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WEST AFRICA NOW MAJOR HUB FOR SMUGGLING COCAINE FROM SOUTH AMERICA INTO EUROPE, SAYS INCB

Vienna, 19 February (*United Nations Information Service*) – Cocaine consignments destined mainly for illicit markets in Europe are increasingly smuggled through West Africa. More and more cocaine seizures have been effected on the high seas of the Gulf of Guinea and on the African mainland, indicating that West Africa has become an important transit and stockpiling area for cocaine consignments from Latin America destined for Europe.

Almost all countries in West Africa are affected, particularly Cape Verde, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Mauritania, Nigeria, Senegal and Sierra Leone. Governments of countries in the region reported seizures of cocaine totalling about 3 tons in 2006 and over 6 tons in 2007; whereas in 2005, the total amount of cocaine seized in Africa was barely 1 ton.

Cocaine trafficking through Africa continued unabated in 2008. In January 2008, the French navy seized 2.5 tons on board a Liberian fishing vessel off the coast of Liberia. In Sierra Leone, 700 kilograms of cocaine were seized on an aircraft arriving from Venezuela, and 300 kilograms of cocaine were seized in Ghana in a motor vehicle coming from Guinea. However, these quantities represent only the tip of the iceberg. According to UNODC estimates, about 27 per cent (or 40 tons) of the cocaine abused annually in Europe has passed through West Africa.

The emergence of West Africa as a transit area for cocaine trafficking may have several causes. The geographical location of West Africa makes it an ideal staging post for trans-shipping cocaine consignments from Latin America to the growing cocaine markets in Europe. Traffickers generally target countries with weak governmental structures that have limited capacity to defend themselves against drug trafficking and its consequences, such as corruption and drug abuse. The Board has serious concerns that drug trafficking undermines political, economic and social structures, weakening the control of governments over their territories and institutions.

Several Governments in West Africa have taken action to address the problem. In Senegal, a new law adopted by the Parliament provides for increased penalties for drug trafficking. Similar legislation is before Parliament in Nigeria. At the subregional level, Governments have acted within the framework of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). A high-level ECOWAS Conference held in Praia in October 2008 adopted a regional action plan identifying regional initiatives to be undertaken to address the issue.

INCB notes that the international community has responded to the surge in cocaine trafficking in West Africa. Following a call by the Security Council to the Government of Guinea-Bissau to address the continued growth in drug trafficking which threatens peace and security in Guinea-Bissau and the sub-region, the international community committed funds to support drug control efforts in that country. INCB calls upon the international community to provide Governments of countries in West Africa with all the assistance necessary to tackle the problem.