



Guinea-Bissau 2016 Crime & Safety Report

Travel Health and Safety; Transportation Security; Stolen items; Disease Outbreak; Theft; Assault; Improvised Explosive Device; Separatist violence; Floods; Religious Terrorism; Coup d'etats; Riots/Civil Unrest; Employee Health Safety; Counterfeiting; Drug Trafficking; Bribery

Africa > Guinea-Bissau; Africa > Guinea-Bissau > Bissau

5/23/2016

Overall Crime and Safety Situation

Guinea-Bissau is one of the poorest countries in West Africa and lacks sufficient resources and infrastructure to ensure a stable security environment.

Post Crime Rating: Critical

Crime Threats

Official Americans, businesspersons, and visitors are targeted for crimes of opportunity (petty theft, pickpocketing, theft of valuables from vehicles, minor assaults). In particular, low level criminal activity occurs in crowded areas (Bandim Market, port in central Bissau). Criminals take advantage of foreigners attempting to navigate through the crowded markets.

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Poor infrastructure and lack of lighting at night also presents a more opportune environment for criminals to exploit.

Guinea-Bissau was ranked 161 out of 175 surveyed in Transparency International's 2014 Corruption Perception Index (CPI).

Other Areas of Concern

According to law enforcement, the Mindaro and Reino neighborhoods of Bissau are areas where particular caution should be taken. Aggressive vendors, panhandlers, and street criminals target foreigners as they exit the Bissau airport and take advantage of the crowded markets (especially Bandim Market) to commit crimes of opportunity (pickpocketing, theft).

There are an unknown number of landmines left over from the civil war and the war of independence, particularly in the areas of Bafata, Oio, Biombo, Quinara, and Tombali. In 2006, Bissau (city) was declared as a "mine-free" zone by government officials and non-governmental organizations that assisted with the de-mining process. In September 2014, a landmine blast killed 20 people on a crowded mini-bus in a rural area north of Bissau. Travelers should not leave designated roads and pathways when traveling throughout the rural interior.

The armed resistance by the Movement of Democratic Forces of Casamance (MFDC) is the longest running active separatist movement in sub-Saharan Africa. Since 1982, MFDC rebels have been fighting for independence for the southwestern region of Senegal between Gambia

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and Guinea-Bissau, known as the Casamance. The MFDC is a rebel group that is in a de-facto cease-fire with the government of Senegal. The group has fought a long campaign to gain independence from Senegal. MFDC rebels have used Guinea-Bissau as a sanctuary. In spite of the cease-fire, one should avoid areas that the group is known to operate in. Considering the unpredictable nature of MFDC forces, one should exercise extreme caution when traveling in the northwestern region of Guinea-Bissau—in particular along the roads between Mpack, Sao Domingos, and Varela. It is advised to only travel during daylight hours and continue to monitor the local security situation before traveling. U.S. Embassy Dakar maintains a restricted travel policy for U.S. government employees and family members in the Casamance. The violence associated with this movement in the past has diminished considerably in recent years; however, isolated incidents of banditry do occur along the major arteries. Armed men have used the cover of roadside foliage to force civilian vehicles to stop at gun-point and then rob passengers of items of value. The geographic center of the conflict zone is concentrated between the northwest region in the department of Bignona along the National Highway 4 (N4) and National Highway 5 (N5).

Transportation-Safety Situation

Road Safety and Road Conditions

Poor transportation infrastructure presents significant danger to travelers on most urban and rural roads. Road conditions and driving standards are extremely bad. While Guinea-Bissau has developed the major transit route between Bissau and the Mpack border-crossing to Senegal, the majority of roadways are not regularly maintained or developed.

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Traffic conditions inside the city limits of Bissau present several transportation challenges. One must be ever-vigilant when traveling. Some considerations are: general road conditions, night time driving conditions, vehicular-related accidents, cargo/transportation theft, traffic law enforcement, and public transportation safety (airline, ferry, train, bus safety). On-going construction and recently installed traffic lights on Avenue des Combatentes da Liberdade da Patria in central Bissau have created significant congestion from the airport to the Port of Bissau. In addition, the erratic and continuous stop-and-go of small transport buses ("Toca-Tocas") and taxis creates an unpredictable and unstable traffic pattern. Drivers are also encouraged to exercise caution during the rainy season (June-October), due to flooded roadways and an increased number of potholes.

For safety and security reasons, U.S. government personnel are not permitted to drive or travel outside of Bissau at night. Due to the lack of lighting and physical condition of the roads, there are multiple hazards (banditry, carjacking, farm animals wandering onto dark roads). There are no working street lights outside of Bissau, so driving at night is especially perilous.

Never drive into unfamiliar areas. Park your car in well-illuminated, well-traveled areas, if possible. Always carry a small flashlight or keychain light at night to prevent accidents.

Public Transportation Conditions

Official Americans, business representatives, and other visitors are encouraged to arrange for transportation and drivers. Due to the unpredictability of the road conditions and lack of public infrastructure, trusted contracted drivers are the most efficient method of travel.

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There are also several taxi services available. Passengers should exercise caution when selecting a taxi because many are in sub-standard condition. Although difficult given the current construction situation, have the driver use only the main roads into town, no shortcuts, and never get into a taxi that is already occupied. Always negotiate a price before getting into a taxi. It is also important for passengers to inform taxi drivers that they do not want additional patrons to be picked up along the route. If the cab stops to pick up someone else, tell the driver that you will not pay him. Taxis in Bissau serve as a bus service, in which each passenger pays for one seat.

Furthermore, the Regional Security Office does not recommend visitors to use the unconventional bus system in Bissau, the "Bus Rapides" or "Toca-Tocas."

Other Travel Conditions

There have been incidents of pirogues (dugout canoes used to ferry people across rivers) sinking and drowned passengers.

Terrorism Threat

Post Terrorism Rating: Low

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Local, Regional, and International Terrorism Threats/Concerns

There is an on-going regional threat of transnational terrorism in West Africa that could spill over into Guinea-Bissau. The instability of a fledgling government, porous borders, and lack of law enforcement resources creates a vacuum, which terrorists seek to exploit as a place of refuge and to support regional logistical operations.

In recent years, terrorists associated with al-Qai'da in the Lands of the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) have utilized Guinea-Bissau to facilitate terrorist operations in the region.

On January 11, 2008, Guinea-Bissau authorities arrested Ould Sinda and Ould Sidi Chabarnou, two AQIM terrorists charged with the murder of four French tourists in southern Mauritania during a Christmas Eve attack. The terrorists were transiting Guinea-Bissau to flee from foreign security forces. They were arrested at a hotel regularly used by foreign visitors near the airport.

In February 2011, three AQIM terrorists, including one Bissau-Guinean national, were arrested in Mauritania for plotting to conduct attacks against French and government facilities there.

While terrorists have not demonstrated the operational capabilities to conduct operations in Guinea-Bissau, the general threat of indiscriminate terrorist attacks in the country exists.

Political, Economic, Religious, and Ethnic Violence

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Since Guinea-Bissau gained independence from Portugal in 1974, the country has been plagued by attempted and successful coups, political assassinations, and a civil war.

In April and May 2014, Guinea-Bissau conducted successful presidential and legislative elections and installed a new government and president to replace the transitional government brokered by ECOWAS following a coup in April 2012. The new government has taken positive and unprecedented steps in security sector reform. The most notable of these measures was to dismiss the tainted Army Chief of Staff, Antonio Indjai, and replace him with a senior officer who enjoys the loyalty of the military. The political situation remains fragile. In August 2015, President Jose Mario Vaz dismissed Prime Minister Domingos Simoes Pereira due to a political power struggle. Carlos Correia has been appointed the new prime minister, but political tensions continue, and the government is largely not functioning. The National Assembly has yet to approve the government's program of priorities. The military has publicly announced its intention to stay out of political affairs and has done so. A legacy of periodic violence and instability means that all travelers should closely monitor the political situation.

Post Political Violence Rating: Medium

Civil Unrest

The government recognizes freedom of assembly and association and authorizes public demonstrations. Demonstrations typically begin/end in front of the Presidential Palace in "Praça dos Heróis Nacionais." While most demonstrations are non-violent, political instability

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has prompted violent activity among demonstrators. It is recommended that official Americans, businesspersons, visitors, and other bystanders avoid all public demonstrations.

Post-specific Concerns

Environmental Hazards

During the rainy season (June-October), heavy rains have caused severe flooding and loss of life.

Critical Infrastructure Concerns

The utility infrastructure is severely damaged and underdeveloped. Electricity and water is irregular in Bissau and largely unavailable throughout the interior. The lack of infrastructure in Bissau contributes to a costly and unstable working environment. The primary residential and commercial source of electricity is diesel generators. The poor road conditions and lack of infrastructure further impede the ability of law enforcement and emergency services to respond to emergencies.

Economic Espionage/Intellectual Property Thefts

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Counterfeit currency is widely distributed among illicit vendors in tourist areas (the airport, Bandim market).

Drug-related Crimes

Guinea-Bissau has been identified as a transit point to Europe from South America for narcotics trafficking. The lack of enforcement capabilities and resources, porous borders, susceptibility to corruption, and its location in relation to Europe, South America, and West Africa provide an opportune environment for traffickers. International drug cartels and other criminal organizations utilize the un-policed Bijagos archipelago and remote airstrips for drug trafficking, arms trafficking, and illegal immigration. Drug traffickers send bulk shipments of narcotics to Guinea-Bissau and break up the items in small units to smuggle to North Africa and Europe. Traffickers use all modes of transportation (sea, land through West and North Africa, and air by commercial, cargo, and private airlines).

Due to instability and organized transnational criminal organizations, it is highly recommended that U.S. businesses conduct thorough due diligence checks on business partners and investments. International businesses and financiers have expressed concern that their companies or intermediate shipping companies can become compromised by drug traffickers, aiming to take advantage of their legitimate businesses to access shipping resources.

Police Response

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While the international community is assisting Guinea-Bissau to restructure their judicial and law enforcement systems, corruption, bribery and harassment continue at all levels of government. Police and emergency personnel are poorly trained and lack resources to respond to crime and emergency situations effectively. Due to the deficiency in resources, response times to emergency situations may be slow or non-existent. If the police do respond to an incident, they may not have the investigative skills to solve crimes or identify/arrest suspects.

All foreign visitors should always carry identification (certified copies of passport/residence permit). As a rule, the police do not distinguish between original documents and photocopies. Foreigners are required by law to present the documentation to law enforcement officials, if requested.

Persons violating Bissau-Guinean laws, even unknowingly, may be expelled, arrested, or temporarily detained.

How to Handle Incidents of Police Detention or Harassment

Guinea-Bissau has not signed the Vienna Convention on Consular Relations, nor does the U.S. have an agreement with the government requiring notification of the U.S. Embassy of arrests of American citizens. If Americans are arrested or are victims of bribery or crime, they should use whatever means of communication available to alert the U.S. Embassy in Dakar or the Bissau Liaison office of their situation.

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Crime Victim Assistance

Americans who are the victim of a crime or emergency incident should contact the U.S. Embassy in Dakar, Senegal. There is no local equivalent to the “911” emergency line; however, the following emergency numbers are in place for specific emergency situations:

Police (Public Order Police) – 117

Ambulance Services (Medical Emergencies) – 113

Fire – 118

Police/Security Agencies

The Public Order Police (POP), part of the Ministry of Interior, has the primary responsibility for responding to emergency incidents and enforcing traffic laws. The Judicial Police within the Ministry of Justice have the primary responsibility for major investigations to include terrorism and drug trafficking. At times, these two entities have been at odds and have even fought and killed officers of the opposing agency. In addition, in December 2014, two groups of officers from the POP were arrested and implicated in an armed robbery and in a theft of \$10,000 from drug traffickers.

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Medical Emergencies

The health care system lacks sufficient pharmaceuticals, medical supplies, and medical professionals. Hospitals do not meet Western standards.

Travelers should carry a supply of any needed prescription medicines, along with copies of the prescriptions, including the generic name for the medicines, and a supply of preferred over-the-counter medications. For more information, please refer to OSAC's Report, "Traveling with Medications."

Contact Information for Recommended Hospitals/Clinics

General National (Hospital Nacional Simao Mendes); Rua Da Eduardo Mondlane, Bissau; The hospital has approximately 100 beds and provides general medical/surgical care to include orthopedics and basic emergency services.

Military Hospital; Avenida Unidade Africana; (245) 530-2330; 150 beds with full service medical/surgical care, including emergency services. The best medical facility in the country, open to all who pay cash for services.

Recommended Air Ambulance Services

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There are no private air ambulance services in Guinea-Bissau; however, they can be arranged through neighboring countries:

S.O.S. Air Ambulance

www.internationalsos.com

London, England: + 44 (0)20 8762 8008

Geneva, Switzerland: + 41 22 785 6464

Pretoria, South Africa: + 27 (11) 541 1300

S.O.S. Medicines Dakar

Dakar, Senegal: +221-33 889-1515 or sosmeddk@sentoo.sn

M.R.I. Air Ambulance

Gaborone, Botswana: +267 3901601

Recommended Insurance Posture

Serious medical problems may be stabilized at private medical clinics or general hospitals, while awaiting medical evacuation. Medical evacuation insurance is highly recommended for travelers visiting Guinea-Bissau.

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Country-specific Vaccination and Health Guidance

Malaria, cholera, hepatitis and other tropical diseases are risks to travelers in Guinea-Bissau. For additional information on vaccines and health guidance, please visit the CDC at: http://wwwnc.cdc.gov/travel/destinations/traveler/none/guinea-bissau?s_cid=ncezid-dgmq-travel-single-001.

OSAC Country Council Information

There is no formal OSAC Country Council in Bissau; however, interested organizations are welcome to join the Dakar Country Council to discuss regional security concerns. The Dakar Country Council also covers U.S. private sector interests in Guinea-Bissau. The Regional Security Office in Dakar is available to meet with American business and organization representatives and will provide information on the current security situation in country. Dakar Country Council Point of Contact: RSO Michael Lombardo (+221) 33-879-4000. To reach OSAC's Africa team, please email OSACAF@state.gov.

U.S. Embassy Location and Contact Information

Embassy Address and Hours of Operation

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In 2007, the U.S. government opened a U.S. Liaison Office in Bissau (BLO), which is staffed by locally employed personnel. The BLO can provide limited services to American citizens in the event of an emergency; however, all security and consular services should be coordinated through the U.S. Embassy in Dakar, Senegal.

U.S. Embassy Dakar, Senegal

Route des Almadies

Dakar, Senegal

U.S. Bissau Liaison Office

Edifício SITIC

Rua José Carlos Schwarz, 245

Bairro d'Ajuda

Bissau, Guinea-Bissau

Office: (+245) 325-6382; (+245) 595-4647

After-hours calls should go to U.S. Embassy Dakar

Hours of Operation: 0800-1700, M-F

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Note: No consular services provided

Embassy Contact Numbers

Embassy Operator (+221) 33-879-4000

Emergency After-hours telephone/Marine Post One: (+221) 33-879-4000/4444

Hours of Operation: 0800-1700 M-Th; 0800-1300 F

Regional Security Officer: (+221) 33-879-4000

Website: <http://guinea-bissau.usvpp.gov/>

Consular coverage for multi-post countries

RSO Dakar is responsible for Guinea-Bissau. The U.S. Embassy in Bissau suspended operations on June 14, 1998, at the outbreak of a violent civil war. There is no U.S. diplomatic or consular presence in Guinea-Bissau. The U.S. Embassy in Dakar, Senegal, is accredited for all diplomatic and security concerns.

Nearby Posts

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Embassy Dakar: <http://dakar.usembassy.gov/>

Embassy Guidance

If you are going to reside in or visit Guinea-Bissau, please take the time to tell our Embassy about your presence in-country. If you enroll, we can keep you up to date with important safety and security announcements. It will also help your friends and family get in touch with you in an emergency. To enroll your stay or visit, click the STEP (Smart Traveler Enrollment Program) button at <http://travel.state.gov>. Consular information is available at: http://www.travel.state.gov/travel/cis_pa_tw/cis/cis_1113.html.

Tips on How to Avoid Becoming a Victim

Scams

Young males conduct the majority of scams in Bissau. Most scam artists work in pairs for pickpocketing purposes. One man will distract you by engaging you in a conversation or by touching you while the other man will be picking your pocket, handbag, or backpack. The majority of scams occur at the Bandim Market, International Airport, and Port of Bissau.

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Situational Awareness Best Practices

Because of the general ineffectiveness of law enforcement, all American citizens and organizations should exercise heightened personal security awareness and practice personal security measures. Criminals will exploit any vulnerability to commit crimes of opportunity. Anyone exhibiting outward shows of affluence is more likely to be targeted by criminals. In a country that is as impoverished as Guinea-Bissau, it does not take a lot for a foreigner to look like an inviting target. Do not wear expensive jewelry or necklaces of any value, as these are targeted for snatch-and-grab type crimes. Do not carry backpacks or fanny packs, as they brand an individual as a tourist. Carry bags with short straps that can easily be placed under one's arm.

The economy is primarily cash-based and uses the West African Franc (XOF/CFA). Do not use credit/debit cards. The rate of credit card fraud is high. Avoid carrying large amounts of cash. If you must carry cash, break it up, and place it in different areas on your person. Do not exchange currency with street vendors. Travelers should only exchange money in trusted banks and hotels. Criminals regularly target foreigners to exchange counterfeit currency, especially at the airport and near hotels. It is recommended that travelers secure adequate sums of CFA before arriving.

Make photocopies of your passport, driver's license, and other ID and carry copies while in public. Place original documents, including passports, into secure storage at your hotel or place of business.

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It is recommended to pre-arrange for transportation and to limit walking around Bissau at night to reduce the risks of being a victim of a crime. Never walk alone at night.

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