togo, as well as to neighbouring regions in Africa. Suspended shipments of ephedrine or pseudoephedrine to African countries totalled more than 5.5 tons, far more than the facilities detected so far could process.

Local law enforcement statistics are of little use in determining the extent to which methamphetamine is trafficked

through the region. Part of the problem is that some countries lack the technology to distinguish between certain banned substances. When unsure, the responsible authorities may simply report that “psychotropic substances” were seized. These seizures have been reported in Nigeria, for example, for years, but have recently increased remarkably. Significant amounts of drugs testing positive for amphetamines were seized at the international airport in Lagos in 2010 (75 kg) and 2011 (45 kg).

**Figure 12: Seizures of ‘psychotropic substances’ in Nigeria**



Source: NDLEA Annual Report 2010

### How is the trafficking conducted?

In a classic case of outsourcing, ephedrine, largely produced in East Asia and South Asia, is exported to West Africa, where it is converted into methamphetamine and shipped back to East Asia. Almost all of the detected trafficking to Asia has involved the use of commercial air couriers, a technique at which Nigerian traffickers excel. Couriers may swallow latex wraps of the drug, conceal it on their person, or hide it in items within their luggage, such as in African crafts and souvenirs.

### Licit pharmaceuticals, illicitly diverted

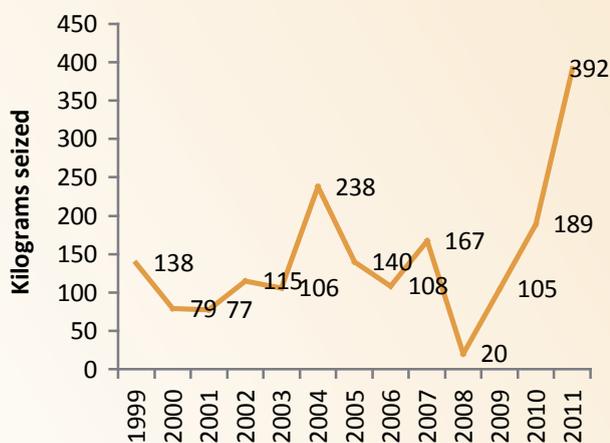
West Africa is a transshipment hub for licit pharmaceuticals that will be diverted for illicit use. A prominent recent example is the time-release synthetic opiate ‘Tramadol,’ which is extensively abused in the Middle East. Egypt, for example, has recently rescheduled this medication, as it is second only to cannabis as the most common drug of abuse in the country.<sup>19</sup>

Between 4 May and 18 May 2012, no fewer than 11 seizures of Tramadol were made by customs officials in Benin and Togo. Adding large seizures in December 2011 and June 2012, some 130 tons of the drug were seized in these two countries. These drugs were seized because the dosage (200 mg) was higher than the authorized dosage (50 mg). All imports were from India, and all but one listed Niger as a final destination. The designation of an inland destination may be for the purpose of avoiding coastal inspection. It is likely that the drugs were to be trafficked on to the Middle East, because Tramadol abuse is not a recognized problem in West Africa.

## Heroin trafficking through West Africa

Alongside the rise in methamphetamine trafficking, there has been a clear increase in the amount of heroin transiting West Africa, largely through commercial air couriers. Nigerian traffickers are involved in heroin markets in many parts of the world, and the region has been used as a transit area in the past. As with cocaine, most of the heroin seems to be destined for the European market.

**Figure 13:** Heroin seizures in West Africa



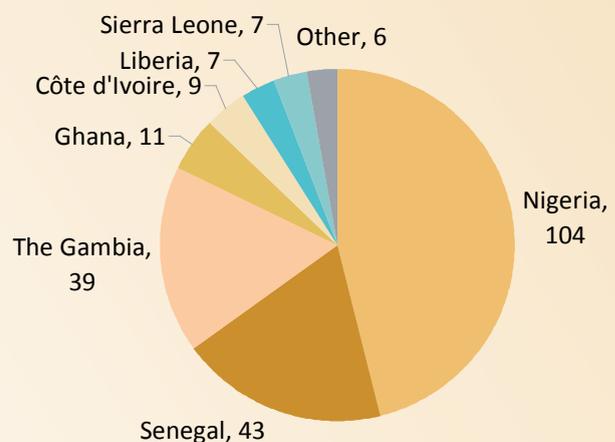
Source: UNODC Regional Office in West Africa

It appears most of the heroin enters West Africa via East Africa, sourced from South West Asia (including Iran) and Turkey. There are also direct commercial flights from Turkey to Nigeria, Ghana and Senegal, on which heroin can be couriered.

In addition to air couriers, there has been a recent series of seizures involving large volumes of heroin transported in shipping containers:

- In November of 2010, 139 kg were discovered entering Nigeria in a container from Bandar Abbas, Iran. The drugs were concealed in auto parts.<sup>20</sup>
- In April 2011, Pakistani authorities inspected a container destined for Benin, and discovered 108 kg of heroin packed into matchstick boxes. Further investigation led to a further 266 kg of heroin hidden in rice bags at a warehouse.<sup>21</sup>
- A week later, 202 kg of heroin was seized at Cotonou seaport, in a container originating from Pakistan and destined for Nigeria.<sup>22</sup>
- West African heroin traffickers are also active in destination markets. For example, during the first five months of 2011, 227 West African heroin traffickers were arrested in Italy.

**Figure 14:** Nationality of West African heroin traffickers arrested in Italy, January-May 2011



Source: Italian Ministry of Interior

Due to free movement within ECOWAS, the couriers may be dispatched from any airport in the region. Evidence of overland transport has been found from Nigeria to Benin, for example.<sup>23</sup> Methamphetamine has been found on couriers flying from Benin, Cameroon, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Guinea, Nigeria and Senegal. It remains unclear which of these countries might host production, since any methamphetamine could have been supplied through Nigerian output.

In addition, departure from any given West African country does not mean that nationals of that country are running the operation. At the height of cocaine couriering to Europe (2005-2007), couriers were departing from nearly every country in the region, but almost all of the operations were being run by Nigerians who had relocated to other West African countries. Nigerian traffickers may employ couriers of less suspect nationalities, and they may also acquire pass-

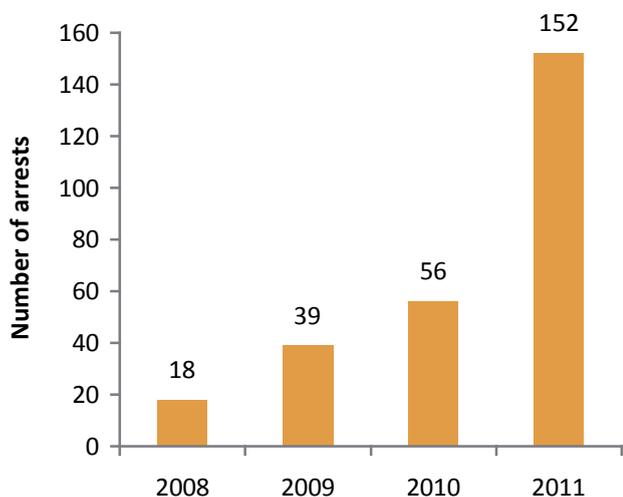
ports from other countries in the region, through fraud, forgery, or marriage.

Since flights from West Africa attract attention, couriers may fly through a number of other airports before arriving in East Asia. The choice of transit airports may also include the hubs of the airlines they choose to use. Some of the airlines that extend the most service to African countries are based in the Middle East, so these appear prominently among the transit countries.

The destination of these couriers appears to be the high-value methamphetamine markets in Japan, the Republic of Korea, Malaysia and Thailand. But on their way, couriers may transit a number of other East Asian countries, including China, Cambodia, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Viet Nam.

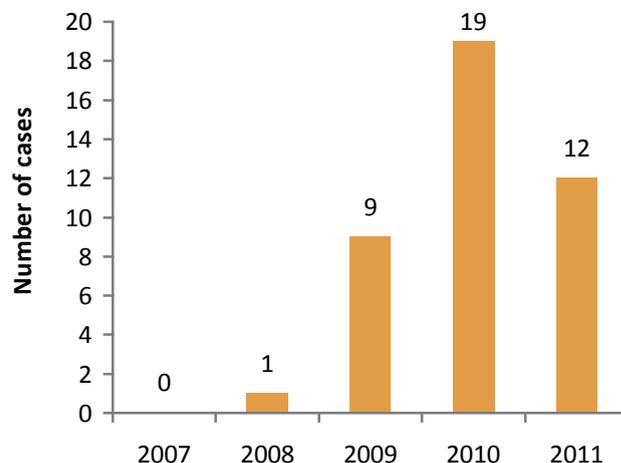
For example, to reach the Malaysian market, couriers typi-

**Figure 15:** Nigerian couriers arrested for methamphetamine trafficking in Malaysia, 2008-2011



Source: Royal Malaysian Police

**Figure 16:** Number of methamphetamine smuggling cases in Japan associated with West African organized crime groups, 2007-2011



Source: National Police Agency of Japan

cally depart from Ghana or Nigeria and may transit airports in the Middle East (Egypt, Qatar, Syria, United Arab Emirates), Europe (Germany), and South Africa. Some flights also transit Bangkok. The drugs typically enter the country at Penang, a state located on the northwestern coast of Malaysia, or at the international airports around Kuala Lumpur. Nigerian couriers have been detected in ever-growing numbers since 2008, with 152 apprehended in 2011 alone.

### Who is doing the trafficking?

The only confirmed production sites to date were associated with Igbo Nigerians, and Nigerian nationals also appear prominently in the key destination markets. Drug trafficking grows in parallel to other licit and illicit commercial activities in Nigerian expatriate communities. New arrivals are typically given a start-up stake with the understanding that future supplies will be sourced from their benefactor. In this way, a street dealer transforms himself into a wholesaler and can begin importing drugs on his own behalf.<sup>24</sup>

Initially, a new trafficker may be compelled to import the drugs on his own person, which is one reason why Nigerian nationals feature so prominently among the couriers detected. Once some experience and capital are gained, they may either acquire the passport of another African country or hire nationals of these countries to carry the drugs. It appears that well-established groups are now hiring nationals of Southeast Asian countries as couriers in order to reduce official scrutiny.

Today, Nigerian drug trafficking groups have been detected in almost every country in East Asia, and are particularly

active in Japan, the Republic of Korea, Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand:

- At airports in Japan, 59 “African” couriers were detected between 2007 and 2011, most of which were identified as Nigerian.<sup>25</sup> Throughout the country, 24 “Africans” were arrested for trafficking amphetamine-type stimulants in 2010.
- The number of West African air couriers arrested in Malaysia nearly doubled between 2009 and 2010, from 35 to 65, with Nigerian nationals accounting for 79% of the total.<sup>26</sup>
- In Thailand, 22 Africans were arrested between 2010 and February 2011 carrying some 38 kg of crystal methamphetamine between them.<sup>27</sup> Igbo street dealers can be found in the red light district of Nana (Bangkok).<sup>28</sup>
- In China, from 2004 through October 2010, a total of 418 West Africans were arrested for drugs, and two-thirds were identified as Nigerians.<sup>29</sup> Many of these were dealing heroin imported from Karachi, but others were involved in methamphetamine-related activity.<sup>30</sup>

In Asia, the Japanese market is most prized, as the street price of methamphetamine is over US\$100,000 per kilogram, more than 10 times the price in Thailand. There is a small Nigerian community in Tokyo, some of whom have been in Japan for decades, running nightclubs and small import businesses. In Japan as in other Asian countries, Nigerian methamphetamine trafficking has evolved in parallel with trafficking from Iran. Iranian traffickers have outnumbered Nigerians in a number of key destinations in the past. The relationship between these two groups remains unclear.

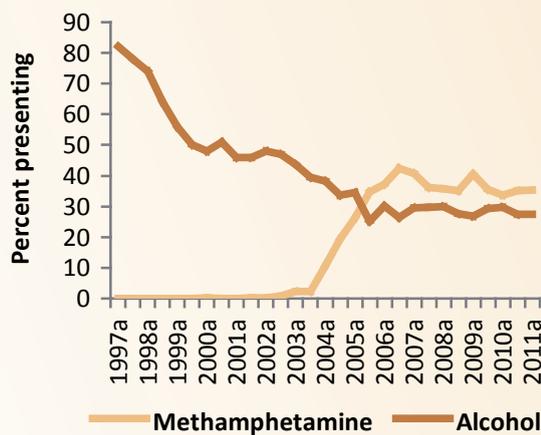
## Methamphetamine in South Africa

Ironically, it was likely Asian syndicates who introduced methamphetamine to Africa.<sup>31</sup> In the early 2000s, Chinese organized crime groups were active in the Western Cape of South Africa, dealing in a range of commodities including abalone, a protected shellfish harvested illegally by local gang members. Shortly after this commercial link was established, the local gangs began dealing in methamphetamine, a drug new to South Africa. In the course of two years, it became the most problematic substance in Western Cape. According to the Medical Research Council (MRC), Cape Town now has the highest metham-

phetamine prevalence in the world, with 2% of the adult population consuming the drug.<sup>32</sup>

As a result, South Africa has become a regional hub for the production and trafficking of methamphetamine. Most production is centered in Gauteng province, the primary industrial area of the country.<sup>33</sup> Most laboratories are small-scale operations, often located in residential areas. Detections of these have declined since 2008, while seizures of methamphetamine have increased. There has also been a decline in the amounts of precursors imported to South Africa.<sup>34</sup> All this suggests a shift to an external source of supply – perhaps West Africa.

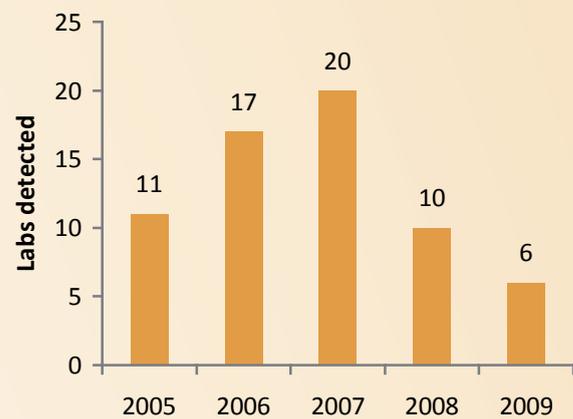
**Figure 17:** Primary substance of abuse of those presenting for treatment in the Western Cape, South Africa\*



Source: South African Community Epidemiology Network on Drug Use (SACENDU)

\*As of 2007, the data is for Western Cape; prior to 2007, all data is for Cape Town only; "a" denotes the first half of the year

**Figure 18:** Methamphetamine labs detected in South Africa



Source: South African Police Service

## How big is the flow?

While methamphetamine trafficking could become problematic for West Africa, regional output is modest in global terms, and is likely to stay that way for several reasons.

First, West African manufacturers face considerable competition in the primary destination market: East Asia. Rivals in China have direct access to ephedrine and geographic proximity on their side. Competitors located in the rebel-controlled areas of Myanmar face even less enforcement attention than those in West Africa, and have a long history of making methamphetamine for the local market. West African producers may have succeeded initially due to their novelty – no one had seen methamphetamine coming from Africa before – but their ability to out-compete local producers in the long-term is dubious.

Second, most of the detected trafficking has been by commercial air courier. Given the extreme distances involved –

it is nearly 14,000 km from Lagos to Tokyo – there are limited prospects to expand into larger volume smuggling techniques. In the end, there are limits to the amount that can be exported over such a long route, one kilogram at a time.

Approximately 10% of the methamphetamine air couriers arrested in the primary destination countries of Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, Republic of Korea and Thailand in 2010 were West Africans, predominantly Nigerians.<sup>35</sup> The enforcement agencies of these countries are well aware of the role of both West Africa and West Africans in the trafficking of the drug, so it is likely that the interception rate is high. Traffickers make use of couriers of other nationalities and transit countries, however, so it is unclear what share of airport interceptions can be attributed to West African groups. Still, there are probably less than 1500 methamphetamine couriers of any foreign nationality arrested in any given year in the five main destination countries.<sup>36</sup>

If 5% of the couriers were detected and 10% of the couriers

were West African,<sup>37</sup> then around 3000 West African methamphetamine couriers would have flown to Asia in 2010. If each were carrying an average of about a kilogram of methamphetamine apiece,<sup>38</sup> then around 3000 kilograms were imported by West Africans per annum. With wholesale prices ranging from about US\$40,000 in Malaysia to as much as \$200,000 in Japan and the Republic of Korea,<sup>39</sup> this would produce a gross income of some US\$360 million a year for West African traffickers. The figure could be even higher given that West African groups are employing couriers of many nationalities.

But given growing awareness of the threat, the intercept rate of methamphetamine couriers could be much higher than one in 20. If one in five were detected (20%), this would imply around 750 West African couriers per year, for 750 kilograms of methamphetamine imported. Using the same wholesale prices, this would produce a gross income of US\$90 million for the West African traffickers. Assuming the true number lies between these two extremes, the volume of methamphetamine trafficked from West Africa to East Asia can be estimated at some 1525 kilograms, for a gross income to traffickers of about US\$225 million.

### Implications for policy

The income from trafficking West African methamphetamine to East Asia is remarkable for such a new flow – in the high tens to the low hundreds of millions of dollars. But, as has been argued above, the long-term prospects of this flow are limited in light of competition from producers located in the destination markets. The greatest risk, then, is not that the income from methamphetamine trafficking will become destabilizing. It is that traffickers impeded from entering Asian markets will dump their product in West Africa, creating an additional problem the region is ill-positioned to handle. To avoid this outcome, measures need to be taken now, while the problem is still young.

One of the main reasons the region is vulnerable as a site for methamphetamine production is that the capacity for regulation of precursor chemicals is limited. It is therefore incumbent on the international community to ensure that West Africa receives only the ephedrine it needs for legitimate pharmaceutical use. In particular, flows from China – the primary source of ephedrine globally – should be monitored. Since the ECOWAS agreement allows free flow between borders, these needs should be assessed on a regional, rather than a national, basis.

At present, Asia is the primary destination market for West African methamphetamine. To eliminate the involvement of West African groups, it is only necessary to render them uncompetitive compared to local groups, which, given the distance involved, should not be difficult to do. The potential vectors for trafficking are limited. In keeping with the methods most used by Nigerian groups internationally, controls on air couriering and postal (including express

mail) shipments are likely to reach most of the flow. Profiling of couriers and full controls on any direct flights from the region will limit the potential for running a large number of couriers on a single flight, a technique employed by Nigerian traffickers all over the world.