

**Statement of Margaret H. Nardi Deputy
Assistant Secretary of State for International Narcotics and Law
Enforcement Affairs before the
Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Africa Subcommittee
Hearing on Africa Maritime Security Challenges
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Chairman Cruz, Ranking Member Booker, and distinguished Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to address maritime security challenges in Africa and the Department of State's efforts to counter threats to U.S. interests and commercial diplomacy. Through robust partnerships with African governments and interagency coordination, the Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs (INL) confronts illicit maritime activity, piracy, and trafficking networks that threaten freedom of navigation and endanger U.S. commercial interests.

Confronting the Surge of Illicit Maritime Activity

INL programs combat transnational criminal organizations (TCOs) and other illicit actors who exploit gaps in maritime law enforcement across Africa to smuggle a variety of illicit goods, including drugs and illegally extracted natural resources. In the Western Indian Ocean, networks originating in Southwest Asia—particularly Afghanistan and Iran—traffic heroin, methamphetamines, and other narcotics via dhows and other vessels, moving drugs from production areas through the Arabian Sea and along the East African coast. Recent law enforcement data, reveal a 150 percent increase in methamphetamine seizures in the past year, including some conducted as a result of INL assistance, along traditional Southwest Asian trafficking routes. In addition, there have been eight cases of large scale Mexican cartel-linked methamphetamine laboratories operating in Southern and Eastern Africa, which had not been observed in the region prior to 2023. U.S. law enforcement is also seeing evidence of Mexican cartels exploiting maritime routes and regulatory gaps governing precursor chemicals to traffic synthetic drugs in the region.

On Africa's west coast, the Gulf of Guinea remains a hotspot for piracy, illegal fishing, and drug trafficking from the Caribbean and South America. INL is providing direct maritime law enforcement training, port security equipment and training, and building partnerships within the region, across the Atlantic, and with U.S. law enforcement agencies to help countries confront these activities that threaten vital shipping lanes and U.S. businesses, while also providing revenue to TCOs and terrorist actors in North Africa and the Sahel. Foreign industrial fleets, including many linked to China, exploit regional waters, driving alarming levels of illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing. This depletes fish stocks and worsens economic instability, leaving coastal populations vulnerable to recruitment by criminal and terrorist organizations.

Russia and China are more than willing to violate African sovereignty in the pursuit of military and commercial footholds along African coasts. China is active in nearly every African country, with at least 61 port projects, and its first overseas People's Liberation Army (PLA) base in Djibouti. In 2023, an INL project identified links between fishing vessels escorted by the PLA Naval Escort Task Force and a privately operated fishing base in Mauritania, supported by China's Maritime Belt and Road Initiative. These vessels and their owners have created corruption risks at every level, in various African countries, which reduces opportunities for U.S. trade and investment.

U.S. Response and Partnerships

INL programming addresses these maritime threats by improving maritime enforcement and port security in West Africa, countering transnational threats, and enabling U.S. trade and investment. IUU fishing is often linked to other crimes, making it imperative that our training programs include counternarcotics, identification of human trafficking and forced labor, information sharing and technology to track and target vessels for interdiction, as well as training on the 'judicial finish' to help countries prosecute complex maritime crimes.

Port security is also a critical element of maritime security. Ensuring cargo that is transiting or off-loaded at ports is screened and verified aids our efforts to combat TCOs that are known to smuggle weapons, drugs, people, and other illicit goods via cargo containers in poorly secured ports. To counter malign Chinese interference with U.S. trade interests in West Africa and to protect Americans from online scams, INL is working with the U.S. Coast Guard and CBP to improve port security and cyber security infrastructure in West Africa.

In the Western Indian Ocean, INL brings together countries impacted by transnational criminal activity to share information and collaboratively respond to violations of sovereignty. We work closely with partners to strengthen their abilities to track, board, and apprehend those engaged in illegal activities to ensure consistent prosecution and incarceration of criminals that threaten U.S. national security. And our efforts are paying dividends – just last month, Mauritian law enforcement officers, trained by INL on maritime search and seizure techniques, intercepted 433 kilos of cocaine with an estimated street value of over \$70 million.

Strengthening Targeted U.S. Support for African Partners

INL is strengthening targeted programming to secure vulnerable ports and maritime areas by working with U.S. law enforcement partners to train West African maritime law enforcement and judicial officials to combat maritime crime and piracy that threatens U.S. security and commercial interests. INL is also facilitating information sharing between countries on the Gulf of Guinea and Latin American partners to address transcontinental trafficking by Western Hemisphere-based FTOs. A recent maritime enforcement operation by INL trained units that included work between Cabo Verde, Mauritania, Portugal, and Brazil resulted in an at-sea interdiction of an estimated one ton of cocaine transiting the Gulf of Guinea.

We are also supporting customs enforcement in major African ports to increase interdictions of illicit goods often exploited by malign Chinese actors. In Gabon, INL is in the process of procuring Defender-class maritime vessels and training to counter IUU fishing, particularly activities linked to China. INL also supports customs work at Gabon's Port of Libreville-Owendo by establishing an inter-agency Port Control Unit to combat transnational crime at the seaport. With INL support to professionalize the Kenyan Coast Guard, Kenya conducted 20 joint operations with neighboring countries in a six-month period earlier this year, resulting in interdictions of drugs and disruptions to human trafficking networks.

In addition, INL supports a range of initiatives to strengthen maritime security in the Western Indian Ocean, including technical assistance and equipment provision to improve intelligence-driven operations and legal frameworks for prosecuting maritime crimes. In 2026, INL is evaluating additional opportunities in East and Southern Africa to strengthen oversight and management of maritime ports, particularly ports experiencing increased Chinese maritime interference.

Conclusion

In conclusion, with this Committee's support, INL intends to continue working with our regional partners to strengthen maritime and port security as well as counter destructive criminal actors in support of U.S. trade and investment. Secure maritime routes in Africa are essential to ensure reliable movement of U.S commerce, especially energy and critical minerals. When maritime governance is weak, adversaries exploit these gaps and U.S. supply chains are threatened.

Thank you for your attention and leadership on these threats to maritime security which impact the United States. I welcome your questions.

