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**Africa on the Global Drug Trafficking Map:
From Transit Corridor to Emerging Market**



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INTRODUCTION

The seizure in September 2026 of nearly 3.9 tonnes of cocaine at the northern French port of Dunkirk has again placed Ghana, and West Africa, at the centre of an uncomfortable question: where does Africa sit in the changing global illicit drug trade? French customs found the cocaine concealed in a container carrying plastic waste that had arrived from Ghana. ^[OBJ] The shipment was reportedly destined partly for Antwerp, Belgium, a major European entry point for cocaine. French authorities estimated its street value at about €225 million, or approximately US\$261 million (Reuters, 2026).

The significance lies in the route. Cocaine is not produced in Ghana; its principal production centres are in South America. Yet a shipment could cross the Atlantic through a Ghanaian maritime gateway and arrive in Europe. For decades, Africa was viewed principally as a transit zone through which drugs moved towards lucrative consumer markets. That description is no longer sufficient. Africa remains a transit region, but it is also becoming a destination market, while trafficking routes diversify, criminal networks become more sophisticated, and traffickers adapt to enforcement.

The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) estimates that 74 million people in Africa used drugs in 2024, equivalent to 8.6 per cent of the population aged 15–64. Africa accounted for 61 per cent of global cannabis seizures in 2024 and 60 per cent of pharmaceutical opioids seized worldwide during 2020–2024. West Africa remains significant for cocaine trafficking, while East Africa has become increasingly important for heroin (UNODC, 2026). Africa therefore serves several roles simultaneously: source, transit corridor, consumer market, and strategic operating environment for transnational criminal organisations.

A GLOBAL MARKET IN EXPANSION

The Dunkirk seizure must be viewed against the expansion of the international drug market. The UNODC's World Drug Report 2026 estimates that 331 million people worldwide used drugs in 2024, representing 6.2 per cent of the global population aged 15–64 and a 34 per cent increase over a decade. UNODC also identifies a genuine rise in drug availability and prevalence (UNODC, 2026).

Cocaine is particularly significant. About 25 million people used cocaine in 2024, 38 per cent more than a decade earlier, while potential cocaine manufacture reached about 4,100 tonnes, more than four times the 2014 low (UNODC, 2026). Expanding supply has encouraged trafficking networks to diversify routes, shipment sizes, concealment methods and ports.

Antwerp, Rotterdam and Hamburg have long been important gateways, but by 2024 seizures were shifting towards France, Portugal and Spain, with smaller ports also gaining

importance (UNODC, 2026). The Dunkirk seizure therefore fits a broader pattern of route diversification.

AFRICA'S STRATEGIC POSITION

West Africa's geography places it between South American production centres and European markets. Its long coastline, expanding ports, high volumes of legitimate cargo and uneven capacity to monitor borders and supply chains create opportunities for organised crime.

Modern trafficking is rarely a simple smuggling operation. Large-scale networks can involve financiers, brokers, transporters, importers, exporters, corrupt insiders and logistics specialists. Maritime transport is particularly important for bulk shipments, and seizures of more than one tonne from vessels and containers are relatively common (UNODC, 2026). Containers offer concealment within legitimate cargo and opportunities to exploit weaknesses in cargo handling or information systems.

The Ghana shipment demonstrates the problem: cocaine was concealed in a container carrying plastic waste. The challenge for authorities is therefore not to inspect every container, which would cripple trade, but to identify high-risk consignments through intelligence, risk profiling, information-sharing and investigations into the people and companies behind shipments.

WEST AFRICA: THE COCAINE CORRIDOR

West Africa has long been recognised as an important transit region for cocaine moving from South America towards Europe. UNODC reports that some cocaine destined for Europe continues to flow through West and Central Africa and North Africa, with seizure data since 2019 indicating a strong resurgence of the West and Central African route (UNODC, 2026).

The Dunkirk case demonstrates the international nature of the supply chain. French authorities were investigating a criminal network believed to be behind the shipment. In Ghana, the Narcotics Control Commission (NACOC) arrested three suspects whom it said were allegedly representing or facilitating activities in Ghana linked to Dutch fugitive Jos Leijdekkers, known as “Bolle Jos” (NACOC, 2026). NACOC said the suspects were assisting investigators and stressed that Ghana would not become a haven, transit point or operational base for international trafficking organisations (NACOC, 2026).

Drug trafficking also requires money, people, logistics and contacts. A shipment can cross several jurisdictions while financing, loading, transport and retrieval are handled by different actors. Consequently, a seizure in France can generate investigative leads in Ghana, Belgium, the Netherlands and South America.

GHANA AND MARITIME SECURITY: WHAT HAPPENED?

For Ghana, the Dunkirk seizure places maritime infrastructure under renewed scrutiny. Ghana is a commercial and maritime hub on the Gulf of Guinea, with ports handling manufactured goods, agricultural products, industrial materials and waste. These legitimate flows create economic opportunity but can also provide cover for illicit consignments.

In March 2025, more than 3.3 tonnes of cocaine concealed beneath sand and reportedly travelling from Takoradi to Accra were intercepted, with an estimated street value exceeding US\$350 million (Daily Graphic, 2026). Another consignment involving about 120 slabs of cocaine, valued at approximately US\$150 million, was intercepted along the Takoradi-Cape Coast highway (Myjoyline.com, 2025). In June 2026, NACOC investigated the seizure in Australia of about 320 kilograms of methamphetamine allegedly shipped from Ghana. In August 2026, authorities arrested three people over an alleged attempt to conceal 869 slabs of suspected cocaine in bags of gari and cassava powder in Tema, reportedly involving a Dutch national, a transporter and a clearing agent, with an estimated street value of US\$6.9 million (Daily Graphic, 2026).

Seizures measure what authorities detect, not everything traffickers move. Nevertheless, repeated large seizures suggest that Ghanaian territory, ports, logistics networks or commercial relationships may be useful to trafficking organisations.

What can be learned from the Dunkirk case is therefore as important as the seizure itself. The central intelligence questions are not simply “Who was caught?” but “How did the shipment enter the system, who enabled it, who financed it, who knew about it, and where did the intelligence fail?” NACOC's reported cooperation with French authorities to obtain information on how the shipment left Ghana, identify those involved, and work with the Ghana Navy and Marine Police on coastal surveillance points in the right direction (Graphic, 2026).

AN INTELLIGENCE- AND SECURITY-LED RESPONSE

Firstly, Ghana needs stronger intelligence fusion. NACOC, Customs, Police, Navy, Marine Police, port-security authorities and relevant financial and regulatory institutions should be able to connect cargo, vessel, company, individual and financial intelligence. International partners, especially European and West African counterparts, should contribute timely information.

Also, port security should become more intelligence-led and risk-based. The issue is improving container selection. High-risk shipments can be identified through anomalies involving consignors, consignees, cargo descriptions, routing, documentation, ownership

structures and previous intelligence. Container scanning, canine capabilities and targeted physical searches should complement human intelligence and analytical work.

Additionally, Ghana should strengthen investigations into the networks behind seizures. Every major seizure should trigger parallel inquiries into cargo, shipping documentation, companies, clearing agents, financiers, beneficial owners and logistics chains. Where evidence permits, investigations should seek to dismantle networks rather than simply arrest couriers. Stronger financial intelligence and systematic asset tracing are therefore essential.

Furthermore, anti-corruption controls are critical. The March arrest of nine public officers, including five Customs officials, over alleged involvement in an undeclared Tramadol consignment at Tema Port, alongside officers reportedly from NACOC, Port Security, the Energy Commission and the Ghana Standards Authority, illustrates the risk of insider facilitation (Daily Graphic, 2026). Vetting, rotation in sensitive posts, appropriate financial scrutiny, whistle-blower protection, audit trails and credible disciplinary and criminal proceedings can reduce this vulnerability.

Increasingly, Ghana should strengthen maritime domain awareness. Intelligence from ports, the Navy, Marine Police, Customs and international maritime partners should be integrated to identify suspicious vessels, movements and patterns. NACOC's reported work with the Ghana Navy and Marine Police is therefore an important component of a broader security architecture (Daily Graphic, 2026).

Intelligence must also extend into the digital and financial domains. Criminal groups increasingly use encrypted communications, social media and emerging technologies. UNODC reports that law-enforcement operations against encrypted systems such as EncroChat, Sky ECC and Ghost have produced intelligence leading to arrests and prosecutions (UNODC, 2026). Social media may also matter more than the dark web for retail distribution: among a non-representative European sample surveyed in 2024, 19 per cent reported purchasing drugs through social media compared with 4 per cent through the dark web (UNODC, 2026). Ghanaian agencies therefore need lawful digital-investigation capabilities and trained analysts, supported by appropriate judicial oversight.

Lastly, regional cooperation is indispensable. Traffickers exploit borders, so African security institutions need mechanisms for sharing intelligence, conducting coordinated investigations and tracing assets across jurisdictions. Cooperation with European and South American authorities is equally important because the supply chain crosses continents. Ghana should ensure that intelligence received after a European seizure is rapidly converted into investigative leads locally.

BEYOND COCAINE: THE WIDER AFRICAN CHALLENGE

Africa's drug problem is larger than cocaine. Cannabis remains the most widely used drug globally, and Africa accounted for 61 per cent of global cannabis seizures in 2024. About 7.5 per cent of Africans aged 15–64 used cannabis in 2024, with prevalence around 10 per cent in Southern Africa and West and Central Africa (UNODC, 2026). Unlike cocaine, cannabis is extensively cultivated within Africa, combining domestic production, regional trafficking and international flows.

Pharmaceutical opioids present another major challenge. Africa accounted for 60 per cent of global pharmaceutical-opioid seizures during 2020–2024, including 55 per cent of codeine seizures and 97 per cent of tramadol seizures (UNODC, 2026). West and Central Africa are particularly affected by non-medical tramadol and codeine use. Ghana's seizure of about five million Tramadol tablets, valued at an estimated GH¢100 million, following an intelligence-led operation at Accra International Airport, illustrates the scale of the problem (Daily Graphic, 2026).

East Africa has become increasingly important for heroin. Around one-fifth of global heroin seizures were made in Africa in 2023 and 2024, compared with only 2 per cent in 2020, reflecting the growing southern route from Afghanistan (UNODC, 2026). Meanwhile, synthetic drugs and mixtures such as “kush” are creating new challenges. Seizures of synthetic cannabinoids increased rapidly in West and Central Africa between 2021 and 2024, while mixtures such as “nyaope”, “kadhafi” and “kush” may contain dangerous substances, including potent nitazene opioids (UNODC, 2026).

Africa's emergence as a consumer market is particularly important. UNODC estimates 74 million African drug users in 2024 (UNODC, 2026). Increased trafficking can facilitate domestic markets, meaning a transit route can gradually become a consumption route. The danger is that trafficking infrastructure and local networks can support expanding domestic markets.

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Seizure figures can obscure the public-health dimension. Globally, 331 million people used drugs in 2024, including an estimated 256 million cannabis users, 63 million opioid users, 32 million amphetamine users and 25 million cocaine users (UNODC, 2026). About 34 per cent of people receiving treatment for drug-use disorders in Africa are under 25, with cannabis and opioid disorders accounting for much treatment demand (UNODC, 2026).

Security policy must therefore operate alongside prevention, treatment, rehabilitation, mental-health services and evidence-based public education. West and Central Africa also face a paradox: while illicit pharmaceutical opioids circulate widely, access to essential controlled medicines for legitimate pain management remains extremely low. In 2024, the subregion had an average of only 25 standard daily doses of internationally controlled medicines for pain management and palliative care per million people, the lowest availability among the world's subregions (UNODC, 2026).

CONCLUSION: PROTECTING GHANA AND AFRICA'S REPUTATION

The Dunkirk seizure is evidence of a transnational criminal economy capable of exploiting legitimate trade, international logistics and institutional vulnerabilities.

For Ghana, the immediate priority is to establish how almost four tonnes of cocaine could leave its shores concealed in legitimate cargo, identify every relevant actor, trace the money and close the vulnerabilities that enabled the shipment. For Africa, the strategic priority is to prevent individual trafficking corridors from becoming entrenched criminal ecosystems.

That requires intelligence fusion, risk-based port security, maritime surveillance, financial investigations, anti-corruption measures, digital capabilities, regional information-sharing and sustained cooperation with European and South American partners. It also requires public-health investment so that enforcement does not address supply while ignoring demand and harm.

The objective should be to prevent criminal networks from using African territory, institutions and markets as components of their business model. The Dunkirk case simply shows that national borders alone cannot contain a network that spans continents. Ghana and its partners therefore need a response that is equally connected, intelligence-led and preventive. Africa is no longer merely on the route; it is increasingly part of the map. The task now is to ensure that it is not captured by the networks operating across that map.

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