



## **DESTABILIZATION FACTORS AFFECTING WESTERN AFRICA: CASE STUDY OF SIERRA LEONE & LIBERIA**

**Date:** November 21, 2025

*Disclaimer: This briefing note contains the encapsulation of views presented by the speaker and does not exclusively represent the views of the Canadian Association for Security and Intelligence Studies.*

### **KEY EVENTS**

On November 21, 2025, Charles Suilen presented *Destabilization Factors Affecting Western Africa: Case Study of Sierra Leone & Liberia* at the 2025 West Coast Security Conference. The presentation was followed by a question-and-answer period with audience members and CASIS Vancouver executives. The session examined the drivers of regional destabilization in West Africa through an exploration of regional actors, triggers and trends, and contemporary security challenges. In tandem, it examined security sector reform efforts and used Sierra Leone and Liberia as primary case studies.

### **NATURE OF DISCUSSION**

The discussion focused on intersecting regional trends contributing to instability in West Africa, including trans-Atlantic narcotics trafficking, illicit resource exploitation, maritime and environmental insecurity, and the spillover effects of violent extremism in the Sahel. Mr. Suilen emphasized how these pressures converge at the national level in Sierra Leone and Liberia, both of which are navigating political reform amid heightened regional insecurity. The presentation also assessed the role of European Union-led security sector reform initiatives and the importance of regional coordination and local ownership in achieving long-term stability.

### **BACKGROUND**

Mr. Suilen identified four primary destabilization triggers currently shaping the security environment in parts of West Africa. Trans-Atlantic narcotics trafficking was presented as a central stressor, with cocaine flows moving from Latin

America through West Africa and onto Europe, in response to growing European demand. Most of the trafficking was described as maritime based, utilizing container shipping and low-profile vessels, making coastal states particularly vulnerable. In this respect, West Africa's geographic position was highlighted as a key factor in its attractiveness as a transit corridor, with narcotics activity increasingly being exploited within broader patterns of organized crime and insecurity.

Illicit wildlife flows and illegal fishing were identified as additional destabilizing factors. Mr. Suilen noted that a considerable proportion of global illegal fishing activity occurs off the West African coast, which in turn threatens food security, state revenue, and maritime governance. The exploitation of endangered species and maritime resources was framed as both an environmental and security concern, requiring greater monitoring and law enforcement capacity.

Maritime and environmental security challenges were further compounded by the emergence of sanctioned Russian "shadow fleets" operating in regional waters, raising concerns related to sanctions evasion, environmental risk, and weak maritime oversight. These developments were presented as contributing to an increasingly congested and opaque maritime security environment. Note: these ships not necessarily operate off the coast of West Africa but can cause a liability and responsibility for the country of which flag is being used.

Religious extremism in the Sahel was discussed as an indirect but pervasive destabilizer. Mr. Suilen highlighted Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso as key areas of concern, noting that extremist groups seek permissive environments that offer access to trafficking routes and limited state reach. The convergence of extremist activity and narcotics trafficking was described as potentially concerning as illicit revenue streams could provide financial resilience and operational flexibility to armed groups.

Turning to Sierra Leone and Liberia specifically, Mr. Suilen outlined a range of internal security challenges exacerbating localized pressures. These included the visible effects of maritime trafficking, such as an abandoned low-profile vessel washing ashore on the coast of Sierra Leone in January 2025, although no contraband was detected. He also noted the presence of European narcotics traffickers operating in Sierra Leone; both governments have declared narcotics

a national crisis, reflecting the scale and persistence of the challenge, and mainly impacting unemployed youth.

Illicit mining and deforestation were identified as ongoing security and governance concerns in both countries. Increased deforestation – driven by housing expansion and reliance on charcoal due to limited access to electricity – was framed as both an environmental and socio-economic vulnerability. These activities were described as undermining state authority and contributing to longer-term instability.

Political instability was highlighted as a further compounding factor. Both Sierra Leone and Liberia are set to hold elections in 2028 and 2029, respectively. Mr. Suilen cited incidents of political violence, including a failed coup d'état attempt in Sierra Leone in November 2023, and an arson attack on a parliamentary institution in Liberia in December 2024, as indicators of fragile political environments. Refugee inflows from neighboring states, including from Burkina Faso into Liberia, were said to be adding pressure to domestic security and governance systems, particularly around identification and monitoring.

The presentation also addressed the growing role of foreign information operations. Mr. Suilen noted that Russian disinformation and misinformation activity on social media has increased in some politically fragile contexts. Such activity was framed as a potential force multiplier for existing political and social tensions.

Mr. Suilen subsequently examined the role of European Union security sector reform initiatives in mitigating these challenges. He highlighted EU-funded programs operating across West Africa, including SEACOP, which targets Trans-Atlantic cocaine trafficking, human trafficking, and weapons flows. He also pointed to the West African Police Information System (WAPIS), which integrates law enforcement data through Interpol-supported platforms. In addition, he addressed the Support to West Africa Integrated Maritime Security (SWAIMS) program, focusing on Operational Response and Management of the Rule of Law at Sea for the coastal ECOWAS countries, resulting in delivery of RHIBS for the respective naval and coast guard forces. These initiatives were presented as valuable capacity-building programs, particularly when paired with effective intelligence sharing and sustained political commitment.

The presentation concluded by stressing that long-term success depends on continued regional coordination, trust-building between states, and intelligence-sharing mechanisms that respect sovereignty while addressing transnational threats, preferably in ECOWAS and/or Mano River Union context. Mr. Suilen emphasized that external capacity-building efforts should complement, rather than substitute for, tailored local solutions.

### Question and Answer

*What is the impact of traditionally democratic powers taking steps to degrade the rules-based order? The U.S. and states in Western Europe, and more recently, democracies in Latin America, and could this open a vacuum for China or Russia to fill?*

Democracy is context-dependent and externally imposed models often fail to account for local realities. In this sense, democracy is a matter of definition, which must align with localised contexts and dynamics. Afghanistan can serve as an example and exemplifies how Western conceptions of democracy can prove ill-suited to local conditions. Deeper contextual understanding is thus a necessity; instability in the Global South often manifests not through overt conflict but through embedded criminal and terrorist networks operating below the threshold of open violence. And approaches to mitigating or combating this must be rooted in these understandings.

*Do you think current policies and alliances are well suited to face strategies by countries like China, Russia, and Iran to expand their place in the global order? Based on current projections what do you think a future rules-based order will look like?*

Both the United States and the European Union are reorganising and reassessing their foreign policy approaches and partnerships to counter, for example, China's Belt and Road Initiative. Through its Global Gateway concept, the European Union is shifting away from traditional development-centric engagement toward partnership-based models that emphasize economic cooperation and capacity empowerment, including expanded European business and trade relationships with African states.

## KEY POINTS OF DISCUSSION

- West Africa's geographic position has made it a key transit corridor for trans-Atlantic narcotics trafficking, predominantly via maritime routes. These flows intersect with broader organized crime networks (even from Europe), placing coastal states under sustained security pressure.
- Illegal fishing, wildlife trafficking, illicit mining, and deforestation are eroding food security, state revenue, and environmental sustainability. These activities weaken maritime governance and contribute to long-term socio-economic instability.
- European Union security sector reform initiatives, including SEACOP and WAPIS, play a critical role in regional stabilization, but long-term effectiveness depends on trust, intelligence sharing, and locally grounded solutions supported by international partners. More broadly, joint capacity-building mechanisms, intelligence sharing, and cross-border local cooperation are critical to countering domestic and transnational threats.

## FURTHER READING

Suilen, C. (2024). LESSONS LEARNED ABOUT THE IMPORTANCE OF REGIONAL COOPERATION: A CASE STUDY OF GUYANA. *The Journal of Intelligence, Conflict, and Warfare*, 6(3), 197–201.  
<https://doi.org/10.21810/jicw.v6i3.6395>



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