Nigeria: Corruption Fuelling Drug Trade

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State agencies accused of failing to fulfil their mandate.

Experts say that the fight against drugs in Nigeria is being hampered by corruption among the ranks of the National Drug and Law Enforcement Agency (NDLEA).

There is also growing alarm over rates of domestic usage of illicit substances in Nigeria, a country once seen primarily as a drug transit point.

Established in early 1990, critics say that the NDLEA has failed to live up to its mission statement, which is “the total eradication of illicit trafficking in narcotic drugs and psychotropic substances; suppression of demand for illicit drugs and other substances of abuse” as well as recovering drug money.

NDLEA spokesman Jarikre Ofoyeju said that the agency was “working to bring about a balance between supply and demand reduction.

“We are targeting medium and high-level drug traffickers, seize their drugs, prosecute them and trace their illegal proceeds for forfeiture. Other areas of priorities include staff welfare [and] motivation, public enlightenment and treatment for problem drug users,” he said.

The NDLEA has boasted of some major successes, with large hauls of drugs confiscated at border crossings.

In 2015 alone, narcotics worth N3.7 billion (11.5 million US dollars) were seized at the Murtala Muhammed International Airport (MMIA) in Lagos.

This included 172kg of cannabis, 160kg of ephedrine, 114kg of methamphetamine, 96kg of cocaine, 45kg of tramadol and 5kg of heroin.

But critics say that this is merely the tip of the iceberg and stress that Nigeria remains a hub of organised drugs crime. According to the UN’s 2016 World Drug Report, the third largest quantity of cocaine seized around the world was from Nigeria, with 50 to 70 per cent of the drug trafficked by air.

Debo Adeniran is the executive chairman of the Coalition Against Corrupt Leaders (CACOL), a civil society grouping. He said that he believed there had been a sharp rise in corruption within the NDLEA and that urgent action was needed to purge its ranks.

The organisation was incapable of owning up to its own problems, he said, adding, “It has been happening for a very long time.”

NDLEA officials have been accused of directly colluding with the criminals they are tasked with pursuing.

In one ongoing case, an NDLEA staff member is being investigated over an alleged scheme to import drugs from Brazil.

NDLEA official Ali Bala Adamu was arrested in January along with four alleged co-conspirators - Ijeoma Ojukwu, Victor Umeh, Uche Igwelo and Egbuche Fidelis Osita – on charges of conspiring to import cocaine from Brazil.

According to the indictment, 20 million naira (60,000 dollars) worth of drugs were concealed in luggage abandoned at the arrival hall after the arrival of an Emirate Airline flight on December 28, 2015.

Osita came to the airport on January 1, 2016 to collect the bags, leading to the arrest of the other suspects.

HOW DRUGS ARE TRAFFICKED

One high-profile trafficking case involved Chief Akindele Ikumoluyi, popularly known as Ile Eru and a powerful figure in the West African drug market.

He was exposed and sentenced to ten years imprisonment in 2008 after a drugs mule, Abdul Fatai Olori, turned state’s witness.

Olori told NAJj.com that he had been introduced to Akindele in 2004 when he needed money to pay for medical treatment. Akindele agreed, but on the condition that Olori travel to Brazil and collect a “message” from one of his business associates. In early 2006, Olori made the journey.
“When I got to Brazil was picked up by a man who took me to a house where I was locked up for three weeks,” Olori said. “I was provided with food but denied free movement. It was after three weeks that he came back with two bags containing cocaine.

“The message Akindele wanted me to ‘collect’ from his business associate finally became clear,” Olori continued, who continues to maintain that he had no idea what he would be asked to carry.

He said he was scared that he would be arrested on his return to Nigeria but was assured that smooth passage through MMIA was guaranteed.

However, at the airport Olóri was seized by NDLEA officials and accused of trafficking 10 kg of cocaine into Nigeria.

He made a full statement describing the circumstances in which he had been sent to Brazil.

But the following day, Olóri claimed, he was asked by officials to produce another statement that did not implicate Akindele.

“I later called him [Akindele ] to come and explain things to the government people but he didn’t answer me. He abandoned me and wanted me to rot and die in prison for what I did not know anything about”,” he continued.

“I was very honest with the NDLEA people especially the prosecuting team,” said Olóri, who was granted bail after some months in detention. “I told them everything and that I was ready to cooperate with them so that Akindele can be arrested before many people fall into his trap.”.

As a consequence, Akindele was sentenced to ten years imprisonment on March 18, 2008.

But Olóri said that he believed that for every offender caught by the NDLEA, two were allowed to go free.

“If you have money those people will leave you alone. There are many bad people in this Nigeria,” Olóri said.

He said that Ikumoluyi had evaded arrest for so long because he had a network of informants.

This was corroborated by a high-ranking NDLEA official who asked to remain anonymous because of security concerns.

“Before NDLEA could catch him [Ikumoluyi], it took the commitment and diligence of a select few who were on the team set up to nail him. Each time they tried, he would escape because he had informants within the house,” he said.

“There was a day that the taskforce had credible intelligence about Akindele’s whereabouts and were about to set out to effect his arrest; a call came in and it was Akindele asking that a mutual agreement be reached between him and Olóri. Everyone was surprised and shocked,” the NDLEA official continued.

SUPPLY ROUTE

Nigeria is a key transit point for both heroin and cocaine en route to Europe, East Asia and North America.

But drug usage appears to be widespread within Nigeria, too. A visit to the cities of Sokoto, Kano, and Port Harcourt show that illicit substances are easily available.

In the ancient city and state capital of Kano in Nigeria’s northwest, most of illicit drug activities appear to take place on the Aba and Emir roads. Drug dealers can be seen dispatching packages of cannabis to customers late each evening.

In Sokoto, in the extreme northwest of Nigeria, the Mammy market along Abdullahi Fodio Road is a popular place to get drugs including Tramadol, an opioid analgesic and Benylin with codeine, a cough mixture.

An NDLEA official, who asked to remain anonymous as she was not authorised to speak to the media, served as a guide around the Sokoto market.

She said that most drug dealing began at five pm and ended at ten pm when the market closed. After that, business moved outside.

The NDLEA official said that she had lodged complaints about the rising incidences of drug abuse and the apparent impunity with which dealers operated, but no concrete steps had been taken.

Many young women in the market have turned to sex work to fund their habits.

One woman from Bauchi state, who said she had come to Sokoto to make money, offered full sex in
exchange for N500.

“Are you interested or not?” she asked. “I didn’t charge you that much now. I need the money now to get high. Even if you are not ready now I can give you my number so that we can catch up later outside Mammy gate when it is past 10 pm. I will do anything you want. Just give me the money first,” she said.

Shuddering, and sweating profusely despite the mild weather, the woman grabbed the reporter’s phone and punched in her contact details.

A number of cafes and shops in the market also appear to be hubs for local drug dealers.

“They also cater for the less privileged and those with low financial power,” said Mohammad, a local trader.

Young men and women could be observed trooping in and to get drugs packaged in dark brown or green bottles.

The oil city of Port Harcourt in the south of the country also has a thriving drug business, with gangs in areas such as Rumoola and Rumokwuta specialising in cannabis while dealers in the Government Reserved Area (GRA) of the city control the cocaine supply.

Osas, a resident of Port Harcourt, gave an overview of how the system worked.

“You cannot just stand up and say you want to buy drugs. Even if it is cannabis, you have to properly do your intro or else the dealers will say you are government and they might hurt you or scamper away,” he said.

“The routine is that you will be introduced by someone who is a regular customer. And the introduction which can be done over the phone depending on trust must carry your name, complexion, height, colour of attire worn and any other thing to describe you.

“You will then be given a point of collection where someone will then approach you for the drug-money exchange,” he said.

LOOKING THE OTHER WAY

One former NDLEA official described how employees of the agency could be pressurised to turn a blind eye to corruption.

Salisu Usman (not his real name) began working at MMIA in 2003 but soon found himself unpopular amongst his colleagues. Eventually he was posted away to north-eastern Nigeria.

“I always questioned my colleagues as to why they would let some people go even when there is overwhelming evidence that the person is trafficking drugs,” he said. “Sometimes they answered me politely and said that I am a round peg in a square hole. It was later that I then found out that there were some directives from God-knows-where that somethings should pass without explanations,” Usman said.

When Usman at one point disobeyed one of these directives, he said that he was subtly warned to toe the line.

“The official said that I should be soft a little and follow instructions to the end if I don’t want to be sacked, posted out or framed up,” Usman said.

“It was not like a threat per se,” he said. “It was more like an advice but any reasonable person can decode it wasn’t an ordinary advice. It was a colleague that they sent. I knew it wasn’t his idea and that he was directed.”

Others explained how crime and graft was covered up due to fear of retribution.

Sam Adurogboye is a former journalist who is now spokesman for the Nigerian Civil Aviation Authority.

“I did a story on drugs when I was still young and it was not published. So I asked my editor why the story was not published and he replied that he knows that I am a young boy and that he wants me to marry and have kids.

“They know these drug lords and barons. Most of them are usually highly placed personalities but they cannot be touched because of the power they wield. Am sure you know that some drug lords or mafias in some countries are the ones that decide who will rule or not. They can be powerful,” he said.

Adurogboye said that such pressures should be borne in mind when considering what action to take against corrupt officials.
“On the contrary, instead of going hard on the NDLEA we need to understand the issues and put ourselves in their position. We need to sympathise with some who genuinely were pressured to aid drug trafficking. Imagine your family, job or anything dear to you being threatened,” he continued.

NDLEA spokesman Ofoyeju said that the agency was aiming to ensure appropriate sanctions were applied in any instances of unprofessional conduct amongst its officials.

“The NDLEA has a standard operating procedure where it gets reports both from within and outside on the activities of officers,” he said. “Interestingly, all reports are properly investigated and anyone found guilty are sanctioned accordingly. The certainty of disciplinary action against anyone found wanting has encouraged optimum performance and also enhanced service delivery in the agency.

“Let me assure you that the agency will continue to respect the rule of law in handling all cases of unprofessional conduct.”

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