

CIVIL SOCIETY OBSERVATORY OF ILLICIT ECONOMIES IN EASTERN AND SOUTHERN AFRICA



RISK BULLETIN

SUMMARY HIGHLIGHTS

1. **The assassination of South African gangster Ernie 'Lastig' Solomon points to a major reconfiguration in the Western Cape underworld.**

The assassination of South African underworld boss Ernie 'Lastig' Solomon marks a seismic moment, particularly in the country's Western Cape province, where he had his roots. He is the second prominent gang leader to be shot dead in less than a year as new alliances are formed and underworld elements are reconfigured.

2. **Corruption, instability and violence in Zimbabwe's gold sector.**

Zimbabwe's small-scale gold-mining sector has seen a surge of violence driven by 'machete gangs' taking control of mining sites or extorting and robbing miners. Ongoing GI-TOC research has investigated how the connections between political elites and the machete gangs enable the corrupt control of mine sites and political processes. The illegal gold market has been further rocked by the disruption of COVID-19.

3. **Nelson Mandela Bay is an often-overlooked example of rampant gangsterism.**

Nelson Mandela Bay, in South Africa's Eastern Cape, has seen a steady increase in violence in recent years to levels that are comparable with some of the most violent places on Earth. Much of this violence is gang-related, yet the trajectory and dynamics of this violence differs to trends seen in Cape Town, the epicentre of South Africa's gang violence. Specific patterns of gang activity and chronic misgovernance in local politics have helped drive Nelson Mandela Bay's cycle of violence.

4. **Corruption, crime networks and social media: the international illicit trade in Madagascan tortoises.**

Ploughshare and radiated tortoises in Madagascar are critically endangered, but conservation efforts have been eroded by the constant pressure of the illegal wildlife trade. These animals are highly valued on international exotic-pet markets and are therefore targeted by traffickers. Ongoing GI-TOC research investigating the political economy of this trade looks at the development of this market, including its online dimension, and current trafficking routes.



ABOUT THIS ISSUE

In this issue, the final issue of the Risk Bulletin of Illicit Economies in East and Southern Africa in 2020, we showcase findings of ongoing GI-TOC research on a number of illegal markets.

Our ongoing surveys of prices in illegal gold markets throughout the region, for example, have allowed us to assess the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic in real time. At a time when international prices for gold have skyrocketed, the impact on those in the informal and illegal parts of the gold sector has been more complex, as travel restrictions and lockdown measures have, in some cases, made life hardest for the most vulnerable.

These surveys are among similar studies our team is conducting to assess prices in a number of illegal markets, including the illegal charcoal trade, illegal firearms trafficking and several drugs markets. In a context in which reliable data for forms of illegal trade

is often fragmentary or absent, these studies are helping to build the quantitative data available.

We have also been innovative in building datasets on illicit trade in our research into the illegal trade in endangered tortoises from Madagascar, where we have used a new machine-learning tool developed to find evidence of illegal wildlife trade online.

In this issue, we also address two major stories in South Africa's gang landscape. Firstly, the assassination of gang leader Ernie 'Lastig' Solomon; a significant event not only because Solomon was a powerful figure in the Western Cape underworld, but also because his killing is emblematic of wider shifts in dynamics of control between gangs in the region. Secondly, we look to the Eastern Cape, where the severity of gang violence is often overlooked. We highlight how Nelson Mandela Bay has become one of the most violent urban areas not only in South Africa but at a global level.

1. The assassination of South African gangster Ernie 'Lastig' Solomon points to a major reconfiguration in the Western Cape underworld.

South African gang boss Ernie 'Lastig' Solomon's decades-long reign over a vast criminal empire came to an abrupt end in November when the BMW he was driving was forced off a road in Boksburg, east of Johannesburg. Two gunmen opened fire, riddling the vehicle with bullets.¹ When the shooting stopped, Solomon lay slumped behind the steering wheel. A second man later succumbed to his injuries. A woman and a baby were also wounded.²

Multiple and possibly overlapping theories for the murder quickly emerged. Former members of the Terrible Josters, the gang Solomon led, claimed that the assassination was linked to an internal battle for control of the gang between Solomon, Solomon's nephew Horatio 'Voudie' Solomon and alleged 28s boss Ralph Stanfield, who has become a dominant figure in the Western Cape underworld.

Stanfield is believed to be the boss of the 28s, an organized-crime group going by the same name (but separate to) the 28s prison gang, who have long been powerful in South African prisons. The 28s led by Stanfield are, in turn, part of the 28s alliance, a group of street gangs that include Solomon's Terrible Josters. Solomon himself was also allegedly a former leader within the 28s prison gang.

The feud had already apparently exploded into violence several times in 2020. Voudie Solomon was the target of a hit on 15 March 2020 – widely believed to have been ordered by his uncle – and, while he survived, his daughter was killed. On 11 May 2020, Ernie Solomon survived an attempted hit in Hawston, an abalone-poaching hotspot on the Cape south coast, which may have been initiated in response to the killing of Voudie's daughter. There are also allegations that the May hit could have been linked to an earlier attempted hit on Stanfield, believed to have been orchestrated by Solomon.³



Ernie 'Lastig' Solomon, former leader of the Terrible Josters gang. Solomon was one of the most prominent figures in the South African underworld, with a reputation for ruthless violence. 'Lastig' means 'troublesome' or 'terrible' in Afrikaans. *Photo: Cornél van Heerden*

Others claim the fatal hit was linked to a drug deal gone wrong, when Solomon's henchmen lost a large consignment of mandrax tablets (known as 'quaaludes' in the 1980s) to a rival gang.⁴ Solomon is said to have travelled to Gauteng to pursue the stolen drugs – said to be worth R2 million (US\$130 000) – which may have triggered a pre-emptive assassination.

Then there are suggestions that a powerful Western Cape gang boss and former associate of both Solomon and murdered Hard Livings boss Rashied Staggie (who was killed in a hit in December last year) orchestrated the murder, turning some of Solomon's men against him in a tactical strike intended to consolidate organized-crime interests.

Solomon's murder raises acute questions about the future of the drug trade he profited from, the abalone trade he taxed and the gang world in which he was one of the most powerful and feared figures.

SOLOMON'S CRIMINAL EMPIRE

Solomon's killing is a seismic moment in the history of South African organized crime. He was one of the most prominent figures in the South African underworld, with a reputation for protecting his businesses with ruthless violence. ('Lastig' means 'troublesome' or 'terrible' in Afrikaans.) His criminal network extended across the country, with established links in Gauteng, Durban and Nelson Mandela Bay.⁵

Solomon's Terrible Josters controlled drug-retail markets in certain parts of Cape Town, and Solomon reportedly manufactured meth and trafficked other illicit substances. His business interests grew during the COVID-19 lockdown into trafficking in cigarettes and alcohol. This range of criminal activities was enabled by a range of figures, from farmers who rented him locations for meth labs to Russian, Chinese and other South African criminal figures.⁶



Bullet holes riddled the roof and window of the car in which Ernie 'Lastig' Solomon was killed. Photo: Supplied

Solomon was also heavily involved in the lucrative abalone trade. Abalone is a highly sought-after endemic marine mollusc, prized as a delicacy in Hong Kong and China. 90 per cent of South African abalone is shipped to Hong Kong.⁷

Between 2000 and 2018, poachers have stripped South African coastal waters of at least 96 million abalone, according to estimates published by TRAFFIC, the international wildlife trade monitoring network: 'On average, two thousand tonnes of abalone are bagged annually by poachers – 20 times the legal take – in an illicit industry estimated to be worth at least US\$60 million a year.'⁸ Between 2000 and 2016, up to 43 per cent of the abalone illegally harvested in South Africa was traded through a number of non-abalone-producing sub-Saharan African countries to Hong Kong.

Solomon ensured that a large swathe of the Overberg coastline in the Western Cape was in the grip of his enforcers, and especially the town of Hawston.

In the Overberg, Solomon was primarily an extortioner, and sometimes outright robber, of the area's lucrative abalone and crayfish poaching operations, rather than a major poaching operator himself.⁹ According to a well-placed gang source:

Ernie 'Lastig' would tax that Hawston community, and the other surrounding communities as well, as if he was the Sheriff of Nottingham ... he would tax the people of those communities [for abalone taken and] one rand [US\$0.07] for every crayfish that left the water ... and those people were also scared of him, they would give him their last cent, because they were so *kak* [shit] scared of him and his soldiers.¹⁰

Residents of Hawston and former gang members who worked for him say he struck fear into the community and criminal fraternity alike, exerting a mafia-like grip over his networks and reportedly ruling the Cape Overberg region 'with an iron fist'.¹¹

Solomon wasn't the only criminal with an interest in the trade. Though 'gang figures' have always been linked to the illegal abalone-poaching industry, poachers say that there has been a marked increase in gang presence and intervention in poaching syndicates in recent years, with more and more 'new faces' from Cape Flats gangs keen to muscle in.¹²

At the time of the failed hit attempt on Solomon in May, the abalone-poaching economy was going through an uncertain period. In June 2020, as South Africa was in the throes of a hard lockdown imposed by the government in response to the pandemic, the price paid to divers for poached abalone crashed from R600 (US\$40) per kilogram to around R300 (US\$20) per kilogram. But as the lockdown eased, prices increased sharply. By November 2020, the price of poached abalone had reached its highest-ever levels, in some cases exceeding R800 (US\$50) per kilogram.¹³

With Solomon now removed from the picture, locals fear that more violence could arise in the Overberg, where the rewards for a slice of the abalone trade are higher than ever.¹⁴

CHANGING OF THE GUARD

Solomon's death is another milestone of the steady demise of the aristocracy of gang leaders who controlled South Africa's gang structures during the

1980s and 1990s.¹⁵ In the wake of the murders of Rashied Staggie and Solomon, there seems to be a move to consolidate organized-crime structures in the Western Cape, and a new generation of leaders is emerging.

South Africa's law-enforcement authorities have been unable to have much of an impact on the growing levels of gang violence, and this situation does not appear to be improving.

2. Corruption, instability and violence in Zimbabwe's gold sector.

For an estimated 1 million people in Zimbabwe, small-scale gold mining offers a means of making a living, and the industry indirectly benefits millions more.¹⁶ However, as widely seen in East and southern Africa, the informality of the sector and the desirability of gold as a commodity create an environment ripe for criminal abuse. Zimbabwe's informal and illegal gold market, which has been in flux in recent months due to the impact of the coronavirus pandemic, has seen a surge of violence by gangs linked to members of the political elite who exercise corrupt control of gold-mining sites.

DISRUPTION AND RECOVERY

The scale of the illegal gold market and informal mining in Zimbabwe means that official figures are likely to underestimate actual gold production. Based on official purchasing data, artisanal and small-scale gold mining (ASGM) produced 17.5 tonnes of gold in 2019. However, it has been estimated that 50 per cent of ASGM production is lost to smuggling,¹⁷ and the true amount may be even higher.

The GI-TOC has been tracking artisanal and small-scale gold mining in Zimbabwe, Kenya, South Sudan, Uganda and South Africa, throughout 2020 as part of a new study.¹⁸

The coronavirus pandemic has caused gold prices to soar on international markets, hitting an all-time high in August. However, our research has found that the impact on informal and illegal mining has been more varied. In Zimbabwe, artisanal gold miners and traders were unable to move or sell gold further down the supply chain because of a lack of access to international markets due to lockdowns, prohibitions on transport and travel and border closures. The result was an oversupply of gold and a steep drop in local gold prices. In March 2020, gold was trading at between US\$36 and US\$39 per gram on the informal market in Zimbabwe, while international spot prices placed the per gram valuation of gold at US\$56.¹⁹ As travel restrictions eased and gold smugglers increasingly established new routes and methods for exporting gold, supply chains reopened and local prices quickly recovered. Now reflecting international demand, gold is being traded in Zimbabwe at around US\$60–US\$65 per gram, reaching as high as 95–100 per cent of the international gold price as of the end of October 2020.²⁰

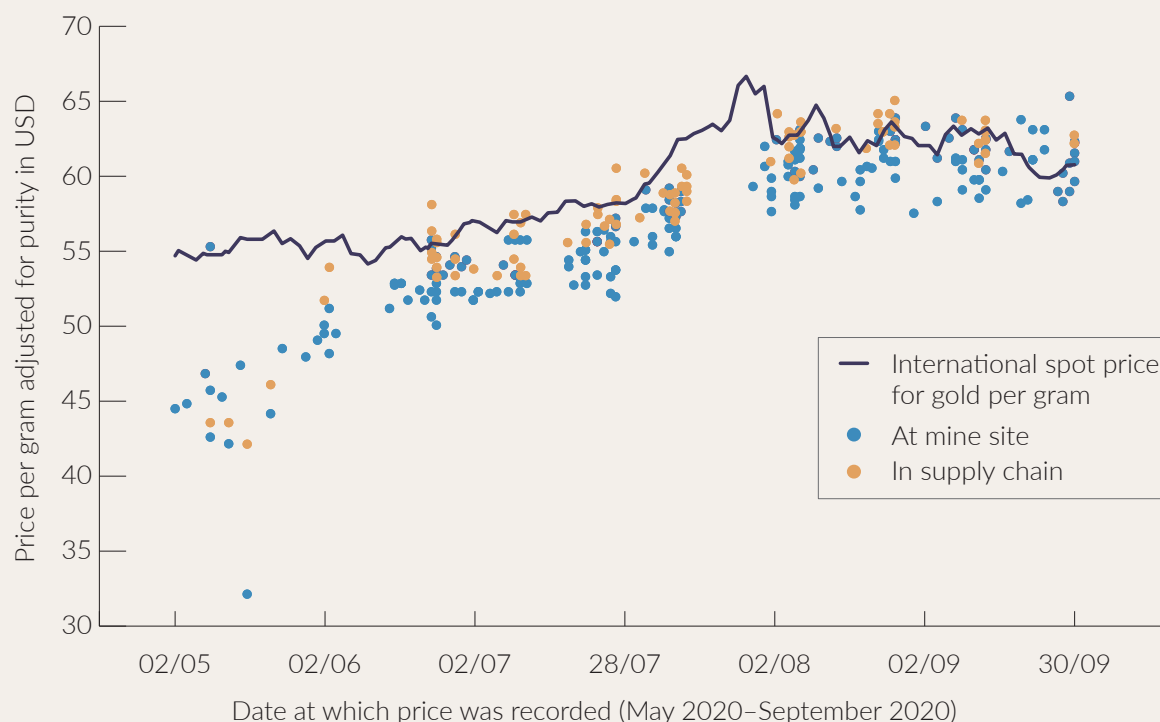


FIGURE 1 Gold prices in Zimbabwe's informal gold market by supply-chain location of transaction and compared to international spot prices for gold.

NOTE: Gold prices were collected by field investigators who interviewed gold miners, buyers and traders. Prices of gold at mine sites (shown in blue) naturally tend to be lower than the prices recorded further down the supply chain (shown in orange), at trade hubs near mine sites or at larger cities such as Harare and Bulawayo. Gold traded in Zimbabwe's informal gold market tends to vary between 80 and 100 per cent purity. To enable better comparison to the international spot price (shown by the purple line), we have adjusted all prices from our study to reflect price at 100 per cent purity. Our results illustrate the impact of COVID-19 lockdowns on the informal gold sector, as prices were significantly below the international spot price from late April through to August, then recovered to reflect international demand.

Our research found similar disruption across East and southern Africa, where local small-scale mining collapsed due to lockdown measures and travel restrictions. The situation in neighbouring South Africa, however, stands apart from this trend, as the illegal mining sector here largely consists of miners infiltrating active and inactive commercial mines, rather than artisanal mining.

Although lockdown did disrupt illegal mining operations (which often rely on support from mine employees to bring supplies into illegal miners underground), our research has found that groups of illegal miners have in recent months become more brazen in their attempts to infiltrate mine shafts.²¹

VIOLENCE AND CORRUPTION IN ZIMBABWE'S GOLD MARKET

The disruption caused by COVID-19 adds to existing instability in Zimbabwe's gold sector caused by widespread violence and political patronage. Our interviews with miners and gold buyers have confirmed that corruption in Zimbabwe's gold market is endemic, with interviewees widely alleging that members of the country's ZANU-PF political elite exercise corrupt control over the gold trade.²² When a gold rush occurs, senior politicians reportedly abuse their power to quickly secure ownership of mining rights. If they are unable to secure permits, they may employ violent machete gangs to displace small-scale miners, secure access to mine sites and in some cases, steal gold ore.²³

Younger party members appear to be involved too. In the words of one gold miner from Kadoma, 'the youth from ZANU-PF are the ones that are hungrier and more active on the ground. Whenever they hear of any highly profitable ASGM site they want a share or total control.'²⁴

Often, if a miner finds a profitable gold site, they must share the profits with senior politicians to secure protection against the machete gangs.²⁵ These payments may be small, regular amounts, but other times can represent the majority of the gold value, adding up to hundreds of thousands of dollars.²⁶ Police and army officials have also been accused of extorting bribes from mines and processing centres known to be non-compliant with licensing regulations²⁷ and receiving bribes from gold buyers,²⁸ sometimes in exchange for protection or information.²⁹

The threat posed by the machete gangs appears to be on the rise. Commonly referred to as *mashurugwi*, meaning people from Shurugwi, a key gold-producing district in the heart of Zimbabwe, these gangs are now a country-wide phenomenon.³⁰ Attacks have surged in recent months: according to a November 2020 report from International Crisis Group, 'the death toll over the past year runs into the hundreds'.³¹

As well as facilitating corrupt control of ASGM sites, these gangs also rob artisanal miners of their gold or money, violently displace miners from sites (substituting their own teams), extort miners and gold buyers and traders, and engage in forced labour.³² Local media have reported that female miners and successful mine sites owned by women have been targeted more than those ASGM sites run and operated by men.³³ Sexual violence against these female miners has also been reported.³⁴

The gangs are allegedly protected by high-ranking officials of the ruling ZANU-PF, including by providing gang members with immunity from arrest and prosecution, or facilitating their release on bail. In one story from Zvishavane, a mining town in the south of Zimbabwe, a gang member who had hacked someone to death was arrested but quickly released on bail before boasting publicly to the family that he was untouchable.³⁵ In other accounts, cases of gang violence have remained unresolved for years, with the perpetrator eventually released with little explanation.³⁶

The same gangs have also been employed for political violence during elections, creating linkages between violent control of the gold trade, abuse of political power for personal gain and corrupt influence over democratic processes. In January 2020, the parliamentary chairperson of the Mines and Mining Committee, Edmond Mkaratigwa, reported that ongoing investigations indicate that 'prominent people such as politicians and church leaders are running the unruly gangs to make a fortune'.³⁷ The names of politicians, including high-ranking officials, also featured prominently in a survey of gold-mining communities by the Centre for Natural Resource Governance, a Zimbabwean NGO.³⁸ An exiled former cabinet member has also made allegations that State Security Minister Owen 'Mudha' Ncube and President Emmerson Mnangagwa were implicated in investigations into a machete gang in Kwekwe in 2017.³⁹ Ncube has publicly denied the allegation and while President Mnangagwa has not expressly done so, he has publicly condemned the machete gang violence.

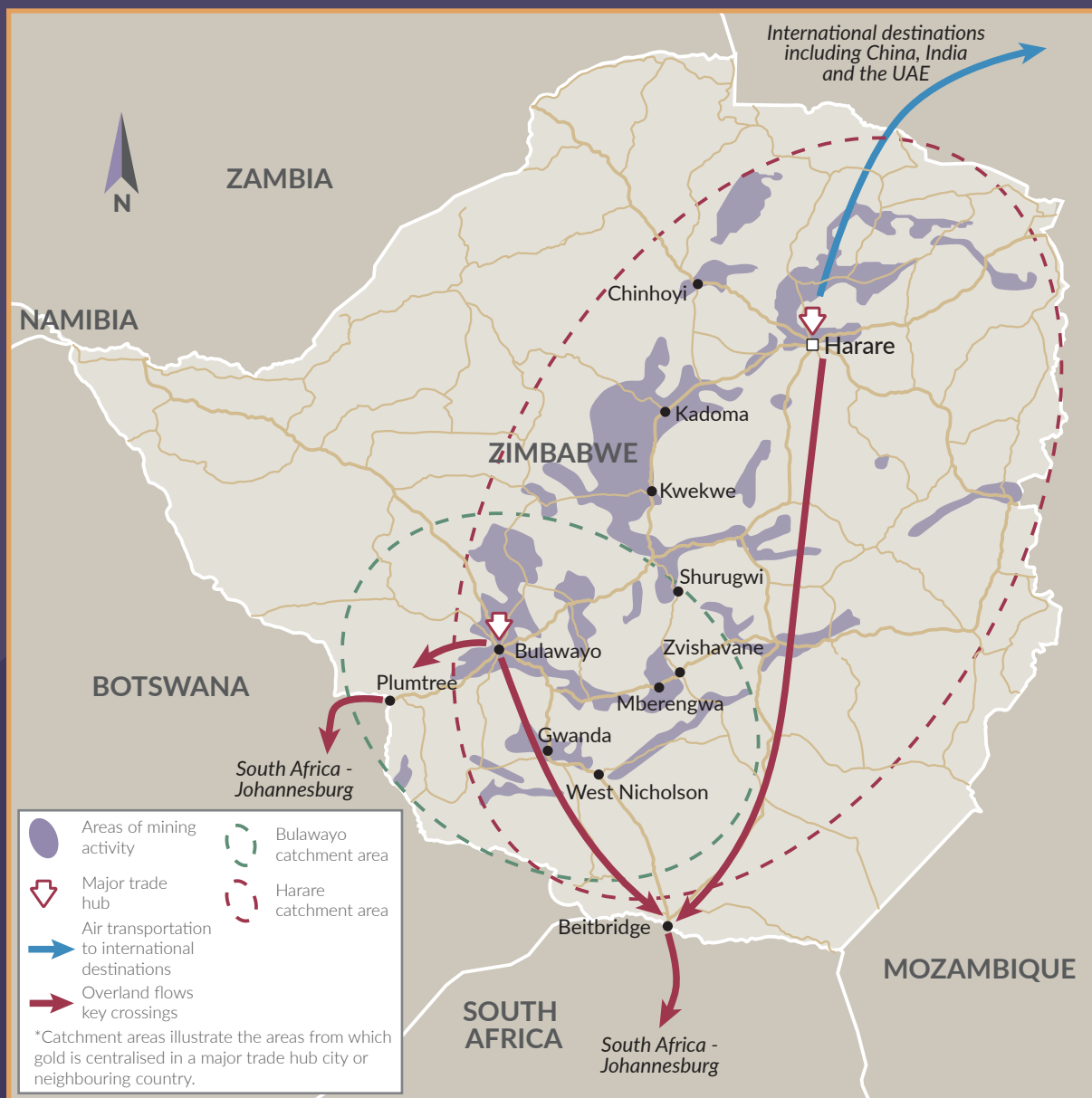


FIGURE 2 Major regional and international smuggling routes for gold from Zimbabwe.

LACK OF EFFECTIVE LAW ENFORCEMENT

In the wake of the surge of mining-related violence perpetrated by machete gangs in late 2019, the Zimbabwean police launched Operation Chikorokoza Ngachipere (meaning ‘illegal mining activities must stop’) in January 2020. The operation has led to the arrest of some 52 115 people in the period to September 2020.⁴⁰ This figure includes thousands of gold miners for trivial offences ranging from a failure to wear personal protective equipment to not having their identity cards, and violent criminal elements of the illegal-mining sector comprise only a fraction of this figure. In late November, local media reported that some 12 330 machete-gang members had been arrested since January – or less than a quarter of the total number of arrests under the main operation.⁴¹ In short, small-scale miners themselves have actually borne the brunt of police operations, rather than the perpetrators of the violence that mars the sector.



Watching over their turf. The Nice Time Bozzas are caught on camera in Helenvale, an urban area that is contested by some 20 gangs. Photo: © Corinna Kern/laif

3. Nelson Mandela Bay is an often-overlooked example of rampant gangsterism.

When the international media cover gang violence in South Africa, the focus is overwhelmingly on Cape Town. This is not without reason: using homicide rate as a proxy for general violence levels, Cape Town holds the title of most violent city in South Africa.⁴²

However, it does not stand alone. Some suburban communities in South Africa are now regularly experiencing similar levels of violence, yet these do not necessarily receive the same levels of notoriety.

Nelson Mandela Bay metropolitan area – comprising Port Elizabeth and a number of surrounding towns in the Eastern Cape Province – is home to many of these communities. Traditionally a blue-collar port area with an economy centred around car assembly and manufacturing, in recent years Nelson Mandela Bay has been experiencing a steady increase in violence. Our research has examined the specific local factors that have driven Nelson Mandela Bay to become one of the most violent places in South Africa.

VIOLENCE IN NELSON MANDELA BAY

In 2017/2018, Nelson Mandela Bay had just over 500 recorded murders, with a homicide rate of just over 55 per 100 000 residents. Violence is concentrated in particular neighbourhoods to an even greater degree than Cape Town or Johannesburg. In Bethelsdorp and Gelvandale – two of the worst-afflicted areas – levels of reported homicide are staggeringly high. In 2018/2019,

Bethelsdorp had 79 homicides per 100 000 people, while Gelvandale saw 124 homicides per 100 000. By comparison, no subnational area in Central America (considered by criminologists to be the most criminally violent region on Earth) exceeds 90 homicides per 100 000 of the population.⁴³

In both Nelson Mandela Bay and parts of Cape Town, racial and economic marginalization, extreme poverty, high rates of youth unemployment, the presence of organized-crime groups and failing government responses shape communities' lives and drive violence. There are, however, important differences between the two. While both cities' murder rates peaked in 2006/2007 and then declined to 2010/2011, their trajectories then diverged. While violence in Cape Town spiralled upwards to around 70 deaths per 100 000 in 2017/2018, Nelson Mandela Bay's stabilized at a high level for several years before increasing rapidly in 2015/2016, a period in which there was extensive gang-related violence in the city. The latest official figures (2018/2019) suggest that the city's murder rate is now above 60 cases per 100 000 residents, edging closer to Cape Town.

Our research in Nelson Mandela Bay has found that specific patterns of gang activity and emerging patterns of misgovernance are crucial to understanding the violence in the metropolitan area, both how it has increased so dramatically and how it differs to gang violence in Cape Town and elsewhere in South Africa.



FIGURE 3 Comparative homicide rates for Bethelsdorp, Gelvandale and Nelson Mandela Bay, 2009/2010 to 2018/2019. Bethelsdorp and Gelvandale are two of the worst-affected areas for gang violence in the metropolitan area.

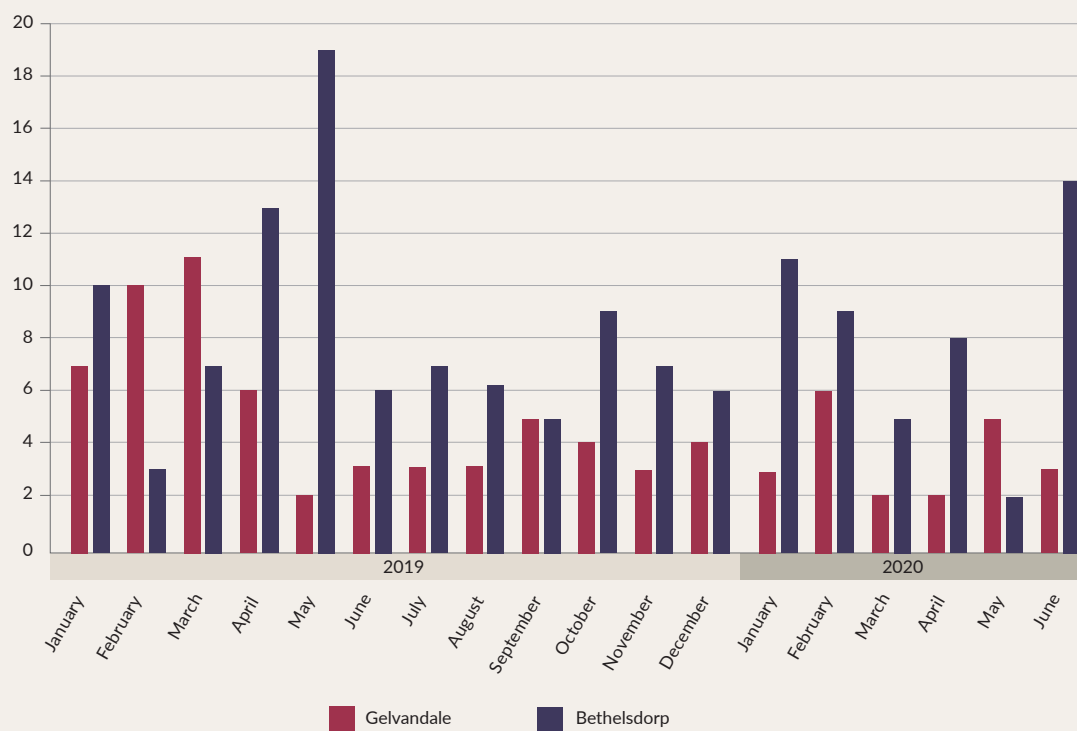


FIGURE 4 Gang-related murders in Gelvandale and Bethelsdorp, 2019 to June 2020.



Luchen Pieterse, 5, was killed, reportedly caught in the crossfire of a gang shoot-out, while flying his kite on the streets of Helenvale in March 2014. *Photo: GI-TOC*

GEMORS GANGSTERISM AND BUILDING LEGITIMACY

One distinctive pattern of gang violence observed in Nelson Mandela Bay, particularly in the northern parts of the city, is what has become known as *gemors* ('messy' or 'trashy') gangsterism.⁴⁴ This is violence directed indiscriminately at ordinary citizens, either for robbery or simply to spread fear.⁴⁵ This subverts the traditional use of violence by gangs for instrumental purposes, such as consolidating territory, enforcing agreements between gangs or revenge killings.⁴⁶

Many of the perpetrators of *gemors* gangsterism are young children between the ages of 9 and 14 who are paid for their actions with small quantities of drugs. Because the primary motive mainly seems to be the drugs,⁴⁷ rather than any economic motive or the loyalty and belonging that attracts children to 'traditional' street gangs, child gang members can be hired with ease, with neither gang hierarchy nor a sense of loyalty keeping them in check.

However, while some gangs have spread violence and instilled fear in the community, others often provide income, protection and services that would usually be supplied by the state. Gangs in Nelson Mandela Bay have reportedly purchased school uniforms for people in the community, paid for electricity, medicines and diapers and distributed food parcels.⁴⁸ By taking on

the provision of such services, gangs seek to garner legitimacy at the expense of local government.

CRIMINAL CONTROL OVER BUSINESS: GANGS, TENDERS AND HITS

There are persistent allegations that some gangsters in Nelson Mandela Bay have made moves to capture local government contracts as a means to extract 'rents' from state business.⁴⁹ This practice brings armed and violent actors into the arena of local politics – actors who are prepared to use violence to maintain their business interests and who enter into corrupt arrangements with local politicians. It also affords some veneer of legitimacy to criminal enterprises which are presented as legitimate businesses and recipients of public funds.

One interviewee – a police detective with knowledge of gang activities – said: 'Gang bosses have [registered] SMMEs [small, medium and micro-enterprises] and they have relationships with powerful politicians like ward councillors and maybe even high up ... That gangster that is operating like a businessperson still is the head of the gang and has all of his minions that are ready to kill for him because those kids are armed to the teeth with guns.'⁵⁰

A former gang member claimed that gang meddling in lucrative government contracts could be traced to the early years of South Africa's democracy: 'The gangsters found that they could extend their violent extortion rackets to manipulate control over council members by registering as SMMEs. ... Politicians were forced to succumb to gang bosses under the threat of violence.'⁵¹

Violence and murders related to government tenders reached an all-time high in 2019, when several homicides were linked to a tender for cleaning storm-water drains in the Nelson Mandela Bay metropolitan area.⁵² Lungelo 'Baba' Ningi, the leader of the Eastern Cape Black Business Caucus (a group apparently committed to the development of black entrepreneurs and business interests in the province), and businessman Nkululeko Gcakasi were two of the victims.⁵³ Ningi had been vocal in his support for local SMMEs but had also been accused (just weeks before his murder) of siphoning off money for himself.⁵⁴ It is also alleged that the Black Business Caucus was influential in the irregular allocation of funds in the tender process of the contract for storm-drain cleaning.⁵⁵



Gelvandale community residents gather during a march against violence and gangsterism in the area, August 2017.

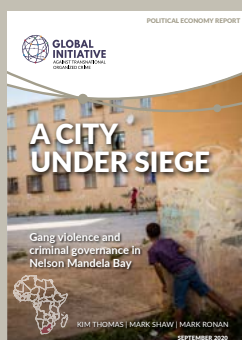
Photo: © Gallo Images/Die Burger/Lulama Zenzile.

At the time of writing, some R4 million (US\$260 000) from the storm-water project is still unaccounted for.⁵⁶ The former mayor of the metropolitan area, Mongameli Bobani, had opposed a forensic audit into the project, feeding suspicions that there may be involvement from the top tiers of local government.⁵⁷

Politicians may also look to benefit from the services offered by the gangs. As a police officer from Nelson Mandela Bay explained: 'The ward councillor or the high-level politician that [arranged] a tender for the gang boss also can have his wish granted in terms of the gang boss doing him a favour. The ward councillor or politician

maybe has an enemy in politics and then they go to the gang boss and say, "I helped you get this tender and I gave your people this and that, so sort out this rival councillor for me."⁵⁸

The result is a governance crisis whereby state functions at the local level are usurped by criminal actors while violence spirals on several fronts, from political hits to unpredictable *gemors* gangsterism. As a result, swathes of Nelson Mandela Bay's population are living under conditions of criminal governance. Nelson Mandela Bay deserves urgent attention, but overshadowed by Cape Town, may struggle to receive it.



- ◀ This report draws from research in a new GI-TOC ESA – Obs research report, *A city under siege: Gang violence and criminal governance in Nelson Mandela Bay*, which is the culmination of extensive interviews with community members, gangsters and government. The report highlights how Nelson Mandela Bay has been emerging as one of South Africa's major centres of gangsterism for many years, even though this has received little attention from national and international civil society. We advocate for a more coherent strategy to break the cycle of violence, roll back criminal influence in local authorities and erode the barriers of exclusion that separate communities in the city.

In order to advocate for and discuss effective policy responses, on 4 November 2020, GI-TOC board member Vusi Pikoli, South Africa's former National Director of Public Prosecutions, led a closed briefing in Nelson Mandela Bay with a high-level group including members of law-enforcement, prosecution and government departments in the Eastern Cape, as well as academics.

The closed briefing enabled all stakeholders to openly engage with the distressing issues raised by the report. These included, among others, corruption and misgovernance in the city's administration, policing shortcomings and the prevalence of *gemors* gangsters.

4. Corruption, crime networks and social media: the international illicit trade in Madagascan tortoises.

In the struggle for the future of Madagascar's critically-endangered ploughshare and radiated tortoises, decades of intense and successful conservation efforts have been nullified by huge increases in tortoise trafficking and poaching over the past 20 years. In the international exotic-pet trade, these tortoises' very rarity is what drives smugglers' interest. This is not just a conservation issue, but a governance issue: for every animal smuggled, there exists an extensive network of criminal and corrupt actors who actively and consistently undermine rule of law, governance and democracy.

RISING DEMAND, DIVERSE TRAFFICKING ROUTES

In the 1980s and 1990s, demand was driven by specialist collectors from all over the world, but the Madagascan authorities did not pay much attention to reptile trafficking. This changed in 1996 with the theft of 75 ploughshare tortoises from the Ampijoroa breeding centre.⁵⁹ This loss was followed by political changes a few years later: in 2004, the Malagasy government embraced biodiversity conservation and President Marc Ravalomanana spoke at the World Parks Congress in Durban, outlining a conservation plan that became known as the 'Durban Vision'. This triggered investment in protected-area development and management, and efforts to tackle environmental crimes.⁶⁰

Yet increasing demand from South East Asia, possibly driven by rising household income coupled with an interest in exotic pets, saw an increase in tortoise trafficking. Monitoring of trafficking trends have shown that trafficking has peaked around political instability in Madagascar, such as the coup that took place in 2009.⁶¹

Currently, tortoises are first trafficked by road from south-west Madagascar (radiated tortoises) or from the north-east (ploughshare tortoises). Although police inspection points on the main roads are ubiquitous (trafficked tortoises may pass through up

to 20 checkpoints), there have been few reports of seizures at these checkpoints, suggesting that low-level corruption is rife.

The main tortoise-trafficking routes out of Madagascar are either by air from Ivato Airport in Antananarivo, or by boat from Mahajanga in the north-west to Comoros. Secondary routes include regional flights from smaller airports to Comoros, Mayotte or Réunion. More recently there have been reports of radiated tortoises going directly by ship from south-west Madagascar to China, or by fishing boat to Mozambique.

The use of Ivato Airport as the main exit point for tortoise trafficking from Madagascar raises particular concerns regarding corruption and security. The methods used are practiced and professional. Tortoises are shipped in suitcases both as personal luggage and freight. 'Mules' are sometimes offered US\$500 to take a return flight to Bangkok with only hand baggage.⁶² Baggage check-in is facilitated by airport staff linked to the smugglers – there have been reports of bags bypassing security and being loaded directly onto the aircraft. At the destination, the passage of the mule and their luggage is again often facilitated by airport staff linked to the smugglers.⁶³

Tortoise traffickers in Madagascar can be divided into two groups. The first comprises Malagasy citizens who collect tortoises and sell them to international traffickers. Into this category falls Andriamanalintseheho Tsilavina Ranaivoarivelo, alias Atsila Ratsila, an unemployed 27-year-old who had extensive contacts in South East Asia and was caught with radiated tortoises in a sting operation coordinated by conservation NGOs in Madagascar in 2016.⁶⁴ Corruption is also a part of this group's modus operandi. In one well-documented tortoise-trafficking investigation, Madagascan police officers reported that they had been immediately offered a US\$6 800 bribe to release the Madagascan nationals they had placed under arrest, and there was subsequent pressure by a general to release the traffickers.⁶⁵



FIGURE 5 Major trafficking routes of ploughshare and radiated tortoises, within Madagascar and across the region.

SOURCE: Madagascar, ENACT Africa Organised Crime Index, <https://ocindex.net/country/madagascar>.

The second group comprises foreign nationals who are either based in Madagascar or who regularly travel there, such as Anson Wong, a notorious Malaysian wildlife trafficker whose operations in Madagascar were exposed in a documentary by Al Jazeera in 2013.⁶⁶ Local sources currently describe a network of Asian nationals who have been living in Madagascar for a long time and run legal businesses, but who are known to also run a tortoise-trafficking operation.⁶⁷ One researcher at an NGO, which specializes in investigating wildlife crime, described an Asian wildlife trafficker he is aware of who regularly travels to Madagascar and has contacts with corrupt senior police officers who facilitate his visits.⁶⁸




























































Previous and ongoing GI-TOC research⁶⁹ has identified various illicit flows that overlap with the same







routes used by tortoise traffickers: cannabis and radiated tortoises travel by the same roads and through the same checkpoints from the south-west to Antananarivo;⁷⁰ tortoises and heroin are both trafficked through airports; and tortoises, cannabis and illegal migrants are smuggled by boat to Comoros. There is little to suggest, however, that the same criminal networks are in control of the illegal tortoise trade and these other illegal markets: these have different drivers and different destination markets. But where these illegal flows are passing through the same routes and transport hubs, it is likely that they share the same facilitators who arrange transport and pay bribes to corrupt officials. The confluence of illicit flows is not coincidental. The erosion of governance and oversight associated with one illegal trade facilitates others.



Ploughshare and radiated tortoises displayed on Instagram under #angonoka. The images are of captive-held tortoises taken from Instagram accounts in South East Asia. Photo: © #angonoka

Significant seizures of radiated and ploughshare tortoises (2017–2020)

2017		
14 May	26 June	August/September
 325  Ivato International Airport, Madagascar  5  Kuala Lumpur International Airport, Malaysia  Abu Dhabi International Airport	 370  Ivato International Airport, Madagascar  2  Kenya  Vietnam	 16 16 ploughshare tortoises transferred by the Zanzibar government to a privately owned wildlife petting centre for safe-keeping. They were believed to have been seized at the Zanzibar airport.
1 January	(2017 – date unknown)	17 December
 76  Toliara 76 radiated tortoises seized along with 3.5 kg of cannabis.	 116  Mahajanga, Madagascar  Port in Moroni	 9  Ivato International Airport, Madagascar  Roland Garros Airport, Reunion  Guangzhou Baiyun International Airport, China
10 January	11 January	3 April
 460  Morondava Beach, Madagascar Tortoises were found in bags on the stranded boat that had washed up on to the beach.	 126  Ivato International Airport, Madagascar  Kenya  Vietnam	 26  Ivato International Airport, Madagascar
24 October	1 May	10 April
 7 347  Tortoises seized in Betioky, Madagascar	 8  Kunming, Yunnan Province, China	 10 068  9 888 live and 180 dead radiated tortoises were discovered crammed into a house in Toliara, Madagascar.
6 December	2019	18 July
 300+  Mahajanga, Madagascar  Itsandra, Comoros	 5  Ivato International Airport, Madagascar  Bangkok, Thailand	 2  Malaysia  Taiwan Taoyuan International Airport
2019 – date unknown	late 2019	28 September
 400  400 tortoises were seized at Zanzibar airport. They are being kept at a secure location in Zanzibar.	 50  Comoros	 55  Moroni, Comoros  2  Addis Ababa Bole International Airport  Hong Kong International Airport
2020	June	9 July
 36  Madagascar  Maputo	 708  708 radiated tortoises seized at the Zanzibar airport. Plans are underway for repatriation to Zanzibar.	 144  Beheloke commune, Madagascar

Key	 Radiated tortoises	 Origin location	 Transit location
	 Ploughshare tortoises	 Discovery location	 Destination location

THE ILLICIT MARKET FOR TORTOISES

Thailand, Hong Kong and Indonesia are the most common final destinations for ploughshare tortoises.⁷¹ The animals are most commonly seized transiting Kenya, but were also seized transiting Mauritius, Comoros, the UAE and India. For radiated tortoises, China is the primary destination and Malaysia the second-most common destination – typically in flights leaving from Madagascar. Field data reported by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime in 2020 found that between US\$2 and US\$10 is paid per tortoise in Madagascar, and they are finally sold to customers for between US\$1 000 and US\$2 000 (for a one- to three-year-old animal, depending on the colour).⁷²

Social-media sites and other online platforms play a crucial role in connecting players in the illegal tortoise market.⁷³ Platforms such as Facebook, Instagram and others both facilitate and drive the exotic-pet market, firstly by providing a relatively traceless channel for sellers and buyers to connect, and secondly by popularizing – and through that, contributing to legitimizing – ownership of these species as pets.

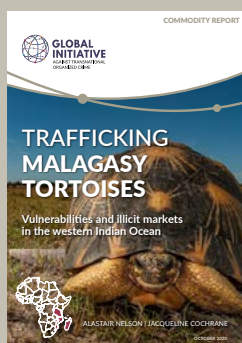
As part of our research into the trade in Malagasy tortoises, we used an innovative machine-learning-

powered tool called the Cascade to explore the potential for such tools in combatting the illegal trafficking of radiated and ploughshare tortoises. The tool has assisted in finding examples of endangered Malagasy tortoises being posted online, either by collectors showing of their specimens, sellers advertising their wares or the online back-and-forth where collectors and other enthusiasts discuss wildlife trading.

A BROAD RESPONSE NEEDED

The excellent species-conservation work being done by organizations on the ground to protect breeding populations, along with habitat-conservation initiatives in the key national parks, are helping to alleviate the dire situation for Madagascar's tortoises.

Meanwhile, tortoise poaching and trafficking highlights larger governance and rule-of-law challenges in Madagascar. Addressing these problems is not a conservation issue. These are broader problems requiring broader responses focused on improving governance, rule of law and crime prevention and building resilience to organized crime – issues that fall within the remit of government agencies, rather than conservation NGOs.



- ◀ This report draws from research in a recently published GI-TOC ESA – Obs research report, *Trafficking in Malagasy Tortoises: Vulnerabilities and illicit markets in the western Indian Ocean* by Alastair Nelson and Jacqueline Cochrane, which investigates the political economy of the illicit tortoise trade. This is part of several GI-TOC research projects looking at organized-crime dynamics in Madagascar, along the Swahili Coast and across the Indian Ocean islands. This research was discussed at an online seminar, *Une plaque tournante: Madagascar's changing role in regional illicit markets*, which took place on 7 December 2020 and is now available as a recording. For more details, visit: <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/un-plaque-tournante-madagascar-webinar/>.

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