SIA SPOTLIGHT™
Exposing Security Vulnerabilities, Driving African Solutions
FLAGSHIP OP-ED & ANALYSIS

AUTHOR: Willem Els, SIA **PUBLISHED:** 28 September 2026

Gateway under Pressure: Assessing Senegal's Exposure to the West African Cocaine Economy

International criticism mounts over Dakar's maritime vulnerabilities as criminal syndicates transform West African ports into major logistics hubs for European-bound narcotics.

When customs authorities intercept multi-ton drug shipments hidden within commercial freight, the enforcement action often masks a deeper institutional vulnerability. Recent reporting and regional assessments have placed Dakar under intense international scrutiny, highlighting how the country's strategic Atlantic ports and transit corridors are increasingly exploited by transnational cartels. According to data compiled by the Africa Defence Forum and the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organised Crime (GI-TOC), annual cocaine seizures across West Africa surged from about two tonnes in 2018 to over 30 tonnes in 2025, cementing the region's status as a primary conduit for the global drug trade. While Senegalese authorities frequently intercept high-value consignments such as the mid-2025 seizure of nearly a ton of cocaine concealed in a truck hauling fruit near Ida Mouride, critics and security analysts argue that interdiction alone fails to address structural governance gaps, porous maritime oversight, and the infiltration of legitimate trade infrastructure.

> ***"When international scrutiny focuses exclusively on periodic drug seizures, it obscures the institutional and logistical deficits that allow criminal networks to convert national trade hubs into permanent transit platforms."***

The recurring critique directed at Dakar centers on its dual identity as both a vital engine of West African commerce and a primary nerve center for narcotics distribution. Investigative reporting by outlets such as *Le Monde* underscores that traffickers systematically weaponize the port's high volume of legitimate container traffic, utilizing the African "rebound" effect as a smokescreen to evade rigorous inspection by European customs offices. Because containers originating from West African ports historically attracted less direct suspicion than direct shipments from Latin America, cartels have turned Dakar into an attractive redistribution base. Critics argue that state responses have been reactive rather than preventative, pointing to lagging maritime surveillance capabilities, insufficient inter-agency intelligence sharing, and vulnerabilities within free-trade zones that allow criminal syndicates to operate with relative impunity.

Evidence suggests that Senegal is becoming a logistics hub. In June 2026, Senegalese Customs seized 970.6 kilograms of cocaine hidden in a truck travelling between Koumpentoum and Koungheul, which had

entered Senegal from a neighbouring country. This seizure highlights that cocaine doesn't need to arrive by sea at Dakar to impact Senegal's criminal economy. Once drugs enter West Africa, they can be transported through established road networks, complicating enforcement efforts. Thus, authorities require intelligence on the entire supply chain, including the movement of vehicles, people, and money across borders.

This structural challenge is compounded by the evolution of trafficking methodologies. Law enforcement officials note that criminal networks constantly adapt by shifting from maritime routes to overland trucking networks, or employing advanced concealment techniques such as dissolving cocaine in fuel to bypass chemical and physical inspections. Consequently, the debate in security circles, monitored closely by bodies like the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), is no longer merely about whether Dakar is failing to stop drugs at the water's edge, but whether state institutions possess the systemic resilience required to dismantle the sophisticated financial architectures and laundering networks underpinning the trade. Without comprehensive reforms targeting port integrity, container tracking, and institutional oversight, high-profile criticisms of regional authorities will likely persist.

Beyond coastal transit, the crisis involves a growing domestic consumption market and deep financial laundering risks across cash-intensive sectors like real estate and construction. Because trafficking routes overlap with Sahelian instability and porous borders, counter-measures must extend beyond physical seizures to target the financial architectures, corporate fronts, and key organizers operating behind the transport networks.

SIA POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Port & Container Integrity Audits: Institute mandatory, risk-based non-intrusive inspection protocols for all high-risk containerized freight originating from known transshipment corridors to eliminate blind spots in maritime logistics.

2. Enhanced Inter-Agency Intelligence Sharing: Establish unified operational channels linking customs, national police, maritime units, and financial intelligence bodies to track transnational syndicates across jurisdictional boundaries.

3. Targeted Financial Investigations: Mandate parallel financial tracking on every major drug seizure to dismantle the laundering networks, front companies, and illicit capital flows sustaining cartel operations.

4. Regional Anti-Corruption Frameworks: Strengthen oversight within customs and port authorities to neutralize internal corruption vulnerabilities exploited by international trafficking rings.

Addressing these vulnerabilities requires a fundamental shift in strategy. Port security and customs enforcement cannot operate in isolation from broader financial and judicial countermeasures. Intelligence apparatuses must pivot toward mapping the entire illicit supply chain, identifying the financiers, shell companies, and corrupt facilitators who manage the proceeds, rather than focusing solely on interdicted cargo and low-level couriers. For Senegal and regional partners alike, enduring security success will be measured by the strength of institutional reforms implemented before transnational syndicates permanently embed themselves within the legitimate economy.

When regional trade hubs face mounting international criticism for security lapses, long-term stability is secured not through defensive public relations, but by dismantling the structural and financial architectures that make state infrastructure indispensable to organized crime.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR
Willem Els is a Director, Senior Security & Governance Advisor at the Security Initiative for Africa (SIA), specializing in counter-terrorism, commercial explosives interdiction, organized crime, and law enforcement intelligence.

SIA SPOTLIGHT™ MEDIA & SYNDICATION
SIA Spotlight™ is the flagship publication series of the Security Initiative for Africa (SIA). For media syndication, republishing permissions, or interview requests: admin@securityinitiativeafrica.org | www.securityinitiativeafrica.org