Drug trafficking routes proliferate through Indian Ocean

There has been a proliferation of drug trafficking routes identified as starting from the Makran Coast and passing through the Indian Ocean. Joanna Wright assesses the challenges facing naval and law enforcement operations aimed at interdicting the trade in the absence of seizures and court cases.

Since 2012 the majority of drug seizures on trafficking routes from the Makran Coast, which stretches across Iran and Pakistan, have been made by the multinational Combined Maritime Forces (CMF) naval operation on a heroin route travelling towards East Africa. This route is often referred to as the ‘smack track’.

In other regions, heroin is typically trafficked overland or in containers, so seizures from dedicated trafficking vessels had previously been rare. In contrast, the CMF seized nearly 11 tonnes of heroin between 2012 and mid-2017. The CMF has also seized large amounts of hashish on a route from the Makran Coast to eastern Yemen.

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CTF-150 made five heroin seizures in May 2017, with others in March, April, and June. This was the largest number of seizures during May since the CMF started intercepting heroin on the route to Africa, but the total weight of heroin for four seizures in May 2016 was larger.

A comparison of CMF seizures made during May 2016 and May 2017 indicated that 2017 was the first year when the average seizure size on the route to East Africa had been less than 200 kg. Searches now typically last for several days, limiting the likelihood that partial seizures are being made.

This raises the possibility that organised crime groups are concerned about consignments being seized, and so are starting to reduce shipment sizes. Still, large amounts of heroin continue to be seized, including 400 kg in one seizure in March 2017.

The largest heroin seizure on the ‘smack track’ was made in April 2014, when a 1,032 kg consignment was intercepted by the CMF. This was one of the largest heroin seizures made outside Afghanistan and its neighbouring countries. Furthermore, it has been reported that the heroin seized in the Indian Ocean has been extremely pure, adding to the importance of the interdictions.

[Sri Lanka and Maldives]

Heroin trafficking on a maritime route to the central sector of the Indian Ocean was underlined in May 2017 when 198 kg of Afghan heroin, which had been smuggled on a maritime route and transferred to a Sri Lankan fishing boat, was seized on the island of Muthupanthiya in Sri Lanka.

The track to the southeast of the Makran Coast first became apparent in 2014, when 24 kg of heroin was seized from a dhow in Maldives. In 2016, another 29 kg of heroin was dropped at sea by traffickers off Maldives, while Sri Lanka made a major seizure of 100 kg from a dhow. The methodology appears similar to that used on the ‘smack track’.

There is some heroin consumption in Sri Lanka, but the larger consignments are likely to be transshipped. Sri Lanka is a particularly attractive target location for drug traffickers because of the high port volumes, senior specialist at the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), Shanaka Jayasekara, told Jane’s in May 2017.

This is of benefit to traffickers using containers for the entire journey and for onwards movement. Jayasekara added, "Much of the heroin coming to the East Indian Ocean region is in containerised cargo and trafficked across the world." In contrast, Maldives has a small deepwater port, limiting the amount of containerised cargo transiting the country, Jayasekara noted.
HMAS Newcastle's sea boats approach a dhow for a flag verification as part of operations involving narcotics interdiction off the east coast of Africa. Tanzania is a key hub, where the majority of large onshore heroin seizures in East Africa have been made. (Commonwealth of Australia/Lieutenant Andrew Colebourn)

A US senior Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) official told Jane's that the same drug trafficking networks were involved in moving heroin to both East Africa and the central sector of the Indian Ocean. The latter route may reflect opportunistic behaviour on the part of organised crime groups. Alternatively, they may be being evasive, suggesting that they may have been affected by the extraditions of alleged drug traffickers from East Africa or CMF actions in international waters.

The DEA official told Jane's that they believed trafficking to Maldives and Sri Lanka to be part of a different route towards destinations in Asia and Oceania. Onwards maritime transportation would be via container or steel-hulled general cargo ships, they added.

Law enforcement sources also told Jane's that there were concerns that Sri Lanka was being targeted by drug traffickers to try to develop onwards routes. These would be plentiful because of licit containerised trade, with destinations including the United Kingdom and a number of countries in Europe.

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New route to Turkey

Heroin traffickers appear to be using a maritime route from the Makran Coast to the Mediterranean to supply Turkish drug trafficking networks. This route appears to have been confirmed by the seizure of more than 1 tonne of heroin by Turkish naval forces in June 2017. Nine Turkish
nationals were detained and 1,071 kg of heroin was seized from a ship that was travelling from Egypt to Greece, according to Turkish news reports.

The senior DEA official told Jane's that sources have reported the route since early 2017 and that the heroin does not pass through hubs onshore. After departing the Makran Coast, Pakistani transporters travel to the waters of the Gulf off Dubai. The senior DEA official added, "Sometimes they switch cargo to another boat, sometimes they keep the same boat and reflag it, re-register it, and change the name."

Pakistani transporters then travel through the Suez Canal and hand over the drugs in the Mediterranean off Egypt, where a Turkish network takes over the cargo. A vessel is sent and the cargo is transshipped, before either being taken to Turkey or heading to other destinations in Europe without transiting Turkey, added the senior DEA official.

Turkish organised crime groups have not been visible in East Africa, but at least one major heroin consignment transited Tanzania en route to Turkey. According to the DEA official, a 2009 case was tied to major Afghan drug traffickers, and involved 2,500 kg of heroin that was sent via Tanzania before being moved on a route through the Red Sea and onwards into Turkey.

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Hubs in Africa

Tanzania is a key hub, where the majority of large onshore heroin seizures in East Africa have been made. A senior DEA official told Jane's that sources identified Tanzania as a major hub for trafficking Afghan heroin as early as May 2009. This was confirmed in 2010 by several large drug seizures on the coast of Tanzania and another in Kenya in 2011. According to the official, warehousing in Tanzania is extremely significant and they have "heard over the years that at any one time the largest stockpile outside Afghanistan was sitting in Tanzania".

"Pretty much every major drug trafficking organisation [DTO] in Afghanistan and Pakistan had people forward in Tanzania, that were part of their DTO, they weren't Tanzanians; they were Afghans and Pakistanis that were sent down there to be the recipient and co-ordinate money and onward movement of the drugs," the senior DEA official told Jane's.

In addition, groups such as Harakat al-Shabaab al-Mujahideen and the Ansaar Muslim Youth Centre (AMYC), which was described by the Somalia and Eritrea Monitoring Group (SEMG) as...
being connected to Al-Shabaab, have a presence along the Swahili Coast. In Tanga, northern Tanzania, a group called the Muene Network was identified as providing logistical support for a Pakistani-Iranian drug ring in a July 2012 report by the SEMG to the UN Security Council.

The Muene Network was also identified in the SEMG report as being involved in the smuggling of personnel in support of Al-Shabaab and the AMYC, moving people between Tanzania and Somalia. Al-Shabaab has raised a significant amount of its funding from illicit taxation of sugar smuggling and the illegal trafficking of Somali charcoal in southern central Somalia.

There have not been reports of heroin being landed in Somalia, but the merchant vessel Amin Darya (also referred to as Al-Noor) stopped off in Hobyo for 10 days before being interdicted with heroin on board in the territorial waters of Kenya, according to a report from the SEMG in October 2015.

There were no conclusive links made between the heroin consignment and activities off the coast of Somalia. Nevertheless, activities and co-ordination undertaken during the Al-Noor stop underline the potential for nexuses between the trafficking organisations and a group in Somalia that may have Al-Shabaab connections. The report stated that the vessel "took on supplies as well as gunmen - possibly affiliated with Al-Shabaab - who later disembarked", and may have been smuggling other items into Somalia.

Mozambique appears to have been used as a hub for trafficking large amounts of heroin since at least 2010, but there has been a notable lack of large seizures in the country. The Dublin Group - the EU, European Commission, and UNODC - reported in late 2012 that there was "intelligence that suggests that during 2010 multi-tonne shipments of cocaine, heroin, and hashish were landed in Mozambique for onward transportation to consumption countries in Europe and North America".

Tanzania is "still huge", the senior DEA official told Jane's, but drug traffickers have reacted to seizures and law enforcement's focus on the country by seeking new landing points, including Madagascar, the Seychelles, and possibly Mauritius. Trafficking networks are constantly looking for new routes, raising the threat that a broader area will be targeted, including places inaccessible via the dhow routes. "All these big guys are looking for a place to operate in Africa that is not well known, that is not on the beaten path … they will move to those places until everyone starts working at that, then look for something else," the senior DEA official told Jane's.

Extraditions to the US

CMF vessels document and then dispose of drugs at sea because they do not have a legal basis to arrest drug traffickers in international waters. In 2014, law enforcement seized several vessels in the territorial waters of Kenya and Tanzania, allowing for crews to be arrested by national law enforcement. Working through the legal process provides a key source of information for international efforts to understand and degrade these networks. For example, the DEA was significantly involved in the Al-Noor case. The senior DEA official told Jane's, "We learnt more from that seizure than the others combined."

Limited access to Tanzania has hampered international access to cases, raising concerns about the level of detail that is being gathered, added the senior DEA official. The DEA is able to aggressively target drug traffickers using counter-narcotics legislation if there is a trafficking link to
the United States. Narco-terrorism laws can be used if there is support to groups such as the Taliban, even if the drugs are not destined to the US.

Substances found on board a dhow are pictured. No heroin was found, though days later HMAS Melbourne made two large heroin seizures. The track to the southeast of the Makran Coast first became apparent in 2014, when 24 kg of heroin was seized from a dhow in Maldives. (Joanna Wright)

Two examples where cases have been built against heroin trafficking networks have exposed nexuses with other types of drugs and manufacturing interests. In May 2017, Ali Khatib Haji Hassan (alias Shkuba) and two associates were extradited from Tanzania to the US. No details of any related court proceedings or any plea on the part of the three men have been reported.

In 2016, the US Department of Treasury sanctioned Hassan and the "Hassan Drug Trafficking Organization", stating that they had obtained "multi-tonne quantities of heroin from sources in Southwest Asia as well as multi-tonne quantities of cocaine from South American suppliers". The sanctions notice claimed that Hassan had operated since at least 2006, and that destinations targeted with the network's heroin shipments included China, Europe, and the US. The network also shipped cocaine via hubs in East Africa to target destinations in China and Europe, according to the statement.

In January 2017, four members of the 'Akasha' network were extradited from Kenya to the US. The US Department of Justice confirmed their arrival in the US, but the court case against them has yet to begin and none of the four men appear to have entered a plea. Per the indictment, the network was involved in heroin and methamphetamine trafficking.

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Conclusion

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There has not been a large heroin seizure made onshore or in the territorial waters of Kenya and Tanzania since 2014, even though there have been no indications that trafficking to the seaboard of East Africa has reduced.

There is also a serious information gap concerning the onwards movement of large heroin consignments. Jayasekara told Jane’s that the lack of seizures makes it difficult to map onwards routes and identify trafficking methodology. He added, "Is it containerised in Mombasa, does it go to Uganda and then Abuja? We really don't know and that is the same reason we didn't know the Southern Route existed in this magnitude, until CMF made seizures."

Access is crucial for tackling the higher levels of trafficking networks and countering onwards routes. The senior DEA official told Jane’s, "The big organisations would transship from Tanzania onto another ship, and send it somewhere. But without having access into Tanzania … [we] haven't been able to close the loop on that."

A number of heroin seizures have been made on overland routes, particularly on routes between Tanzania and Kenya, and on the border between Mozambique and South Africa. Nevertheless, these tend to be small, involving shipments in the tens of kilogrammes or less, and so only account for a small percentage of the drugs being landed. Heroin is also smuggled into the US by the "traditional African method of using couriers - not bulk, but it adds up in the long term", said the senior DEA official.

The UK National Crime Agency highlighted the role of South Africa as a hub, in the National Strategic Assessment of Serious and Organised Crime 2017, released in June the same year. The report noted, "The Indian Ocean via East Africa remains significant, with South Africa providing a key staging post to Europe and UK."

The lack of annual reporting of drug seizures from member states to the UN is also a problem, with details missing even when drugs have been interdicted. Major errors in reporting are also an issue. For example, Kenya submitted a report for 2014 including details from the Al-Noor case, but included a measurement for the contents of the tanks that contained the diluted heroin, implying that nearly 6 tonnes of a heroin substance was seized. Although the report noted that the heroin was mixed with fuel and water, it was easily misinterpreted as a multi-tonne seizure.

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COMBINED TASK FORCE-150

The CTF-150 is one of three task forces operating under the CMF, with a mission to "promote maritime security in order to counter terrorist acts and related illegal activities, which terrorists use to fund or conceal their movements". The other task forces have missions to counter piracy and promote security in the Gulf. Not all states contributing to the CMF are involved in counter-narcotics work. Rear Adm Lebas said, "Each combined task force has its own assets, but there is a lot of synergy between task forces and transfer of assets is possible for tactical reach." Rear Adm Lebas told Jane's that the taskforce had benefitted from coverage provided by an increase in maritime patrol aircraft (MPAs), some deployed specifically for counter-narcotics tasks. Drug trafficking on wooden dhows across the Indian Ocean is seasonal, but during peak times in some years there have been gaps in the availability of CMF assets capable of carrying out seizures. Rear Adm Lebas confirmed that there is now increased involvement during the peak times. He added, "What we tried to do is not spread assets in a wide area, the key point is not only the force flow by itself ... but it is also the way to co-ordinate, to deliver an organised effort with MPAs and frigates." Speaking to Jane’s, Rear Adm Lebas described how CTF-150 had moved on from the narrow focus of its early days of seeking to intercept terrorists and funding being transferred at sea, to a broader effort to increase security in the region.

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