

International

'Breaking Bad' Nigeria? Fear of a new narco-state

Drug trafficking is nothing new to Nigeria

OBINUGWU: In the early hours of a humid November morning, a 16-car convoy rolled into Obinugwu village in southeast Nigeria and stopped outside the iron gates of a non-descript house. More than 50 drug enforcement officials crept through the compound and surrounded the methamphetamine lab hidden by overgrown jungle behind the property.

The bust happened just before daybreak. Dozens were arrested, including the suspected kingpin at his mansion in the nearby city of Owerri. "It took one year of surveillance," a National Drug Law Enforcement Agency (NDLEA) officer, who was involved in the raid, told AFP. "They were all sleeping. We took them by surprise." Inside the lab there was 78 kilograms of meth — a drug as notorious for its exhilarating highs as its life-destroying, addictive lows. But the haul, worth tens of thousands of dollars, was not for domestic consumption.

Instead, it was probably destined for South Africa and Asia, investigators said. Drug trafficking is nothing new to Nigeria, which has long been a transit point for cocaine and heroin going to Europe and North America. The difference is that now Nigerians are producing the drugs. With vast quantities of chemicals entering the country, porous borders and corrupt law enforcement, Nigeria is an ideal place to produce the drug.

Since the country's first meth lab was discovered in 2011, authorities have found 14 more producing mass quantities of the stimulant, while seizures of the drug have jumped

from 177 kilos in 2012 to 1,363 kilos in 2016. "It (meth production) is on the increase, significantly on the increase. Meth today is a serious threat to Nigeria," said Sunday Zirangey, NDLEA Special Enforcement Team commander. "If this continues, Nigeria may turn into a narco-state."

Glen Prichard, Nigeria project coordinator with the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, agreed. "Nigeria is potentially following the same footsteps as Mexico that led to instability, organised crime and an infiltrated government," he added.

Church massacre

Reliable data on meth production in Nigeria is hard to come by and seizures are small compared with global giants Mexico and Myanmar. But evidence on the ground points to a much larger industry. Nigeria's estimated need for the stimulant ephedrine, which is used as a medical decongestant, is 771 kilos, according to a US State Department report on international narcotics.

Yet Nigeria imports over eight tons a year, with the difference suspected of either being used to produce meth or trafficked elsewhere. Despite the risks of arrest and even execution for traffickers in Asia, the profits are irresistible in a country where the minimum wage is just 18,000 naira (\$50, 44 euros) a month.

A kilo of meth sells for \$3,500 on the streets of Lagos but by the time it reaches South Africa it is worth \$12,000 and \$150,000 in Japan — and the stakes are rising. Last year,



National Drug Law Enforcement Agency (NDLEA) officials stand on guard, securing the perimeter around a busted clandestine methamphetamine lab on November 22, 2018 in Obinugwu village in southeast Nigeria. - AFP

the fight for control of the lucrative South African market more than 6,000 kilometers away came to St Philip's Parish in Ozubulu, a village in the southeast Nigerian state of Anambra.

Thirteen people were shot dead in an apparent reprisal attack between Nigerian drug barons operating in Johannesburg. Piles of

trash line the dirt road leading to Ozubulu, where an endless stream of people hawk everything from adulterated fuel to plastic flip-flops. But among the grinding poverty are huge villas with grand columns and intricate wrought iron gates — glaring anomalies in a region with epileptic power and disintegrating roads. — AFP

Albania expels Iranian diplomats for 'harming security'

TIRANA: Albania said Wednesday it has expelled two Iranian diplomats for security reasons, with US officials identifying one as the ambassador and saying the pair plotted terrorist attacks in the Balkan country. The diplomats were suspected of "involvement in activities that harm the country's security," Albania's Foreign Ministry's spokeswoman Edlira Prendi told reporters, adding that the decision was taken in consultation with other countries.

She declined to provide the diplomats' names or elaborate on the nature of their alleged offence. But in a statement welcoming the move, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo described the diplomats as "two Iranian agents who plotted terrorist attacks

in Albania." US National Security Adviser John Bolton also identified one of the diplomats as the ambassador.

"Prime Minister Edi Rama of Albania just expelled the Iranian ambassador, signaling to Iran's leaders that their support for terrorism will not be tolerated," Bolton wrote on Twitter. He added: "We stand with PM Rama and the Albanian people as they stand up to Iran's reckless behavior in Europe and across the globe." An Albanian TV station, Top Channel, reported that the Iranians were suspected of links to an alleged plot to attack a 2016 World Cup match between Albania and Israel.

After the match some 20 people were arrested in Albania and Kosovo in connection with the alleged plot. At the request of US authorities and the UN in 2013, Albania agreed to take in some 3,000 members of Iranian opposition group known as The People's Mujahedin Organisation of Iran (PMOI). Their relocation from a camp in Iraq was completed in 2016 when the last 280 people left for Albania. They currently live in a compound in the northwest of the country. — AFP

France boosts pay for police in wake of 'yellow vest' protests

PARIS: The French government will give police officers a long-sought raise after a strike called in the wake of the "yellow vest" anti-government protests, which have strained security forces already on high alert after years of jihadist terror attacks. The accord was announced just before midnight Wednesday by unions after two days of talks with officials, and a one-day strike which saw police stations virtually shut as officers carried out only emergency duties.

They have complained of exhausting hours of patrols and chronic under-investment in equipment which have stretched departments to the breaking point and taken a heavy toll on the force. Last month an officer who led an "angry police movement", which emerged after the 2016 fire-bombing of a squad car with two officers inside, was found dead at her home in a suspected suicide. For many officers, the violent clashes with ri-

oting "yellow vest" protesters in Paris and other cities on recent Saturdays, and the huge manhunt for the gunman who attacked a Christmas market in Strasbourg last week, were the final straw. "This agreement... paves the way for improved and upgraded working conditions and pay for officers," Interior Minister Christophe Castaner said in a statement.

Union officials said that starting next year average monthly pay will be gradually boosted by 120 euros (\$137) a month, and up to 150 euros a month for senior ranks. The government will also begin negotiations on the huge backlog of overtime pay, with unions saying they are owed a collective 275 million euros. With the pay hikes, the government said a planned 300-euro bonus for officers would now be reserved only for administrative employees and technicians. "It's what we were looking for, we wanted an immediate boost to spending power," said Yves Lefebvre of the Unite-SGP Police union after Wednesday's talks.

Police were emboldened in their demands after the government announced a 10-billion-euro package of financial relief for low-income households to quell the "yellow vest" protests which have rocked France over the past month. The measures include a rise in the minimum wage, tax relief for pensioners and tax-free overtime pay for workers. The total cost of the police pay increases was not disclosed. — AFP