



## President Bio keeps cocaine lord in the family

One of Europe's most wanted criminals is the partner of one of the President's daughters and has transferred his operations to Freetown safeguards overridden. Then, they kept it secret

Sierra Leone has been in a state of shock ever since one of Freetown's most astonishing urban myths was confirmed as fact – that one of Europe's most dangerous criminals, convicted Dutch cocaine kingpin **Jos Leijdekkers**, or 'Bolle Jos' ('Fat Jos' in Dutch), is at large in Sierra Leone and believed to be running his business there.

Leijdekkers, 33, was captured on video on 1 January sitting next to and chatting with **Agnes Bio**, 30, a daughter of President **Julius Maada Bio**, only two rows behind the President and the First Lady **Fatima Maada Bio**, at a church service. Dozens of family members and top government officials, including the Chief Minister, **David Sengeh**, were at the New Year's Day thanksgiving service in the President's home village of Tihun, Southern Province.

Agnes Bio is the partner of Leijdekkers and they have been pictured together in romantic settings on social media. She is a particular favourite of her father's, who has promoted her career in the foreign ministry. After serving as an 'advisor' in the foreign ministry, she is now accredited to Sierra Leone's permanent mission to the UN in New York, *Africa Confidential* has confirmed, and as such is immune from arrest or detention or having her bags searched on entry or exit from the United States.

Leijdekkers was sentenced in the Netherlands in absentia in June to 24 years in prison for smuggling seven tonnes of

cocaine, robbery, and ordering a killing. Before Leijdekkers was identified in Sierra Leone, *Africa Confidential* was investigating the involvement of top government officials there in cocaine smuggling. Like several neighbouring countries, Sierra Leone is no stranger to the cocaine trade (see box – Freetown, the cocaine entrepôt).

Sources in Freetown say the Dutchman took over Sierra Leone's existing cocaine smuggling network, and, deploying enormous bribes, recruited members of the country's national security infrastructure to provide logistical and security services.

### MOVE FROM TURKEY

Leijdekkers ran his operation from Turkey until late 2022, according to media reports, when he disappeared. His presence in Sierra Leone became public after a video surfaced which was shot in the early hours of 1 January 2023 at Freetown's popular nightclub Scarlet, where he got into a scuffle with **Hussein Fawaz**, the nephew of **Haj Fawaz**, a prominent Sierra Leonean-Lebanese businessman, we hear.

According to a police statement, the fight began after Fawaz attempted to calm down a quarrel between a security guard and a man identified as 'investor and businessman Omar Sheriff'. Leijdekkers goes by this name in Sierra Leone, the authorities have acknowledged.

### FREETOWN, THE COCAINE ENTREPÔT

Cocaine smugglers have long been sending the drug to Europe from South America via West Africa, including through Sierra Leone (AC Vol 48 No 13). In July 2008 then Transport Minister **Ibrahim Kemoh Sesay** was suspended and later sacked during an investigation into the arrival of 700 kilograms of cocaine in a twin-engine aircraft plane which landed at Lungi airport. He denied any wrongdoing and was not prosecuted for any criminal offence.

Fast forward to October 2023, when authorities in Antwerp intercepted a shipment of 7.7 tonnes of cocaine hidden between soya beans exported from Sierra Leone – the first in a series of similar incidents. Last December, Liverpool-based criminals were sentenced to long prison terms after importing £140 million worth of cocaine hidden in bags of gari that came from Sierra Leone.

On 20 September last year a private jet with a fake registration number landed without permission at Freetown. It carried four **Mexicans** and one **Dutch** national, who initially refused to submit their documents.

The captain, who claimed not to speak English, later explained that he had been paid US\$20,000 for a trip from Liberia to Mexico with the men. It was widely speculated that the jet had flown from South America loaded with cocaine but the authorities apparently found nothing suspicious and later released the men after they paid a \$100,000 fine.

Asked for comment on the incident, the US Drug Enforcement Administration told *Africa Confidential* at the time it, 'does not comment on ongoing investigations'. On 13 January 2025, **Guinean** authorities found seven suitcases with 180kg of cocaine and \$100,000 in cash in a Sierra Leonean embassy vehicle. The ambassador, **Alimamy Bangura**, was recalled to Freetown but the Guinean government would not let him go, we hear, and only relented when the Sierra Leone Foreign Minister **Timothy Kabba** came in person to bring him back.

Five days later, the Sierra Leonean police discovered an abandoned custom-built mini-submarine, of a type cocaine smugglers have used to transport cocaine from larger ships to the shore or between countries, at Black Johnson Beach, a famed natural beach. The police concluded that nothing of security interest was found after they examined the craft.

Experts on the smuggling say that once in Sierra Leone, the drugs will be hidden in containers bound for export to Europe or given to 'mules' to hide the drug on their person or in luggage, but myriad other means are used to get the drugs to their destination. ●

## FAVOURITE DAUGHTER WHO WENT DUTCH

**Agnes Bio**, 30, is believed to be a special favourite of the President, who has several children by different mothers. Agnes is currently 'co-lead' of the Youth, Peace and Security team in the Sierra Leone Permanent Mission to the United Nations and accredited to the UN Security Council as a diplomat.

She runs the Agnes Bio Foundation which finances training and apprenticeships for young people. But her biggest extravagance may have been a huge party on 29 November last year, which was said to be an engagement party for her and her partner Jos Leijdekkers, the convicted drug smuggler. It was also a week after her birthday on 19 November.

Social media footage broadcast the next day which quickly went viral showed two of Africa's biggest Afrobeats superstars, **Tiwa Savage** and **Ayra Starr**, performing together at a private event the night before. For a private gig, artists of such stature could expect fees worth tens of thousands of dollars. The stars are believed to have flown in specially for the occasion on private jets. The video shows among the small audience **Isaac Bayoh** and **Shaekou Allieu**, both members of Sierra Leone's Permanent Mission to the UN in New York, as well as **Zainab Kandeh**, Agnes's mother.

Agnes has appeared on platforms at side events during the UN General Assembly, including last year. She was recorded making a speech about her foundation seated next to the ex-UN diplomat, **Michael Keating**, former Special Representative of the Secretary-General in **Somalia** and current head of the European Institute of Peace.

It's unclear how the relationship between Agnes and Leijdekkers started. Agnes was born in 1994 in Ireland grew up in **Guinea**, **Morocco** and **France** and completed her education in **Switzerland** and Morocco.

Agnes's mother, Zainab Kandeh, was appointed Consul-General of Sierra Leone in Dakhla, the capital of Western Sahara, in 2021 when Morocco and Sierra Leone resumed diplomatic relations.

According to diplomatic sources, Morocco agreed to finance the consulate as part of a series of favours from the kingdom to Sierra Leone in exchange for President Maada Bio's recognition of Morocco's sovereignty over the disputed Western Sahara.

Screenshots of Agnes's Instagram account show her and Leijdekkers together as a couple. There is no suggestion she is implicated in any suspected illegal activity connected with Leijdekkers. ●

Leijdekkers is clearly identifiable in the video. He slapped Fawaz in retaliation and in the end, his bodyguard fired towards Fawaz, injuring his legs. Also in the video is a man accused of being a key operative in Leijdekkers's operation, **Alusine Kanneh**, Sierra Leone's Chief Immigration Officer. Kanneh has been MP for Nomo and Tonkia chiefdoms in Kenema District since 2012 and a deputy whip for the ruling Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP) before he was catapulted into his current job by the President.

When the video surfaced, Kanneh was accused of being part of Leijdekkers's network. Kanneh denied the charge, saying that he was simply trying to separate the combatants and did not know either man. 'The malicious allegations suggesting that Hon. Kanneh has been associating with a wanted drug dealer are completely unfounded and fabricated to discredit his efforts,' he added.

As well as asking Kanneh to respond to the allegation about

Leijdekkers, we invited him to react to *Africa Confidential's* discovery from public records that he had bought three properties in Delaware and Pennsylvania, in the **United States**, for US\$1.9 million between November 2022 and July 2024, asking how he could afford this on a civil servant's salary.

That July Kanneh had been in the US to meet members of the US Department of Homeland Security to liaise on deportations of Sierra Leone nationals. Kanneh did not reply to our email query, but when contacted by phone denied buying the properties, saying he would 'send all the evidences later'. By the time of publication these had not been received.

Another local official was identified to us as a pillar of Leijdekkers's smuggling network who has links to the transport infrastructure of the country but whom we cannot name for legal reasons. According to members of Freetown's elite Leijdekkers's operations involve many members of the current administration linked to the President, whether by blood or otherwise, whom he has appointed to their present offices.

The Operational Support Division (OSD), the elite armed paramilitary force of the Sierra Leone police, shepherds Leijdekkers around in a convoy of luxury SUVs, we hear. Such escorts may be rented by individuals but this has to be approved by senior officers. He is usually accompanied by armed bodyguards, other sources said.

### DISCOVERY

After the incident in the nightclub, it took the Dutch authorities at least another 18 months to confirm his presence in the country, Dutch prosecutors told Reuters news agency on 24 January. In response to the media reports about Leijdekkers, the government of Sierra Leone has asserted that throughout the festive season, the President 'attended numerous events', where he 'took photographs with many attendees', and 'has no knowledge of the identity and the issues detailed in the reports about the individual in question'.

Fatima Bio also took to social media to deny ever having been introduced to the 'white man' in the church video or knowing who he was. But a video recently surfaced showing a ceremonial harvesting of rice in Tihun in October, where President Maada Bio, Agnes, and Leijdekkers, among others, can be seen harvesting bunches of rice. Leijdekkers is seen in close proximity to the President.

The extent of the Netherlands's interest in Leijdekkers is uncertain. State prosecutors in January told Dutch media they had known Leijdekkers's whereabouts for six months. A spokesperson told Reuters, 'It is the highest priority of police and prosecutors to get him to the Netherlands to serve his sentence. We are doing everything we can in that regard.'

Yet the Netherlands does not have an extradition treaty with Sierra Leone, which, while it could voluntarily hand Leijdekkers back to the Netherlands, is not under any obligation to do so. A statement by Sierra Leone's ministry of information on 26 January said the government 'has not received any formal communication from any country or institution regarding this Jos Leijdekkers'. Information Minister **Chernor Bah** reiterated that point on television and disclaimed any governmental knowledge of that name.

Leijdekkers has been officially wanted for arrest since May 2022. Last year, the Dutch authorities guessed he could be making between €840m and €2 billion a year from cocaine smuggling. Before moving to Turkey, he lived in Dubai.

The government statement on Leijdekkers concluded, 'The government of Sierra Leone strongly reaffirms its commitment to combating transnational crime, including drugs arms and human trafficking and all forms of terrorism. We are resolute in ensuring that our country does not become a haven for organised crime.' ●