



AFRICA - Western Africa likely to be an area of confrontation between Colombian and Nigerian drug traffickers: UN expert warns

Rome (Agenzia Fides) – A Boeing flight hired by South American traffickers crashed on takeoff in northern Mali. Alexandre Schmidt, an official of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) has commented on the event. "A Boeing coming from Venezuela landed on a makeshift landing strip some 15 kilometers (nine miles) from Gao (in the northwest) and unloaded cocaine and other illegal substances," Schmidt told reporters in Dakar, Senegal's capital. "The plane was about to take off but crashed on November 5." The plane was later burned down by drug traffickers, to erase any incriminating traces.

The UN agency official added that the drugs were not found. No one knows how much cocaine the plane was carrying, but according to Schmidt a plane like that can carry up to 10 tons. The use of an airplane of this size is new in the trafficking of cocaine from South America destined for Europe via West Africa. Drug dealers, according to Schmidt, take advantage of the fact that in the north of Mali, there is no radar coverage. The planes land on makeshift runways to unload their cargo of drugs that is loaded on trucks for transport to North Africa, using the caravan roads that have been used for centuries for licit and illicit business. From the African shores of the Mediterranean, the drugs are then transported to Europe.

West Africa has for some years been an important transit point for South American cocaine destined for the European market. According to the UNODC representative, however, there are signs of further dangerous developments: the region is becoming a site for refinement of illicit substances, not only cocaine, but also heroin and synthetic drugs. The most important clue to this development is the discovery in July of various hiding places in Guinea Conakry holding large quantities of chemicals used to refine cocaine and heroin from opium production, as well as to produce ecstasy. The opium is transported to the region by a group of Nigerian traffickers who are based in Pakistan. Groups of Nigerian traffickers are also in competition in the Colombian cocaine trafficking. According to Schmidt Nigerian drug traffickers travel to Brazil to buy drugs and then ship them to Europe through their diaspora. According to the UNODC representative, a violent clash between Nigerian and Colombian drug traffickers could be unleashed.

According to one expert who gave his testimony before the Subcommittee of Foreign Affairs for Africa of the United States Senate, drug trafficking constitutes "the greatest threat to stability" for African countries involved in it. (LM) (Agenzia Fides 18/11/2009)