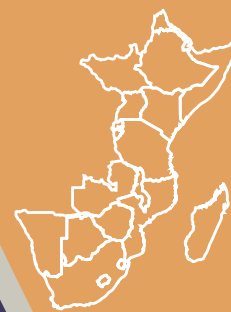


CIVIL SOCIETY OBSERVATORY OF ILLICIT ECONOMIES IN EASTERN AND SOUTHERN AFRICA



RISK BULLETIN

SUMMARY HIGHLIGHTS

1. The fight against illegal gold mining in South Africa faces new (and old) challenges.

As gold prices soar in the post-pandemic world economy, there are concerns that illegal mining activity in South Africa may be rising sharply. Tackling such a surge may prove difficult, given the history of illegal mining in the country. Sources in the industry have described how they face a number of challenges, including deteriorating law-enforcement capacity, endemic corruption and community support for the illegal miners. In this context, illegal miners appear set to remain an influential part of the criminal landscape in South Africa.

2. Is Afghanistan a new source for methamphetamine in eastern and southern Africa?

Production of methamphetamine in Afghanistan has boomed in the past three years, thanks to a combination of poor opium harvests for heroin, meth producers moving out of Iran into Afghanistan following an Iranian crackdown, and the discovery of a new and cheaper way of producing key meth precursors. However, it is still largely unknown to which market these massive volumes of meth are destined. Recent seizures of heroin and methamphetamine, and information from GI-TOC research into meth markets in eastern and southern Africa, suggest that some of this new influx of Afghan meth is being trafficked into Africa.

3. Somaliland: East Africa's largest conduit for cheetah trafficking to the Gulf.

A recent spate of cheetah seizures in Somaliland has shown that the illicit demand for these animals remains strong. Cheetahs are highly prized as exotic pets in the Gulf states, and in supplying this market, traffickers have heavily impacted local cheetah populations in Africa, a situation compounded by the fact that many animals die on route. Despite international and domestic prohibitions against the trade, cheetahs remain at high risk.

4. Kenya's coffee industry is facing a resurgence in organized thefts.

Kenya's world-famous coffee industry has, for the past decade, been targeted by armed gangs of thieves who carry out orchestrated, large-scale heists of the produce. A recent spate of thefts suggest the problem might be having a resurgence following a previous peak in 2011. Coffee farmers have reported how some thefts have turned violent, and farmers' cooperatives have resorted to tightening security to protect their livelihoods. There are suggestions that the so-called 'coffee cartels' are protected by influential figures in politics, business and the police.

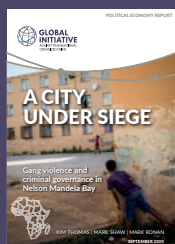


A YEAR OF MONITORING ORGANIZED CRIME

The GI-TOC's Civil Society Observatory of Illicit Economies in East and Southern Africa has been active for one full year. In this time, we have reported on political assassinations in South Africa, analyzed illegal payments for arms shipments in Somalia, used innovative new methods to investigate heroin markets across East Africa, and much more besides. Over the coming months, our monthly Risk Bulletins and research reports will continue to track new developments in organized crime across the region.



COMING SOON:



A CITY UNDER SIEGE

Gang violence and criminal governance in Nelson Mandela Bay

KIM THOMAS | MARK SHAW | MARK RONAN



WHEN THE SMOKE CLEARS

The ban on tobacco products in South Africa during COVID-19

MICHAEL MCLAGGAN



THE POLITICS OF CRIME

Kenya's gang phenomenon

SIMONE HAYSOM | KEN OPALA

FIGURE 1 Publications of the Observatory of Illicit Economies in Eastern and Southern Africa

ABOUT THIS ISSUE

This 12th issue of the Risk Bulletin of Illicit Economies in Eastern and Southern Africa marks one full year in which our Observatory of Illicit Economies has been closely monitoring trends in organized crime and illegal trade across the region. In earlier iterations of this Bulletin, we have provided analysis of the conflict in northern Mozambique and how criminal markets have been implicated in this conflict; extensively monitored illegal drug markets across the region; and drawn attention to new ways in which organized crime activity is encroaching on legal trade and the rule of law, for example in markets for otherwise legal goods, such as fuel and agricultural products.

Our network of analysts and researchers are working on a range of upcoming research papers and conducting pricing studies for key commodities traded illegally across the region. The findings of our heroin pricing study have been published in the new report 'A shallow flood: The diffusion of heroin in eastern and southern Africa', and will be followed with studies on gold, charcoal, wildlife products and firearms, among others. Upcoming research papers will also focus on drug trafficking in the Indian Ocean island states, the relationships between gangs and political power in Kenya, and gang violence and criminal governance in Nelson Mandela Bay, South Africa.

Over the past year, the coronavirus pandemic has been the major global shift that has impacted on organized crime in the region. We have witnessed how gangs in South Africa and Kenya have grown more powerful in the chaos of lockdown restrictions, and documented how children have become more vulnerable to recruitment into gangs. Fear of the pandemic disrupted and even reversed decades-old human-smuggling routes between the Republic of the Comoros and Mayotte, in an unprecedented shift. The scramble for medical provisions opened up opportunities for the illegal diversion of medical donations and corrupt siphoning of funds earmarked for COVID-19 response.

Going forward, we will aim to continue and expand our coverage of organized crime across the region. In this issue, we report on four very different illegal markets, distinct in both the commodities and the geographies involved: from 'zama zamas' (illegal gold miners operating in South Africa), to violent and organized heists in Kenya's coffee industry. We also document the ongoing trend of cheetah trafficking via Somaliland, primarily to the Gulf States, and the emergence of Afghan-produced methamphetamine being trafficked along routes used for trafficking heroin.

1. The fight against illegal gold mining in South Africa faces new (and old) challenges.

Illegal gold mining has been on the rise for the past decade in South Africa. Worsening ore grades, rising costs (as shafts have been sunk ever deeper), bouts of labour and social unrest and falling investment in new mines have all contributed to a sharp decline in the gold mining sector. Widespread layoffs saw the number of workers in the industry fall from 190 000 in 2018 to just 95 000 in 2019.¹

As large mining operations have shuttered, the abandoned shafts have become ready targets for growing numbers of illegal miners. Commonly referred to as 'zama zamas' – a Zulu term that roughly translates as 'take a chance' – many are from neighbouring countries such as Lesotho, eSwatini, Mozambique and Zimbabwe who have often previously worked in the mines.

Zama zamas will often spend months underground without surfacing and depend heavily on outside support for food and other necessities. It is arduous and dangerous work. Some carry pistols, shotguns and semi-automatic weapons to protect themselves from rival gangs of miners.²

'The length of time they spend underground depends on the depth of the mine and access to it,' explained Lyle Pienaar, an executive for risk and security at Pan African Resources, a mid-tier gold producer. He continued:

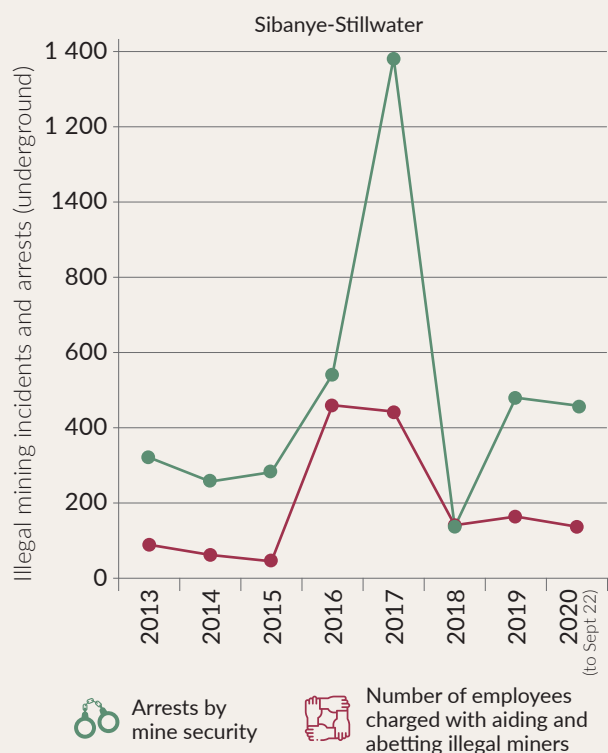
We had one guy who told us when he came up that he had been underground for up to 18 months. In deeper mines, they spend months underground, tapping into the mine's electricity supply. And they'll take everything down with them: food, booze, fridges, little DVD players, mining drills, *phendukas* [crushers]. Biltong [a dried cured meat] is hugely popular. It is almost a staple food. Often it is boiled with water to make a soup. I know of a number of butchers near mines that sell thousands of dollars' worth of the stuff every month.³ In some cases, there is literally an underground economy where gold is sold to corrupt mining staff who then take it up and smuggle it out above ground. Conversely, money is smuggled back down.

Photographs of the illegal miners arrested taken as they emerge from the mines attest to the physical effects of spending months underground, manifested in a ghostly pallor around the eyes.

In 2017, Sibanye-Stillwater (Sibanye), one of South Africa's largest gold producers, began attempting to clear illegal miners from its mines through its operation named Zero Zama,⁴ resulting in 1 400 arrests carried out by mine security. By Sibanye's own assessment, a decrease in arrests the following year testified to the success of this operation.⁵



A group of suspected illegal miners armed with firearms. There are reportedly violent clashes between illegal mining groups which have resulted in four deaths in 2020. PHOTO: Supplied



A group of suspected illegal miners sit in a jail cell after being arrested by mine security, 2020. PHOTO: Supplied

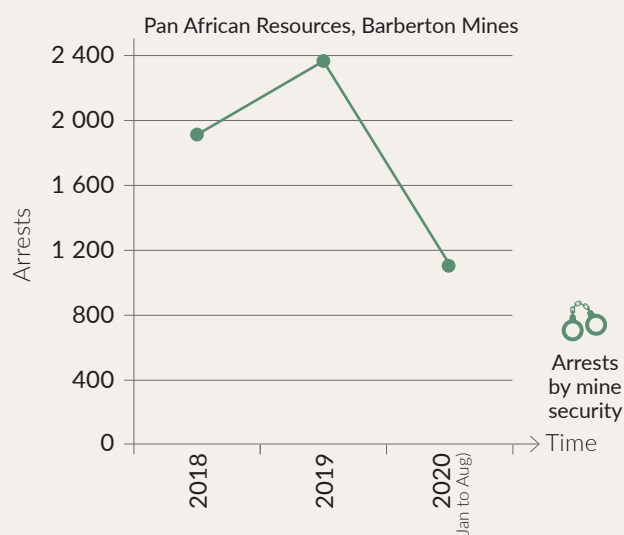
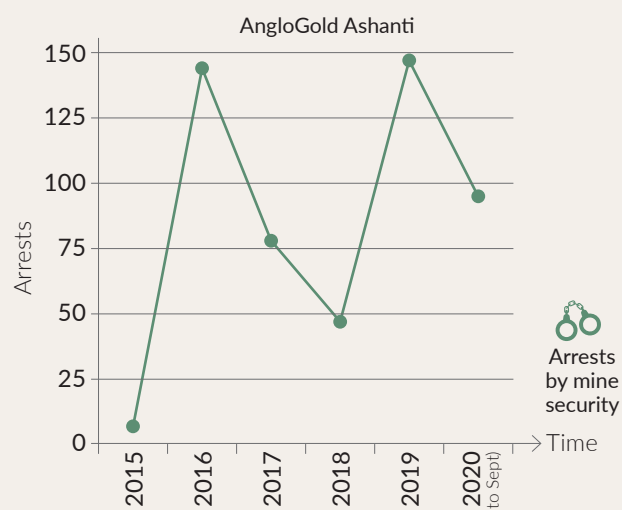
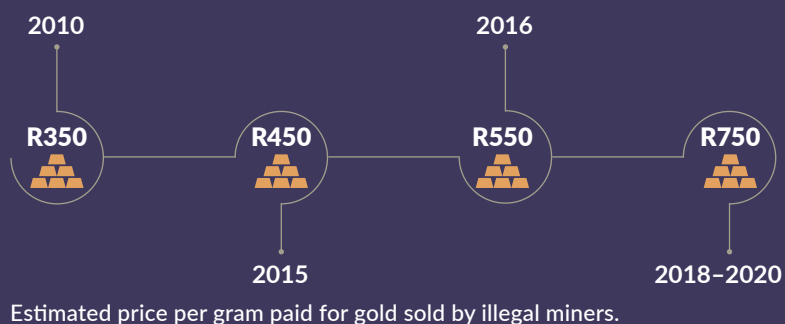


FIGURE 2 These graphs represent data shared by three mining companies in South Africa: Sibanye-Stillwater and AngloGold Ashanti are two of the largest gold mining operators in South Africa, while Pan African Resources is a mid-tier mining company. While these do not represent the entirety of illegal activity in the gold mining sector in South Africa, collectively the data demonstrates the scale of the issue.



7 tonnes

According to The Minerals Council, South Africa, an estimated 7 tonnes of gold is mined illegally in South Africa every year.

However, in late 2018, Sibanye's gold operations were hit hard by a strike by the Association of Mineworkers and Construction Union. The strike, which lasted for five months until April 2019, also saw violence erupt between rival miners' unions.⁶ The halt in operations provided an opportunity for illegal miners. 'The 2018 strike caused a bit of a setback to us. The illegal miners took the gap to start going back underground which put us on the back foot,' said Nash Lutchman, head of protection services at Sibanye.⁷

CORRUPTION AND COLLUSION

The challenge to tackling illegal mining goes beyond labour disputes. Over the past decade, criminal networks involved in illegal mining have exploited the decline in the state's law-enforcement capacity and rise in corruption that largely took place during the tenure of former President Jacob Zuma to grow in sophistication and influence.

'What happened during the Zuma years was that there was a systematic disempowering and dismantling of state organs such as the National Prosecuting Authority and eroding expertise in serious economic offences and metals-related offences, which gave the syndicates the wind in their sails,' says Lutchman. 'They have always been sophisticated and what the Zuma years did was make them better. This is a big driver behind illegal mining activity.'

To fill the void left by police, mining companies have had to establish their own parallel investigative capacity. 'We can't go to the local police station near a mine with information about syndicate activity because of corruption,' says Pienaar. He continues:

The police have warned us about this themselves. Instead, we have handed over a lot of information to the Directorate for Priority Crime Investigation, Crime Intelligence, Provincial and National police structures. But nothing ever transpires and you can literally see the syndicates getting bigger and bigger and starting to legitimize themselves, laundering money into lodges, taxi businesses, liquor stores and guest houses.

At one of our mines we have arrested more than 4 000 illegal miners in the last two years. We account for about 85% of the crime statistics at that police station. But not a single detective or police vehicle has been assigned to deal with this. We have to gather the evidence, we write the police docket, and make a copy in case it goes missing, we have to transport the people we have arrested to the police station because the police won't come and fetch them. Then we have to track the dockets and the prosecution.



- ◀ Three suspected illegal miners equipped with flashlights in a mineshaft, 2020.
- ▼ Suspected illegal miners attempt to access a blocked-off area of a mineshaft deep underground. South Africa has some of the deepest gold mines in the world, some reaching over 3 kilometres deep. Even at this level, mine security have installed surveillance cameras to monitor illegal activity. PHOTOS: Supplied



Police data for illegal mining offences is not available because there is no specific law forbidding the activity, according to Louis Nel, a security consultant and analyst. People can be charged for illegal possession of gold-bearing material, but according to Nel, this route is seldom taken as it requires lab work which can take months or even years. Typically, those involved in illegal mining are charged with trespassing or immigration offences.⁸

‘The criminal justice system treats it as a misdemeanor,’ says Pienaar. ‘Even if they are caught with tools, generators, mining equipment going down into a mine, it is trespassing. These cases are not treated as organized crime cases and they should be. These are people who are part of a syndicate.’ Reportedly, those in control of the syndicates pay for legal representation for miners who are arrested, suggesting that illegal mining is highly organized.

Corruption within the mining industry has also had a damaging effect on efforts to root out illegal miners and, in some ways, poses a much bigger long-term threat. Sibanye’s data shows that the number of its employees or contractors charged with aiding and abetting illegal miners rose from 141 in 2018 to 184 last year.⁹ So far this year, 137 of the company’s staff have been arrested.¹⁰

COMMUNITIES RALLY TO SUPPORT THE ZAMA ZAMAS

Aside from the lack of effective policing and prevalence of rampant corruption, Pienaar argues that the criminal economy created by illegal mining has become deeply entrenched in communities around mines, and as a result, the ‘neighbourhoods that depend on the illegal mining economy will support it 100 per cent’.

This was demonstrated when in 2017 Sibanye attempted to cut off supplies to illegal miners underground and force them to the surface at its Cooke operation, 50 kilometres west of Johannesburg. The company arrested several employees suspected of collusion with the zama zamas and began providing meals for its employees before and after shifts, thereby preventing them from smuggling food down to the illegal miners. ‘The fact that we restricted supplies of food initially really throttled the illegal mining activities,’ says Lutchman.

But Sibanye’s efforts triggered a strike among its employees and an angry community response. ‘It related to the kind of investment the illegal mining syndicates were doing in the communities around the Cooke operation,’ Lutchman said. ‘They were providing food parcels, they were stocking libraries, stocking clinics, removing waste and providing water tanks. They were seen as bringing benefits to the community. They were seen to be delivering services whereas the government wasn’t.’

MINING UNDER AND AFTER LOCKDOWN

The ‘hard lockdown’ imposed by the South African government from 27 March 2020 brought mining operations to an abrupt halt across the country, but they were gradually allowed to restart in May as South Africa relaxed its restrictions.

Sources with links to zama zamas in Free State province described the lockdown as a double-edged sword for the illegal miners. While the shutdown allowed them to continue mining relatively undisturbed, it also deprived them of vital sources of support from corrupt mine employees above ground. Without an ability to communicate with the surface, many zama zamas would have been oblivious to the pandemic raging on the surface until they were literally starved out of the mines. ‘Some of the guys who were underground were forced to come out because they could not get their supplies. This happened at Harmony and Sibanye mines in the Free State,’ a mining industry source said.¹¹

However, global gold prices have soared during the pandemic – topping US\$2 000 an ounce for the first time – as traders look for secure investment options amid economic uncertainty precipitated by the pandemic.¹² There are concerns that syndicates are on a recruiting drive to send more illegal miners underground. According to Sibanye’s Lutchman: ‘We just thwarted an attempt the other day [16 September] at Driefontein mine where they tried to get 15 or 18 Zamas underground. There are greater numbers, they are more brazen, so what we are thinking is that the prices at the moment mean the syndicates are trying to get more people underground to get more product on the market.’

Analysts generally expect gold prices to remain robust for the rest of the year and beyond, so the profit incentive is likely to remain strong at a time when South Africa's unemployment rate is widely believed to have soared to over 40% because of pandemic-triggered economic contraction. 'We prevent an attempt this week, and next week they try again,' said Lutchman.

Should South Africa witness a surge in illegal mining, the heady mixture of community support, closed, dormant and vacated mine shafts, corruption and lack of state capacity and political will to act on illegal mining will make it difficult for the gold sector to roll back the tide.



A group of illegal miners on-site after being arrested by mine security, 2020.



Simple equipment for processing gold ore. The cylindrical pieces of equipment are known as *phendukas*, which along with the ball bearings (pictured in the bucket), are used to break up the rock before processing and extracting the gold. PHOTOS: Supplied

2. Is Afghanistan a new source for methamphetamine in eastern and southern Africa?

Though famed for its role at the heart of the global heroin trade, recent years have seen a huge increase in the production of methamphetamine in the mountains of Afghanistan. In a few short years, meth production in Afghanistan has grown to the extent that it may be supplying markets as far afield as South Africa and Australia.

Until recently, neighbouring Iran was home to the most mature regional market for the production and consumption of methamphetamine. Use of meth alongside heroin has become increasingly common in Iran over the past decade.¹³ However, as research from David Mansfield and Alex Soderholm of the London School of Economics has brought to light, increased law-enforcement pressure and regulation of precursor chemicals in Iran has curtailed large-scale meth production in the country.¹⁴ Meth producers from Iran appear to have maintained a level of production by passing on the skills and knowledge for meth manufacture to counterparts in Afghanistan.¹⁵ This was a natural development as the necessary precursor chemicals – such as ephedrine – are now more widely available in Afghanistan.

At the same time, the area of Afghanistan under opium-poppy cultivation dropped sharply in 2018 and the estimated opium production fell by 29% on the previous year.¹⁶ These decreases, in particular in the

northern and western regions, were attributed mainly to the impact of a severe drought. For opium-poppy farmers reliant on the crop as a significant contributor to their agricultural livelihoods, the new methods of producing methamphetamine became a lucrative alternative. As a result, an abundance of artisanal ‘meth labs’ quickly emerged in these regions, large swathes of which previously had been dominated only by opium.

Yet the real breakthrough came when it became known that the ephedra plant – a common shrub known locally as *oman* that grows abundantly across northern and central Afghanistan – contained a naturally occurring form of ephedrine, one of the key precursor chemicals required to produce crystal methamphetamine.¹⁷ Ephedra has therefore become a game-changer for Afghan meth production as it provided a secure domestic supply of the necessary precursor and significantly shortened the production supply chain, therefore substantially lowering overall manufacturing costs.¹⁸ As a result, Afghanistan has seen a surge in meth production, distribution and use.¹⁹

In response to this sudden emergence of widespread meth production in Afghanistan, the United States (under the banner of the International Security Assistance Force) embarked on a bombing campaign in May 2019. The intention of this initiative was to destroy many of the so-called ‘meth labs’ which had



Low-purity crystal methamphetamine, worth less than US\$3, photographed in Afghanistan. © Kern Hendricks

spread throughout the poppy-growing region of the country and, unlike opium (an agricultural product), could remain an active, year-round security threat.²⁰ The campaign was justified on the grounds that it aimed to deny a new revenue stream to the Taliban by preventing them from taxing these new drug-production facilities and their flows. However, this drew criticism from observers, who argued that the meth labs were not lawful military targets (and could in any case be reconstructed with relative ease)²¹ and that the estimated revenue denied to the Taliban had been vastly overstated. Opposition to the strikes also mounted after it was revealed that they had resulted in the deaths of at least 30 civilians.²²

MARKETS FOR AFGHAN METH

An extraordinary volume of methamphetamine is now being produced in Afghanistan, supplanting the dominance of opium, which has long been the country's primary illegal narcotic.²³ One of the major unanswered questions about this nascent meth production however surrounds the consumption markets for the drug.²⁴ Though domestic meth use has reportedly risen sharply in Afghanistan, and Iran and Pakistan do provide neighbouring consumption markets that may absorb some portion of this new production, it is estimated that the volume currently produced in Afghanistan far

outstrips the totality of this domestic and neighbouring demand. The bulk of this production must be destined for markets further afield, but the question is: where?

Ongoing research by the GI-TOC appears to shed some light on this issue. As we know, heroin is bulk-produced from Afghan opium and packaged in Pakistan before being shipped by dhow along the so-called 'southern route,' departing from ports along the Makran coast of Pakistan en route to African and European markets. There is emerging evidence to suggest that Afghan meth shipments are being 'piggybacked' with this heroin along the pre-existing routes used for international distribution.

International naval forces operating as part of the Combined Task Force 150 (CTF 150) have reported a significant increase in meth seizures in their area of operations in 2019 (which encompasses a wide swathe of the Indian Ocean, the Persian Gulf and the Gulf of Aden).²⁵ As of late December 2019, the force had seized 257 kilograms of meth – including one seizure in the Arabian Sea from a dhow carrying 94 kilograms of heroin and 76 kilograms of crystal meth in October 2019 – compared to only 9 kilograms of meth seized in 2018.²⁶



◀ Still from a video purportedly showing heroin being packaged on the Pakistan-Afghanistan border. The heroin is scooped from the central pile (middle right) into one-kilo bags (such as that placed on the scale in the centre). Similar packaging and drug texture were subsequently seen in a sample of heroin by GI-TOC researchers in Durban. SOURCE: GI-TOC

▼ A one-kilogram bag of heroin offered for sale in Durban, August 2020, showing the distinctive stamps also seen on samples seized elsewhere, which appear to be shipments of Afghan heroin packaged in Pakistan.

SOURCE: GI-TOC



▼ The interior of the same bag of heroin shown (left). The consistency and packaging is consistent with the heroin being processed in the footage reportedly from Peshawar, Pakistan.

SOURCE: GI-TOC





- 1 There has been a massive increase in methamphetamine production in regions of Afghanistan which have traditionally produced opium.
- 2 Vessels carrying combined heroin and methamphetamine shipments have been reported to depart from the Makran coast of Pakistan.
- 3 International naval forces operating as part of the CTF 150 reported a significant increase in methamphetamine seizures in their area of operations in 2019.
- 4 A Pakistani-crewed dhow was intercepted in December 2019 off the coast of Pemba, Mozambique carrying a mixed cargo of heroin and 299 kilograms of methamphetamine.
- 5 Sri Lankan naval forces intercepted two trawlers in international waters carrying 400 kilograms of heroin and 100 kilograms of crystal methamphetamine in February 2020: Sri Lanka's biggest-ever drug bust at sea. Eight Pakistani nationals were detained.
- 6 Kilo bags of heroin provided to a distributor in Durban in 2020 show similarities in packaging to heroin seized alongside meth in Mozambique and Sri Lanka.
- 7 Local distributors in Cape Town have reported that a new supply channel for crystal methamphetamine first appeared in South Africa in late 2019.
- 8 A shipment of methamphetamine and heroin was seized from a truck entering South Africa from Mozambique at the Komatipoort border post in May 2020.

FIGURE 3 Trafficking routes of methamphetamine from Afghanistan to southern Africa.

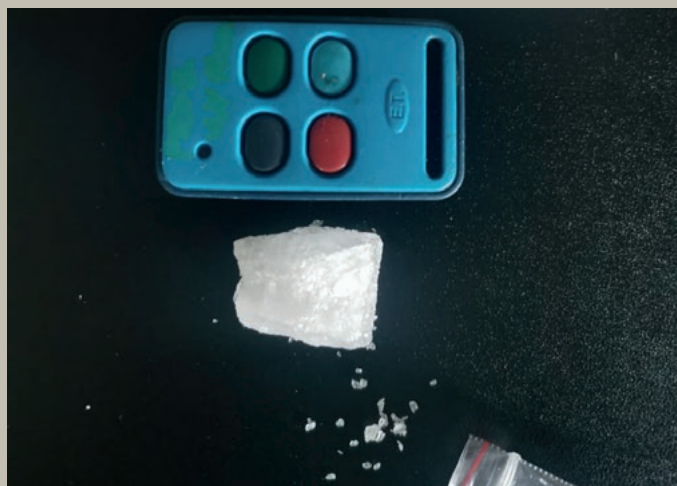


▲ Men smoke crystal methamphetamine in Fayzabad, in the northern province of Badakhshan. © Kern Hendricks

► A shard of crystal meth – not visually dissimilar from samples pictured in Afghanistan – for sale in Cape Town and confirmed by local distributors to originate from a new ‘South Asian’ supply channel that first appeared in South Africa in late 2019.

SOURCE: GI-TOC

▼ Heroin seized from a truck crossing into South Africa from Mozambique at the Komatipoort border point in May 2020.
© South African Police Service



Similarities found between different seizures appear to suggest an interlinked supply chain for meth and heroin. In December 2019, a Pakistani-crewed dhow was intercepted off the coast of Pemba, Mozambique, carrying a mixed cargo of both heroin and 299 kilograms of methamphetamine.²⁷ Pemba is known to be a major port of entry on the East African coast for dhows – predominantly from the coast of Iran and Pakistan – carrying heroin, yet this mixed shipment of meth was the first of its kind in Mozambique. Several months later, in May 2020, a cargo truck was intercepted by the South African Police Service attempting to cross the Mozambican border into South Africa at the Komatipoort border post while carrying a large shipment of heroin and methamphetamine.²⁸

Elsewhere, Sri Lankan naval forces intercepted two trawlers in international waters carrying 400 kilograms of heroin and 100 kilograms of crystal methamphetamine in February 2020 – Sri Lanka's biggest-ever drug bust at sea.²⁹ Eight Pakistani nationals were detained in the operation, and investigations suggested the boats came from Pakistan's Makran coast, with the drugs presumed to have originated in Afghanistan. The vessel was allegedly headed to a transit stop in Penang, Malaysia, for onward transfer of the cargo to Australia, where meth prices are very high.

In July 2020, a GI-TOC research team took images of a heroin shipment that had just been delivered in Durban, South Africa. Similar images were taken of a joint heroin and meth shipment that had arrived in Cape Town, South Africa. Each of these shipments were in the process of being unbundled in advance of their contents' preparation for the local retail market. Wrapped in thick whitish plastic bags of one-kilo denominations, the packaging was stamped with

distinctive blue markings reading 'Pa Pa Jone 100%' and '5161'. These markings are consistent across each of the dual-commodity seizures mentioned above: the drugs seized from the dhow in Mozambique in 2019, those seized at the Komatipoort border crossing and those seized by the Sri Lankan Navy, suggesting a common origin for these shipments.

Interviews by GI-TOC researchers with local meth users and distributors in Cape Town in August 2020 saw informants from both groups confirm that a new source of meth had entered the South African market 'in the past eight to ten months'.³⁰ Described by both groups as 'Pakistani meth,' this new supply appears to be provided through local South Asian syndicates based in South Africa and Mozambique, connecting with suppliers in Pakistan. The purity of this new supply of 'Pakistani meth' is seen by South African users as being quite high, 'just as good' as the Mexican-produced crystal meth arriving from Nigeria and better than the Chinese-produced meth that is manufactured in locations around Johannesburg.

Altogether, this combination of factors may help us towards understanding where Afghanistan-produced meth is ultimately headed. Pre-existing infrastructure and flow channels along traditional heroin routes – the dhow crews involved in trafficking, the ports whereby shipments can be landed without detection and the connections to distributors in southern Africa – have enabled this supply chain to emerge, while recent seizures provide strong circumstantial evidence that suggests Afghan meth is transiting Mozambique and has now become an emergent commodity option in the growing South African meth market. New high-quality crystal meth flows which seem to be appearing recently in Malawi, Tanzania and Kenya may suggest this new development is also a regional phenomenon.



Heroin and methamphetamine seized by the Sri Lankan Navy from two Pakistani fishing trawlers in February 2020. The heroin bricks, on the left, share numerous characteristics with the heroin seized in Durban. © Sri Lankan Navy



A Pakistani-crewed dhow was seized by Mozambican authorities off the coast of Pemba, Mozambique, in December 2019, carrying methamphetamine and heroin. © National Criminal Investigation Service (SERNIC)

3. Somaliland: East Africa's largest conduit for cheetah trafficking to the Gulf.

In late July, two cheetah cubs were rescued from a 25-day ordeal at the hands of wildlife traffickers by the Awdal Region Police in Borama, a city in Somaliland not far from the Ethiopian border. Members of the local community helped look after the dehydrated and underweight cubs until the rescue team arrived. The cubs were then given care by Cheetah Conservation Fund (CCF) staff before being transported to a CCF safe house.

These cubs were part of a series of recent seizures of cheetahs in Somaliland. Through July and August, 20 cheetah cubs were rescued over five missions jointly conducted by the Ministry of Environment and Rural Development, the Seel Regional Administration and the Somaliland Police Force, with support from the CCF and Torrid Analytics. On 14 September, two cheetah cubs were seized in the Sool region in the south-east: the youngest was only 2 weeks old. In total, 25 cubs have been reported as seized or rescued in Somaliland so far this year.³¹

Cheetah trafficking in Somaliland is not a new issue. Since 2010, when reporting became more consistent, there have been 193 rescued or surrendered cheetahs. Nearly a third of these occurred after the country

ratified its Forestry and Wildlife Conservation Law in August 2018, which has reportedly led to increased awareness and better coordination between wildlife officials, police and the army.

Many of the cheetahs seized in Somaliland are believed to originate in Ethiopia, which shares a 500-mile border with the self-declared state. At least 25% of seized cheetahs in Somaliland have been found at or near the Ethiopian border – the two cubs intercepted near Borama in August, for example, were less than 15 kilometres from the border. As known cheetah populations in Ethiopia total no more than 300 adolescent and adult specimens,³² it is clear that the trafficking of cheetah cubs is taking a significant toll on cheetah populations. Ethiopia and South Sudan, along with Somalia/Somaliland where cheetah populations are unknown, are also the last remaining stronghold of the North East African cheetah subspecies, *A.j. soemmeringii*.³³

Cheetah cubs are mostly taken from the wild when the mother hides them to go hunting, either opportunistically by nomad herders or by poachers. A cub can sell for between US\$200 and US\$300 in Somaliland, although prices vary greatly: an unhealthy

- A six-month-old cheetah cub, in the care of Somaliland's Ministry of Environment and Rural Development and the Cheetah Conservation Fund, en route to Hargeisa, 29 July 2020. The cub was one of eight rescued over three missions in Somaliland in late July.

SOURCE: Cheetah Conservation Fund



- ▲ A cheetah cub receives care from representatives of Somaliland's Ministry of Environment and Rural Development, in a village near Erigavo, Sanaag, in August 2020. According to reports, the cubs were being held by local farmers who surrendered them to the authorities, as the result of conflict with the mother cheetah near their livestock.

SOURCE: Ministry of Environment and Rural Development (via Twitter)



cub can be bought for as little as US\$80, while a healthy, older cub can cost up to US\$1 000.³⁴ The same cheetah can be sold for up to US\$15 000 in the Gulf states. Mortality is high, as most cubs are removed from the wild at only two to eight weeks from birth and are subjected to maltreatment and poor nutrition in the hands of poachers and dealers, compounded with the rigours of the trip across the Gulf of Aden. While difficult to estimate, it is thought that over 60% of cheetah cubs die before they reach the market to be sold.³⁵

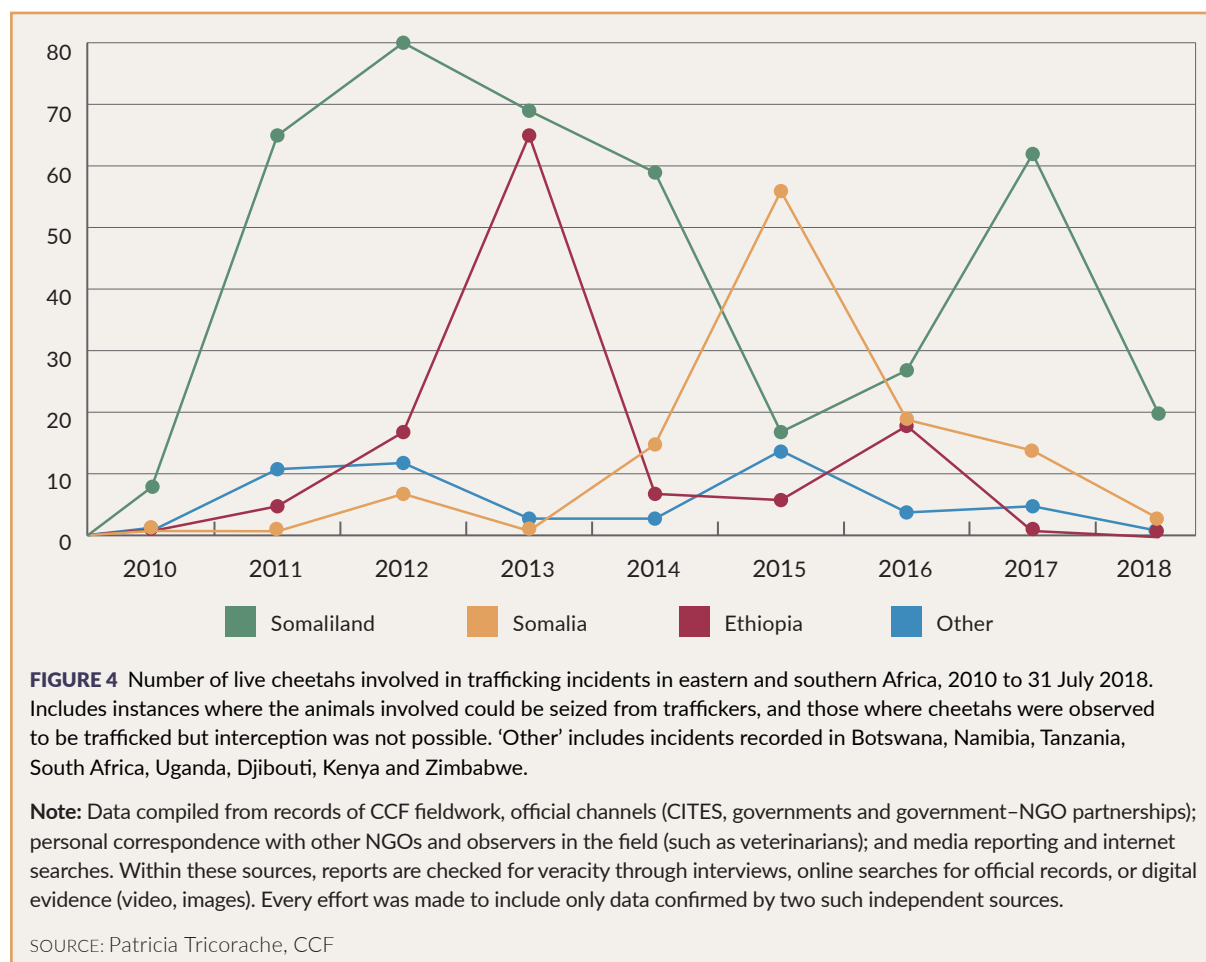
Somaliland is vulnerable as a conduit for the illegal wildlife trade not only due to its proximity to the Arabian Peninsula's wealthy consumer markets for exotic wildlife, but also due to the country's rampant poverty, weak legal frameworks and a lack of environmental awareness. Corruption also drives the cheetah trade, as evidenced by illegally obtained cheetah cubs being sold back to smugglers by corrupt officials after a confiscation have been reported.³⁶ That being said, Somaliland's cheetah trade has been more extensively researched than other countries and regions of Somalia. Its relative importance as the main cheetah-trafficking route into the Middle East might

be in part connected to underreporting from other countries.

ACROSS THE GULF OF ADEN

From Somaliland, cheetahs are transported by boat – hidden in hampers, crates or cardboard boxes – from the northern coastline across the Gulf of Aden to Yemen at an estimated rate of 300 cubs per year.³⁷ The 140 nautical miles between the ports of Berbera in Somaliland and Aden in Yemen can be covered in just over seven hours at a dhow's average speed of 20 knots.

Once in Yemen, cheetahs are reportedly transported by boat or road across the Saudi border to animal markets such as Al-Jazan or Al-Khouba, or delivered to Saudi traders, who will then offer them throughout the Gulf states to known buyers on ecommerce and social-media platforms such as Instagram and Snapchat, or, more recently, through private chat groups. One study found that at least 2 000 cheetahs had been advertised online between 2010 and 2019.³⁸ Most were found on Instagram, with sellers offering cheetahs in Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Kuwait.



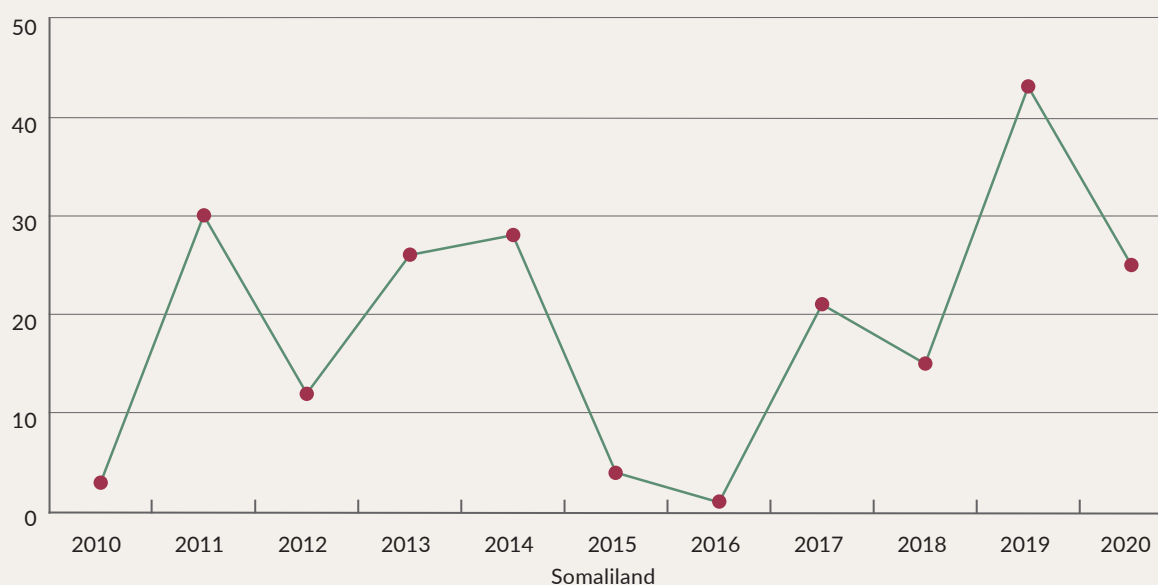


FIGURE 5 Number of live cheetahs seized from traffickers by law enforcement or surrendered in Somaliland, 2010 to 14 September 2020.

SOURCE: P. Tricorache, et al, Pets and pelts: Understanding and combating poaching and trafficking in cheetahs, in L. Marker, L. Boast & A. Schmidt-Küntzel (eds), *Cheetahs: Biology and Conservation*, 2017, <http://www.felidae.org/Tricorache%20et%20al%202017.pdf>; CITES Parties Kenya and Ethiopia, *Illegal Trade in Cheetahs: Supplemental Information and Recommendations*, Annex 1, 18th meeting of the Conference of the Parties, 17–28 August 2019, <https://cites.org/sites/default/files/eng/cop/18/inf/E-CoP18-Inf-073.pdf>; P Tricorache, data compiled from reporting of seizures by the Somaliland authorities.

Delivery to the UAE, Qatar or Kuwait from Saudi Arabia can be made by road or air.³⁹ An investigative report published by *Le Figaro* quoted an employee at the Kuwait airport who stated that:

It is enough to mention that they are ‘cats’ on the box and to pay certain people I know. It is easy for me because I work there and I know who will take the money. I give them between KWD 500 and KWD 1000 [US\$1 600–US\$3 200] to allow illegal animals [through the country].⁴⁰

There have also been isolated reports of cheetahs arriving in Oman from Yemen, as well as being transported from Oman into the UAE via the Hatta border crossing.

AN ILLEGAL STATUS SYMBOL

Cheetahs have long been popular household pets or hunting companions in the Gulf states, where they are viewed as status symbols. This popularity has been boosted in recent years by wealthy or famous individuals posing with their exotic pets on social media.⁴¹ However, few cheetah owners know how to provide the proper care for these animals, with some social-media posts advertising cheetahs that have been declawed – an extremely painful process for the

animals. Many pet cheetahs in the Gulf states do not live beyond the first year, and few live longer than five years.⁴²



An instagram user in Dubai poses with a pet cheetah.

SOURCE: Social media

Trade in wild cheetahs for commercial purposes is illegal in all the Gulf states, either through the states being party to the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) or through domestic legislation.⁴³ In December 2016, the UAE enacted a law banning the private possession

of exotic and dangerous pets, although only one seizure (of four cheetahs) has been made since 2015,⁴⁴ suggesting that the ban is seldom enforced. In Kuwait, where no cheetahs have been seized in the past 5 years, the National Assembly approved a draft animal-welfare law that penalizes illegal trade or possession of predators in December 2015.⁴⁵ In Qatar – where discussions continue over a law regulating the trade and ownership of dangerous animals – the Ministry of Municipality and Environment announced the arrest of an Arab national in July 2016 for trading in cheetahs.⁴⁶

Under CITES regulations, however, captive-bred cheetahs can be traded commercially by registered facilities.⁴⁷ The CITES Trade Database reports that 16 ‘captive-bred’ cheetahs were exported into Armenia from Bahrain and the UAE between 2009 and 2015.⁴⁸

However, the probability that cheetahs in the Gulf (both those kept as pets and those exported) are truly bred in captivity or traded in compliance with national laws or CITES regulations is low. Firstly, only two such registered breeding facilities exist worldwide – both are in South Africa. Secondly, cheetahs do not breed well in captivity. Based on information from the International Cheetah Studbook, a voluntary register of captive cheetahs worldwide, the first report of captive-bred cheetahs in the Gulf states was in 1994. Since then, six facilities have reported a total of 304 cheetah births in captivity, with a 31% mortality rate for cubs under six months. No births have been reported by these facilities since 2016.⁴⁹

It is therefore more likely that purportedly ‘captive-bred’ cheetahs in the Gulf in fact come from elsewhere, as suggested by the ‘captive-bred’ cheetahs exported from Bahrain to Armenia. There are no known cheetah-breeding facilities in Bahrain, suggesting that the cheetahs’ real origins were masked.⁵⁰

A CONTENTIOUS ISSUE

The issue of the illegal cheetah trade has been on the CITES agenda since 2013, when it commissioned a study that led to decisions and recommendations aimed at reducing demand and encouraging international collaboration. However, the 18th Conference of the Parties (CoP), held in August 2019, voted to delete these decisions based on a report from the Standing Committee to the Secretariat.⁵¹ The report concluded that illegal cheetah trade was limited, based on official seizure reports from nine countries that cited 32 specimens (13 live, 19 parts or products) between

2015 and mid-2018. Based on this, the CoP agreed that matters related to illegal cheetah trade could be addressed by a Big Cat Task Force, jointly run by CITES and the Convention for Migratory Species, which is currently in the process of being implemented.

However, Kenya and Ethiopia – two cheetah-range countries – argued that the numbers reported by CITES ‘underestimate the full extent of the trade, since they only include confiscated animals appearing in official records and omit data from many countries, including key primary source countries for trafficked cheetah’.⁵² They cited information showing 393 cheetah specimens (274 live animals and 119 parts), including the 32 seized specimens reported to CITES, during the same period.

The countries’ joint statement – submitted to the CITES CoP – went on to add: ‘Given the perilous state of [East African] cheetah populations that are the source of illegal trade, any ongoing trade in wild cheetah is alarming.’

The recent spate of seizures in Somaliland seems to confirm those fears. The illegal trade in wild cheetahs appears to be continuing apace, with potentially grave consequences for East African cheetah populations.



◀ Two cubs rescued near Borama, 24 July 2020. The cubs had reportedly been in the hands of traffickers for 25 days before their rescue.

SOURCE: CCF



◀ CCF veterinarian Dr Asma Bile prepares cubs rescued from traffickers to make the journey to Hargeisa to the CCF safe house.

SOURCE: CCF

4. Kenya's coffee industry is facing a resurgence in organized thefts.

Kenya is world-famous for its coffee. The country's arabica – popularly known as 'Black Gold' – is highly sought after by roasters for blending with other coffees and fetches premium prices at the New York Coffee Exchange, the largest global auction place for the commodity.⁵³ But this esteemed status has also led to Kenya's coffee farmers being targeted by large-scale heists, some of which have cost lives and exacted a heavy toll on those relying on coffee farming for their livelihoods.

In 2011, when coffee theft first reached its peak,⁵⁴ 10 people were killed in different parts of the country in relation to coffee thefts.⁵⁵ In the same year, five people drowned in the Malakisi River while smuggling coffee into Uganda. In October 2018, Interior Cabinet Secretary Fred Matiang'i launched a crackdown against the so-called 'coffee cartels',⁵⁶ which resulted in a reduction in the violence and scale of thefts. However, the recent spate of thefts suggests that these cartels are becoming increasingly active again.⁵⁷

The thefts predominantly take place at the factories of rural cooperatives, where collectives of coffee farmers store their produce and it is processed before selling it on to millers for final processing and grinding. Thieves target high-quality, high-value grades. James Macharia, a coffee farmer in Nyeri,⁵⁸ has had his coffee looted

from the factory warehouse six times. He remains baffled that no one has ever been prosecuted for these thefts.

Macharia relies entirely on coffee for his income and has never been reimbursed for the stolen coffee. (Cooperatives claim that the coffee cannot be insured – no company offers a policy in Kenya to cover coffee produce as it is not seen as an economically viable policy, and no regulations govern the industry in relation to insurance – and so they cannot shield themselves against the robbers.⁵⁹) As a result of the thefts, meeting his family's basic needs became a struggle and one of his children was forced to drop out of school.

COOPERATIVES SEEK PROTECTION; GANGS ADAPT

This situation has led some cooperatives and farmers to ramp up security around their crops. Mary Wangari, also from Nyeri, hired a vigilante group of 15 young men to guard her 10-acre farm during the harvesting season.⁶⁰ The group patrols the farm in shifts, armed with *pangas* and *rungus* (machetes and clubs), for a daily fee of KES 300 (US\$3). Hiram Mwaniki, chair of Thangaini Cooperative Union, which runs eight factories in Murang'a, reports that their factories were forced to employ 10 guards armed with *rungus* and *pangas*.



A farmer harvests coffee berries at a farm in the Chemegong area, Kericho, Kenya, in July 2020.

© Billy Mutai/SOPA Images/LightRocket via Getty Images

Mwaniki, who once sat on the Coffee Board of Kenya, says that cooperatives cannot afford well-armed guards since they only receive 20% of the profits to cover the factories' expenses.

This, however, puts the guards at a marked disadvantage. According to Mwaniki, the gangs come in groups of more than 20 people carrying weapons (including guns and machetes) and spotlights to dazzle security guards. The gangs would then beat the guards and tie them up before entering the premises. Mwaniki claims that guards who said they would raise alarm have been threatened with being killed. His cooperative has issued a directive to all the guards to immediately raise the alarm in case they see any suspicious vehicles in their vicinity, and local police contacts remain on standby.

The gangs, however, have also adapted to bypass the new security measures at factories. Festus Maina (name has been changed)⁶¹ is a member of a union in Nyeri which was forced to hire armed Administration Police after a series of thefts in the month of December in 2016, 2017 and 2018. (The coffee harvest lasts from November to February, meaning that December is a prime month for coffee theft.) But the armed gangs changed tactics and now target the berries from the farm once they are ready for harvest. This new trend has also emerged in other areas from around 2017.

'You wake up to a clear farm,' said Maina. 'However, this is a petty crime carried [out] by locals who sell the beans to private millers for KES 10 [US\$0.10] per kilo, yet ideally, it fetches between KES 30 and KES 60 [US\$0.30–US\$0.60] when it goes through cooperatives. This process could however take a year. [The thieves] would rather get little but quick money especially as they need loose cash for *busaa* [a local brew] or daily errands.'⁶²

The robbers, Maina says, are armed with crude weapons, often buying bullets or hiring guns from licensed gun owners and law-enforcement officers. 'We cannot refute that gangs might have fake guns, but because this is a rural setting, many have never seen a real gun so they will immediately cooperate with anyone brandishing a gun,' he added. Like other farmers, Maina has never received any compensation for his stolen crop.

ACROSS THE BORDER

While some of the Kenyan coffee being shipped over the Ugandan border comes from farmers wishing to access the Ugandan market, other shipments are of stolen berries. Farmers from Nyeri claimed that they have proof of stolen coffee from across Kenya being sent to Tororo in eastern Uganda to be repackaged before being flown to New York for sale on the global exchange. According to Macharia:

We believe that our coffee is taken to Tororo before it is mixed with local cheaper blends, making traceability difficult. This will improve the quality of the Ugandan produce, which always lags behind Kenya and Ethiopia. In 2016, a road accident in Salgaa in Nakuru saw sacks of parchment coffee [dried but unhulled coffee beans] stolen from Nyeri county spewed on the road. We have enough evidence that it was on transit to Busia border.

That the coffee was discovered in Nakuru, a region on route to Kampala from Nyeri, supports the suggestion that coffee is shipped to Uganda.

John,⁶³ a middleman involved in smuggling coffee over the Busia border, says stolen coffee is kept in various warehouses at borders and transported in the small hours of the night, when it is easier to pass through without attracting the attention of customs officials.⁶⁴ The coffee, he says, is transported using lorries and pickups, although sometimes he is forced to 'buy tea' (pay a bribe) to customs officers. Occasionally, the coffee smugglers use school-age children to transport light bags across the border as they are below the age of criminal responsibility and are rarely stopped by immigration officials.

Millers in Uganda are prepared to pay a higher price for quality Kenyan coffee. 'We have ready buyers in eastern Uganda,' John admitted. 'On average, we buy a bag at an equivalent of KES 5 000 [US\$50], way above the market price, and hawk it to millers in Uganda.' The middlemen are able to buy above the market price because they know their buyers in Uganda will be willing to pay more for the same produce.

Tracing stolen coffee is a difficult task. Recovery of stolen parchment coffee is hard, especially since the

thieves transfer the crop to different gunny bags as soon as they are out of the factory premises. Likewise, it becomes impossible to differentiate between stolen and legal berries once they are taken from the farm. John says, 'I wouldn't know how to identify which coffee is genuine as they all look the same'.

COFFEE CARTELS

There are various reports over who may be supporting the coffee cartels behind the thefts, with suggestions that they may be protected by powerful figures in the political or business world. A report by the Ministry of Internal Security and Provincial Administration in 2011 mentioned two politicians as linked to coffee theft, citing that one of the councillors had a private miller in his compound.

Murang'a County Commissioner Mohamed Barre claimed in 2019 that factory officials were colluding with thieves to help orchestrate the robberies. Barre says the thefts in Murang'a routinely show robbers being able to break in and load the produce onto lorries with minimal delay. According to Barre, the thieves know exactly when and where the coffee is ready for dispatch and in what part of the factory it is hidden.⁶⁵

Mwaniki of the Thangaini Cooperative Union also accuses cooperative officials of colluding with thieves:

It is not coincidental that the thieves know exactly where the coffee that is ready for transportation is. They must be having inside information and such data and statistics is only kept by leaders from the cooperatives. We have had several cases of such heads being charged

in the law courts over the coffee thefts but it normally ends in mentions and the case keeps on getting postponed. Over the years, the courts dismiss it.

Some farmers suggest that the coffee gangs enjoy police protection. 'The cartels are untouchable,' asserts Mwacharia. '[That is] the main reason why there has never been any sentencing for stealing coffee, yet the penalty for robbery with violence is life imprisonment.' He wondered how the gangs managed to ferry their loot through the many police roadblocks, when transporting coffee in and from Kenya requires a licence granted by the police and the Kenyan Coffee Board.

Mwaniki claims the amount of coffee stolen could also be higher than reported, as police officers often mislabel the goods once recovered: 'Once, some parchment coffee was stolen from a coffee factory. A few kilometers away the lorry was involved in a road accident at Karega and was still loaded with the sacks. However, the police recorded the stolen goods as maize instead of coffee. We believe the person behind the theft and the lorry owner must have oiled the police officers' palms to change this crucial information.'

As long as Kenyan coffee remains in high demand both globally and regionally, criminal actors will continue to carry out targeted heists in search of quick money. While this puts a severe financial strain on those who depend on coffee for their livelihood, the assertion – repeatedly made – of collusion between thieves and factory officials, and the alleged protection provided by some rogue state actors, points to a more deeply entrenched system that may prove hard to counter.

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- 61 Name has been changed to protect identity.
- 62 Interview with GI-TOC researcher, 18 September 2020, by phone.
- 63 Name has been changed to protect identity.
- 64 Interview with GI-TOC researcher, 17 September 2020.
- 65 Alice Waithe, Factory managers accused of planning coffee theft, *Star*, 21 October 2019, <https://www.the-star.co.ke/counties/central/2019-10-21-factory-managers-accused-of-planning-coffee-theft/>.

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