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OBSERVATORY OF ILLICIT ECONOMIES IN WEST AFRICA

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Summary highlights



In the wake of the Sudan conflict, fuel and arms smuggling spike in Chad and the broader Sahel.

Fuel and arms smuggling from Chad into Sudan have spiked following the conflict in Sudan and are likely to prolong the war and make it more violent. In the longer term, refugees fleeing the war may also boost the demand for northbound human smuggling. Chad, already beset with threats from various armed groups, is now also threatened by the potential involvement in Sudan's war economy of Chadian fighters, many of them current or former rebels. These seasoned combatants are set to profit from Sudan's war by tendering their services as mercenaries. Funds, weapons, vehicles and combat experience obtained in Sudan are likely to be redirected to Chad over time. As the Sudanese conflict continues to provide an environment for illicit economies to thrive by fostering violence and displacement, effective and crime-sensitive international mediation becomes increasingly critical for regional stability.



Farmers and herders increasingly targeted as kidnapping for ransom reaches record levels in Cameroon's Nord region.

Kidnapping for ransom has been a significant security issue in northern Cameroon for over 20 years. However, since 2020, the phenomenon has increased, particularly in the Nord region's Mayo-Rey department bordering the Central African Republic, where the number of people kidnapped almost doubled between 2019 and 2022. Perpetrators have also expanded in terms of the profiles of their victims, with farmers increasingly targeted. The escalation of the kidnapping has been driven in part by the growing lucrativeness of the livestock and farming sectors in the region, as well as rising insecurity in neighbouring countries. Criminal evolution in response to military measures in Cameroon raises questions about the limitations of securitized approaches to illicit economies such as kidnapping for ransom and highlights the need for alternative strategies that address the drivers of insecurity to accompany such responses.



**GLOBAL
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Trafficking of high-calibre firearms is fuelling deadly violence in Bawku, northern Ghana.

In November 2021, a long-standing chieftaincy dispute between members of two ethnic groups, the Mamprusi and the Kusasi, reignited in Bawku, a town in northern Ghana on the border with Burkina Faso. While Ghana has a long history of artisanal weapon manufacturing, it has generally been spared the levels of conflict experienced in other countries in coastal West Africa. However, as the demand for weapons surges domestically and the conflict in the Sahel region rages on, sophisticated, high-calibre weapons have spilled over into Ghana, predominantly from Burkina Faso, rendering the local clashes increasingly deadly. Civilians are bearing the brunt of this violence, which is enabled by and exploited for commercial and political interests.



Can cocaine seizures act as indicators of political instability in West Africa?

Clusters of material cocaine seizures could provide rare insights into the political protection shielding this murky trade, and more broadly serve as indicators of political instability. Analyzing recent cocaine seizure trends, alongside other drug market indicators, in Guinea, Guinea-Bissau and Ghana – each a transit point in international cocaine trafficking routes to Europe – challenges existing narratives and indicates fractures in the political protection system in Guinea, and seamless protection in Guinea-Bissau and Ghana. We test the value of using seizure patterns to assess current and future political instability in West Africa.

ABOUT THIS ISSUE

The eighth issue of the Risk Bulletin of Illicit Economies in West Africa takes readers on a geographic journey, starting from the far east of the Sahel region, then moving south-west into Cameroon, before travelling along the coast to Ghana and finally arriving in Guinea and Guinea-Bissau. In doing so, this edition explores illicit economy dynamics in different contexts with various levels of conflict and violence.

It begins by exploring the impact – past, present and likely future – of the brutal war in Sudan on illicit economies in neighbouring Chad and the wider region. Next, we examine kidnapping for ransom in northern Cameroon, a particularly pernicious form of criminality that has become increasingly pervasive in the country in recent years. We then turn our attention to a highly localized conflict in northern Ghana, where a combination of artisanal guns and high-calibre weapons are enabling deadly violence, which is increasingly affecting non-combatants. Finally, the last story of this Risk Bulletin considers the cocaine trade and its link to political instability.

The economic, security and humanitarian fallout from Sudan's conflict is reshaping illicit economies far beyond its porous borders, most notably in Chad and the broader Sahel region. While these illicit economies are not the focus of the current stalemate in Sudan, they are crucial components of the war economy feeding and sustaining the conflict. The crisis has

already resulted in a surge in arms and fuel smuggling, and is also likely to boost demand for northbound human smuggling along established routes. This situation poses a significant threat to regional stability, providing armed groups with the resources to prolong the conflict and intensifying the security and economic challenges faced by vulnerable communities.

Since 2020, the phenomenon of kidnapping for ransom, a major security threat in Cameroon, has increased, particularly in the Nord region. The escalation of the kidnapping industry has been driven in part by the growing lucrateness of the livestock and farming sectors in the region, as well as rising insecurity in neighbouring countries. While the perpetrators previously engaged primarily in road ambushes and cattle rustling, their criminal activities have evolved in response to predominantly military-centred government measures, pushing them towards kidnapping instead. This development raises questions around the limitations of securitized approaches to illicit economies such as kidnapping for ransom and highlights the need for alternative strategies that address the drivers of insecurity to accompany such responses.

In Ghana, the protracted conflict between the Mamprusi and Kusasi ethnic groups began in Bawku in the 20th century, stemming from a dispute over the town's chieftaincy. After a long period of relative peace, the conflict flared up again in November 2021 as members

of the two tribes engaged in violent clashes. Since 2021, an increased flow of weapons from abroad, predominantly high-calibre arms from Burkina Faso, has significantly contributed to higher levels of violence in Bawku, which is taking a toll on civilians.

Lastly, we analyze how cocaine trade insights can shed light on current, and potentially future, political instability. We consider twinned hypotheses: that

cocaine seizures tend to cluster in periods when the political system is damaged and law enforcement agencies are able to operate with greater independence; and that seizures may act as a barometer of pending instability resulting from power struggles or fracturing political systems. We examine the contrasting cases of Guinea, Guinea-Bissau and Ghana to explore how seizure patterns can provide insight into political instability in West Africa.

In the wake of the Sudan conflict, fuel and arms smuggling spike in Chad and the broader Sahel.

Following months of simmering tensions, a power struggle between the leader of Sudan's Transitional Military Council, General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, and his deputy, General Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo, known as 'Hemeti', ignited a brutal conflict on 15 April 2023.¹ The two rivals, leaders of the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and Rapid Support Forces (RSF), respectively, locked in a struggle for dominance, are far from alone on the battlefield. A string of powerful allies from Libya, Egypt, Turkey, the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia and Russia, among others, rally behind them, propping up their forces with diplomatic, financial and logistical support.²

The economic, security and humanitarian fallout from Sudan's conflict is reshaping illicit economies far beyond its porous borders, most notably in Chad and the broader Sahel region. While these illicit economies are not the focus of the current stalemate in Sudan, they are crucial components of the war economy feeding and sustaining the conflict. The crisis has already resulted in a surge in arms and fuel smuggling, and is also likely to boost demand for northbound human smuggling along established routes.³ This situation poses a significant threat to regional stability, providing armed groups with the resources to prolong the conflict and intensifying the security and economic challenges faced by vulnerable communities.

Illicit economies supplying the Sudanese conflict

Evidence indicates that two illicit markets that underpin Sudan's war economy have surged since conflict broke out: arms trafficking and fuel smuggling. Despite the official closure of Chad's border with Sudan in response to the conflict,⁴ smugglers in eastern Chad reported an uptick in cross-border fuel and arms smuggling from Chad and Libya into the conflict area.⁵

The ongoing conflict has significantly disrupted regional fuel supply chains, which are key to sustaining the war, leading to noticeable shifts in the fuel smuggling market. Disruptions in Port Sudan's operational capacity, which until the war was the main hub for fuel imports, and along key routes between Port Sudan and Khartoum, have reportedly led to increased reliance on imported fuel from

Libya.⁶ While a significant amount of fuel is smuggled directly into Sudan through Libya's south-eastern Kufra region, Chad has also served as a strategic corridor.⁷

Chad's role as a fuel smuggling transit hub first came to the fore as a result of the Chadian government's two-month exemption of customs duties and taxes on fuel imports from Libya on 30 March 2023. This exemption, alongside a ban on fuel exports, sought to address the shortage of fuel in Chad, in large part a consequence of the closure of Chad's only fuel refinery for maintenance.⁸

Before the exemption, trucks carrying Libyan fuel were reportedly a rare sight, as duties and taxes were imposed by Chadian customs at the border. Subsidised Libyan fuel arriving in Chad was mostly transported by individual smugglers – often Chadian or Sudanese former fighters – in fuel drums on the back of pickup trucks using smuggling routes.⁹ This type of smuggling was mainly used to supply fuel to gold mining areas such as Kouri Bougoudi, where there is a concentration of illicit markets and armed criminal actors,¹⁰ but rarely beyond to the south of the country.

However, since April, and particularly since the outbreak of the conflict, the number of tanker trucks carrying fuel from Libya to northern Chad has reportedly seen a dramatic increase. Many of these tanker trucks reportedly transit Chad and are headed for Sudan, despite the export ban.¹¹ Tankers enter Chad either directly via the Kouri Bougoudi area or via northern Niger. They then pass through several Chadian villages before entering Sudan, with a significant volume ending up both in eastern Chad and Darfur (see Figure 1).¹²

It is estimated that in May around 15 tankers, transporting 36 000 litres of fuel each, transited weekly, often in convoys of three to five vehicles.¹³ As the tax exemption period has now ended (and should the Chadian government not reintroduce it), individual fuel smugglers are likely to respond to the demand for fuel as the war rages on.

The disruption to fuel supply chains caused by the Sudanese conflict has also provoked a sharp increase in fuel prices. Since Libyan fuel exports to Sudan increased in early May 2023, fuel prices in the black market of Um al-Aranib, in southern Libya, doubled from 1.5 Libyan dinars to 3 dinars per litre (approximately €0.3 to €0.6).¹⁴ Likewise, the cost of fuel in northern Chad, traditionally dependent on Libyan fuel, has surged. For instance, a 60-litre fuel drum in Zouar in northern Chad cost FCFA40 000 (€60) on 23 May, a substantial increase from the pre-May 2023 price range of FCFA27 500 to FCFA30 000 (€42–€46).¹⁵

The increase in fuel prices has had significant impacts on the regional economy, and exacerbated economic hardship for locals in Chad, which continues to be one of the poorest countries in the world.¹⁶

The escalating conflict has also stimulated illicit arms flows in the region. As of late May 2023, there has been a notable increase in arms smuggling to non-state armed groups directly tied to the war. Sudanese demand for weapons, driven primarily by civilians seeking protection, communities demanding retaliation and armed groups desiring to bolster their firepower, has surged.¹⁷ Demand may rise even further as civilians seek to protect themselves, encouraged by political figures such as Minni Minnawi, former rebel leader of the Sudanese Liberation Army and current governor of Darfur, who called on the people of Darfur 'to take up arms to defend their property'.¹⁸

The porous border between Sudan and Chad aids these flows, as do the activities of smuggling networks, predominantly composed of former Chadian and Sudanese fighters. Most of the weapons come from abandoned, stolen or illegally sold military stocks, and from other lingering conflicts in the region.

The risks posed by this surge in arms trafficking are considerable. Fleeing Sudanese fighters could seek refuge in Chad, contributing to the proliferation of weapons in the country.¹⁹ And these arms could end up in the hands of rebel groups seeking to overthrow the Chadian government and extend their regional influence, or criminal gangs aiming to dominate drug trafficking or other illicit activities. Weapons could also be used to commit violence against civilians and rival groups, and intensify intercommunity conflicts.

Conflict likely to drive sustained increase in human smuggling flows

Since the outbreak of the war in Sudan, 150 000 refugees have fled to Chad as of June 2023, predominantly from towns close to the Chadian border.²⁰ Should the conflict endure, growing numbers of refugees moving into Chad from other parts of war-torn Sudan can be expected.

Displaced individuals are likely to initially settle in other Sahelian countries or in Libya, where there is an established Sudanese diaspora community, and this is likely to increase demand for northbound smuggling services to Libya.²¹ In the longer term, growing displacement from Sudan could also increase demand for sea crossings from Libya to Europe. Given that displaced people and those seeking asylum abroad might spend years in transit, the ripple effects of the current war in Sudan on migrant smuggling economies in Libya and the Sahel may only be felt in the coming years.

Long processing times for asylum applications processed in neighbouring states are likely to add pressure on local communities, and potentially exacerbate intercommunal conflicts in the medium term. In Niger for instance, tensions around Sudanese asylum seekers in Agadez are likely to escalate if there is a sustained inflow of new Sudanese refugees.²²

Newly displaced Sudanese refugees seeking to transit Chad are likely to swell demand for the services of the country's human smuggling networks. Many networks are composed of Chadian fighters and ex-fighters, for whom people smuggling is a significant source of income.²³

Chad's human smuggling economy predominantly facilitates movements from eastern to northern Chad and southern Libya, where economic opportunities, notably in gold mining, have attracted young Chadian and Sudanese men since the artisanal and small-scale gold mining boom that began in 2013.²⁴ Networks are known to exploit vulnerable migrants, many of whom travel on credit to work in the goldfields of northern Chad and southern Libya. Their 'debt' is bought off the smugglers by gold-site owners for whom migrants are forced to work unpaid, often for undefined periods of time, until they have settled their debt. Sudanese refugees travelling on these routes would be vulnerable to such exploitative arrangements.²⁵

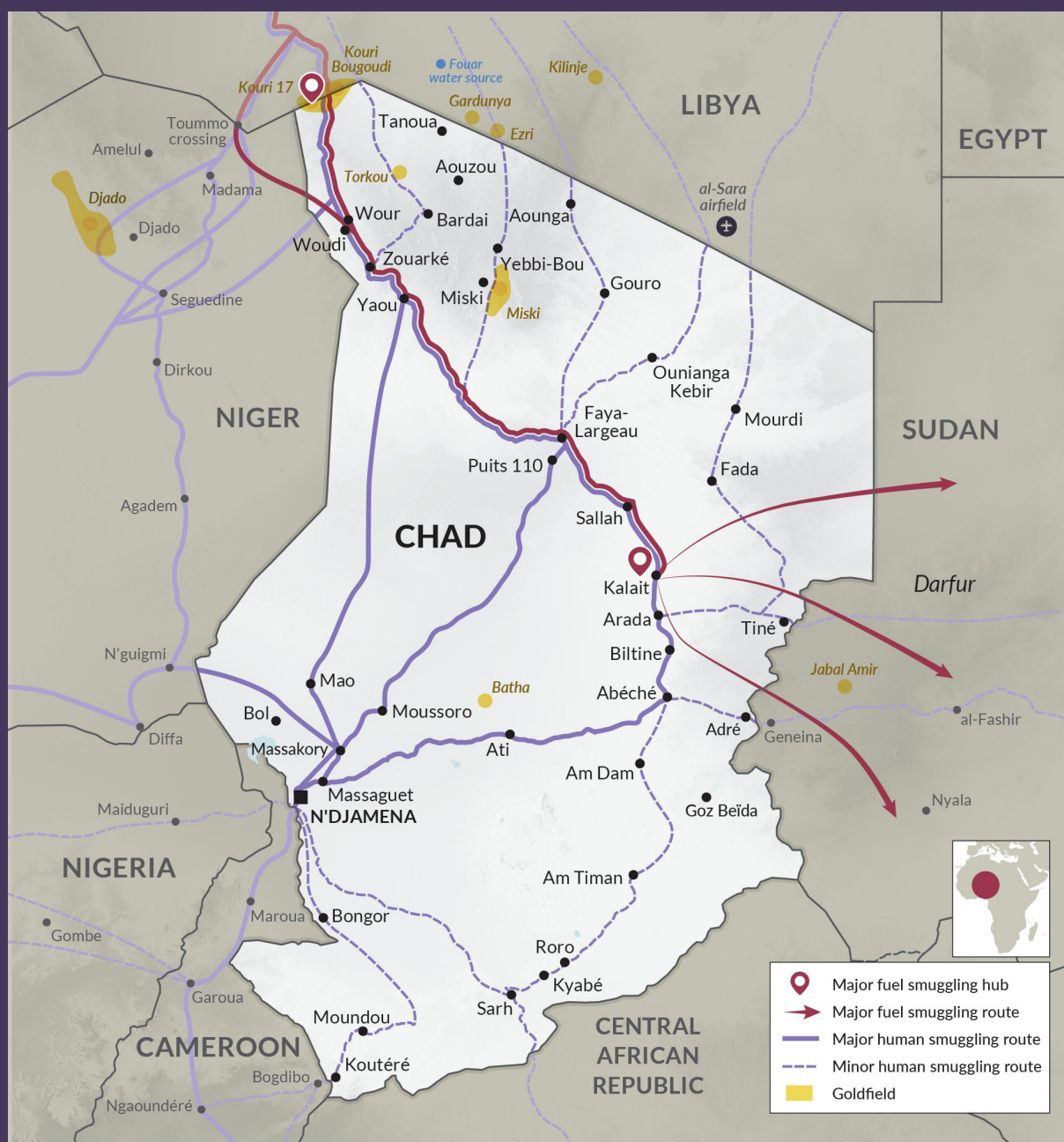


FIGURE 1 Fuel and human smuggling through Chad.

Conflict offers new resource streams for Chadian rebels: pawns with disruptive potential

As well as fuelling instability in the region's illicit economies, the conflict in Sudan presents new opportunities for Chadian rebel fighters. These rebels are key participants in the Sahelian criminal markets and play a crucial role in maintaining the precarious balance

of power across Sudan and Chad, and the broader Sahel region. The conflict could also threaten Chad's tenuous peace with Sudan, which has held since a 2010 peace agreement ended a five-year conflict between the two governments and which saw each country financing rival rebel groups.²⁶



**FACT – Front pour l’Alternance et la Concorde au Tchad
(Front for Change and Concord in Chad)**

The FACT is a political and military organization created by Mahamat Mahdi Ali in March 2016 in Tanua, in the north of Chad. The FACT is mostly composed of Daza Goran.



**CCMSR – Conseil de Commandement Militaire pour le Salut de la République
(Council of Military Command for the Salvation of the Republic)**

Founded in 2016, the CCMSR currently operates in the border regions of northern Chad, southern Libya, eastern Niger and western Sudan. The CCMSR recruit among Kreda Goran (northern Chad) and Arabs.



**UFDD – Union des Forces pour la Démocratie et le Développement
(Union of Forces for Democracy and Development)**

The UFDD is the largest group of Chadian rebel forces opposed to former president Idriss Déby. It was formed in October 2006 under the leadership of Mahamat Nouri. The UFDD mostly consists of Goran Anakaza.



**FNDJT - Front de la Nation pour la Démocratie et la Justice
(National Front for Democracy and Justice in Chad)**

The FNDJT was created in July 2018 in Murzuq and is composed of former CCMSR and FACT fighters of Tebu, Goran, Zaghawa and Arab origin. In June 2023, the FNDJT's cofounder and leader, Adoum Tchamaïmi, reportedly died following clashes with the Chadian army in north-western Chad, which lasted for over a week.

FIGURE 2 Prominent Chadian armed rebel groups, June 2023.

Since the October 2020 ceasefire agreement in Libya, Chadian fighters, who have been engaged in mercenary work supporting several Libyan warring factions since 2011, have had fewer reasons to stay in Libya, and have turned elsewhere for income, including to Sahelian illicit economies.²⁷ As chaos in Sudan unfolds, Chadian fighters, adept at finding new income streams, may well exploit the instability to find a new base in Sudan, drum up new demand for their services as mercenaries and profit from the war economy.²⁸

Chadian rebel groups are veterans of the region's criminal economies, from drugs to arms, cars and people – both as traffickers and as their escorts.²⁹ They also possess crucial knowledge of, and thus know how to manoeuvre within, the cross-border areas of Sudan, Chad, Libya and Niger.³⁰

Evidence from local sources already suggests that some Chadian fighters have headed to Khartoum from southern Libya.³¹ A convoy of around 15 vehicles, transporting 30 to 40 Chadian fighters, reportedly left Sebha in late April and travelled via Rebiana in Libya's Kufra region before entering Sudan. The group

reportedly joined the RSF in fighting against SAF forces in Khartoum. The key incentive for this move was reportedly the opportunity to access stolen vehicles, weapons and equipment, as well as the draw of criminal opportunity, such as the drug trafficking, fuel smuggling and arms trafficking markets.³²

Ripple effects

The second-tier impacts of Sudan's conflict ripple far beyond its borders, reshaping regional illicit economies and threatening to further destabilize an already chronically fragile region. Illicit economies are the lifelines that sustain the operations of Chadian rebel groups, conflict actors in Sudan and numerous other armed groups across the region, contributing to broader instability. The surge in demand driven by the conflict for smuggled fuel and arms, the services of migrant smuggling networks – and possibly mercenary skills – is set to further empower, and enhance the resilience of, Chadian rebel groups, alongside other armed criminal networks operating in the region. In turn, illicit flows of fuel and arms are feeding into Sudan's war economy, providing crucial supplies, and will most likely contribute to prolonging the conflict.

Notes

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- 12 Interviews with Chadian and Libyan smugglers in eastern and northern Chad, and in southern Libya, May 2023.
- 13 These figures were given during interviews with Chadian and Libyan smugglers in eastern and northern Chad, and in southern Libya, May 2023.
- 14 Interviews with Chadian and Libyan smugglers in Um al-Aranib, who travelled along routes in Chad in May 2023.
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- 16 United Nations Development Programme, Country insights: Human development reports. 2023, <https://hdr.undp.org/data-center/country-insights#/ranks>.
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Farmers and herders increasingly targeted as kidnapping for ransom reaches record levels in Cameroon's Nord region.

As midnight approached on 17 May 2023, unidentified armed men stormed into the northern Cameroonian village of Lagoye and kidnapped Babana, a 52-year-old farmer.¹ His kidnappers demanded a ransom payment of FCFA15 million (approximately €22 660). After his family paid the ransom, he was freed, having spent almost two weeks in captivity. Babana's ordeal is just one of many kidnapping incidents to have taken place in Touboro, the district in the Nord region's easternmost department of Mayo-Rey in which Lagoye is situated. Touboro, however, is not alone. Since 2020, across the country's Nord region, particularly in the departments of Mayo-Rey and Benoué, there has been a substantial increase in the number of individuals kidnapped (see Figure 1).

In January 2023, a record 46 hostage-taking incidents were reported in just two days in Cameroon's Nord region.² Based on the number of people kidnapped in the first five months of 2023 (see Figure 2), it is likely that this year's figures could surpass those of last year. Although the country's Extrême-Nord region faces a violent extremist threat from the two main Boko Haram factions, Islamic State West Africa Province and Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati wal-Jihad (People Committed to the Propagation of the Prophet's Teachings and Jihad),³ in the Nord region the threat is of a different nature. Residents are being targeted by a diverse set of criminal actors seeking to exploit the substantial profit-making potential of kidnapping for ransom.

Although the primary source of funding for these criminal actors, known as *zaraguinas*, used to be operating as *coupeurs de route* (highway robbers) and subsequently cattle rustlers, a combination of factors led to their growing diversification into kidnapping for ransom.⁴ Despite military operations against the *zaraguinas* having delivered moderate gains in the Nord region in 2022, the history of criminality in northern Cameroon suggests that military pressure is likely to merely geographically displace the violence or catalyze a transformation in the criminal dynamics of the region. The resurgence of violence in the Democratic Republic of Congo since mid-2022; the development of rebel factions in south-western Chad; the rise of communal

violence in Cameroon; and the volatile security context in Sudan all contribute to varying degrees to the spread of weapons and reinforcement of criminal activities, and are only going to worsen the situation in Cameroon.⁵

From *coupeurs de route* and cattle rustlers to kidnappers

The *zaraguina* phenomenon emerged in the Central African Republic (CAR) in the 1980s.⁶ As demobilized or disaffected soldiers and mercenaries proliferated against the backdrop of the various security crises in CAR, Chad and Sudan, they brought strength in numbers – and weapons – to the *zaraguinas*. This provided the *zaraguinas* with a significant degree of professionalization, supporting their spread into northern Cameroon, aided in large part by porous borders and the greater economic opportunity afforded by the prominence of the livestock sector in the region.⁷ The bandits, known for their ruthless violence, would ambush individuals travelling on their way to or from cattle markets carrying large sums of money, by barricading roads with tree trunks.⁸

The disjointed – and as a result, largely failed – responses to the *zaraguinas* by authorities in Cameroon, CAR and Chad allowed another threat to emerge: cattle theft.⁹ The presence of large livestock markets in the border regions of the other Lake Chad Basin countries, namely, Nigeria, Niger and Chad, was a key enabler of cattle theft in Cameroon, as these markets provided the opportunity to quickly sell off the stolen animals. Stolen cattle were smuggled by networks across the notoriously porous borders in the region to consumers in Nigeria, Chad and CAR, and from these countries into Cameroon.

By the turn of the century, the Cameroonian armed forces had introduced measures aimed at disrupting the rampant road ambushes and widespread cattle rustling, including establishing a greater number of roadblocks and checkpoints. They also provided military escorts for herders travelling along transhumance corridors towards southern and north-east Cameroon, and Chad, for example, as well as for groups of traders on their way to and from cattle markets. As cattle rustling became an

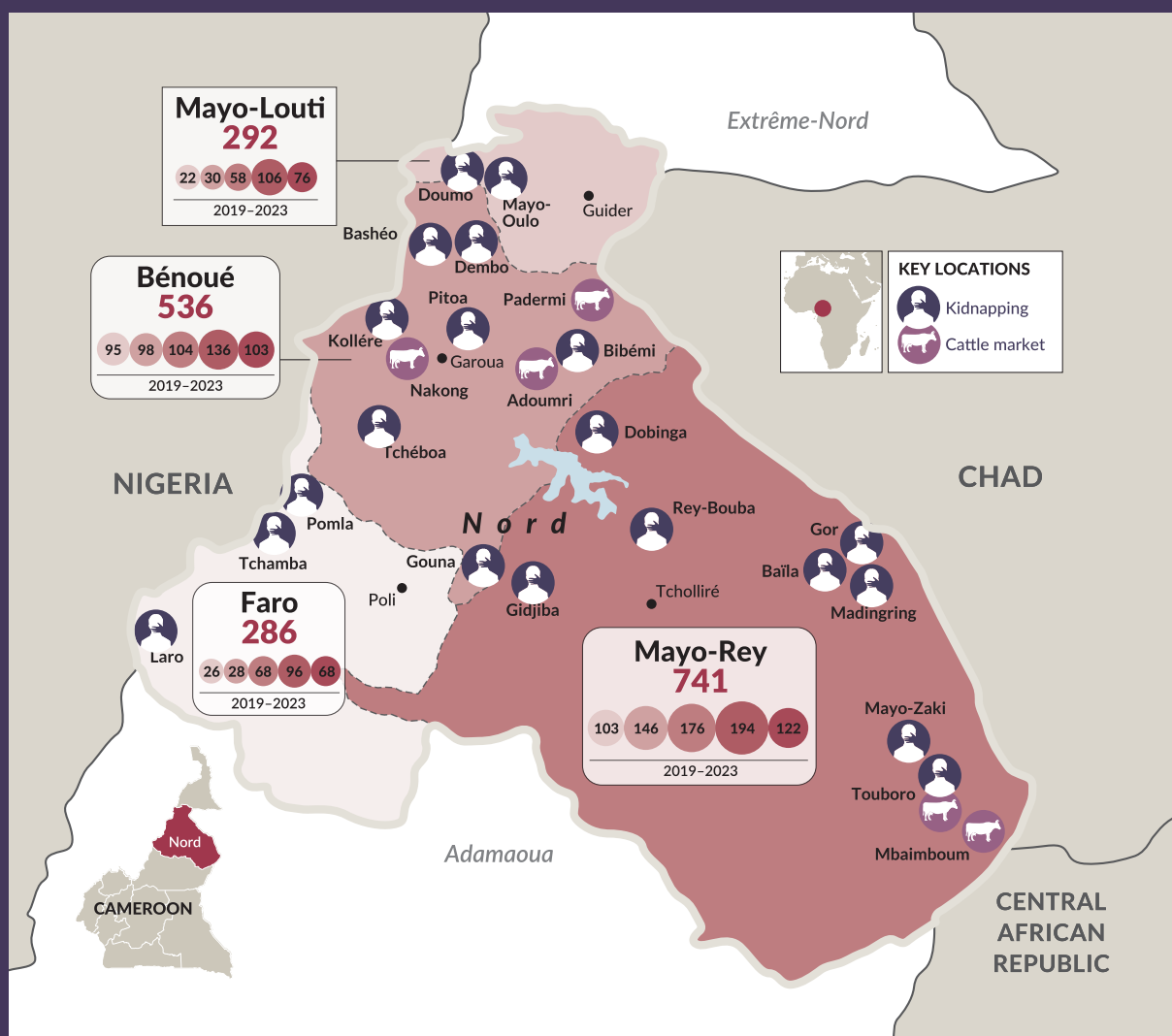


FIGURE 1 Kidnapping incidents in Cameroon's Nord region, 2019–2023.

Note: Data for 2023 is as of the end of May.

increasingly complicated activity for the criminal actors to carry out, they began turning to kidnapping for ransom instead.¹⁰ Taking people hostage is a simpler endeavour than stealing livestock, as it is easier to move into villages inconspicuously, it can be done at night, and is easier to hide.

By 2003, kidnapping for ransom had become a priority concern for Cameroonian policymakers and security services. Today, the kidnapping for ransom industry generates around FCFA1 billion (approximately €1.5 million) a year across northern Cameroon,

according to local media and civil society organizations, and has become the primary security threat facing the Nord region.¹¹

Violent kidnappings intensify

The capacity for violence and the ruthlessness of the perpetrators of kidnappings in northern Cameroon should not be underestimated. Benoué is the department in the Nord region with the second-highest number of individuals kidnapped since 2019, after Mayo-Rey.¹² On 13 March 2023, farmland belonging to two agropastoralists in Bibémi district, Benoué, was



Illustration of the scale of the ransom paid to hostage-takers in northern Cameroon in 2007.

Photo: L'œil du Sahel n° 293, 23 June 2008.

targeted by six armed men. The attackers took three children hostage. Seven days later, the children were brutally executed due to the families' failure to pay the ransom, set by the kidnappers at FCFA18 million (around €27 000).¹³ A few weeks later, in the early hours of 3 April, in the town of Tchéboa, an 18-year-old was

kidnapped by unidentified armed men, who demanded a ransom of FCFA10 million (approximately €15 200).¹⁴

In 2020 there was an increase in kidnapping for ransom activity in the Mayo-Rey department, which borders Chad and CAR (see Figure 2). This occurred in parallel to the reignition of violence in CAR. By the end of 2022, following three consecutive year-on-year increases, the number of people kidnapped in Mayo-Rey had almost doubled since 2019, from 103 to 194.¹⁵

Mayo-Rey is rich in pastures, attracting livestock farmers from other regions of Cameroon as well as neighbouring countries. However, given the lucrative nature of the cattle market in the region, herders are among the people most targeted by kidnappers. In February 2023, Mal Oumarou, a herder living in Madingring, in Mayo-Rey, was taken hostage, with his captors demanding a ransom of FCFA20 million (about €30 500).¹⁶

A wealthy cattle trader based in Touboro paid more than FCFA30 million (approximately €46 000) when his son was kidnapped in June 2020. Before paying the ransom, he reported the kidnapping to a local law enforcement official. However, this was in vain. 'The hostage-takers called me and repeated exactly what I had told the [official],' he said. 'I realized that I was trapped, and I just paid them so that they wouldn't kill him.'¹⁷

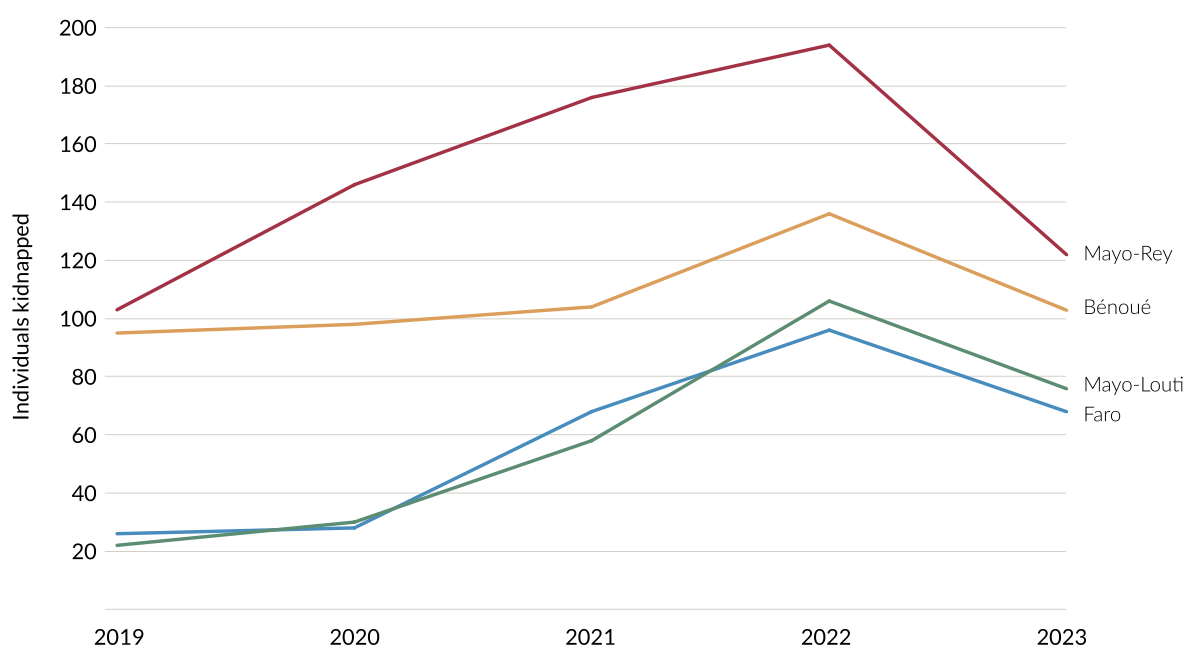


FIGURE 2 Number of people kidnapped in the Nord region of Cameroon, by department, 2019–2023.

Note: Data for 2023 is as of the end of May.

Examples of complicity between hostage-takers and law enforcement officials are plentiful in northern Cameroon. As a result, there is a strong reluctance to report kidnapping cases to the authorities. The alleged involvement of local law enforcement is also considered a key driver of the increase in kidnapping incidents since 2020. While there has always been a degree of collaboration, it is perceived by close observers to be significantly more flagrant nowadays.¹⁸

However, alleged collusion between criminals and local authorities is not the only reason the families of kidnapping victims largely refrain from coming forward. Families of those held for ransom report that kidnappers threaten to kill hostages if they contact the security and defence forces. As such, families are forced to remain silent and negotiate directly with the criminals, or risk reprisals. 'Who is going to leave their mother, wife, father or children in the hands of a criminal on the pretext that there is no point paying the ransom when

they'll never be freed? My mother was freed after a ransom of FCFA17 million [€26 000] was paid,' said a local farmer in Touboro whose mother was kidnapped in March 2023.¹⁹

Despite a seemingly disproportionate number of them taking place in Touboro, kidnapping incidents occur in a number of different places in the Nord region. Perpetrators capture individuals using roadside ambushes or by making night-time incursions into villagers' homes. Abductions are so common that not even town centres are safe. As one Touboro resident reported, 'Town centres used to be spared [from kidnapping incidents] and so were used as refuges for people fleeing villages, but today that's no longer the case. Today we live in fear.'²⁰

While initially targeting cattle herders, kidnappers have since around 2019 expanded their targets to include farmers, given the prosperity of many, particularly cotton

Date	Target	Location	Department	Ransom
August 2016	Cotton farmer	Bitou (Touboro)	Mayo-Rey	FCFA 100 million (€150 000)
June 2017	Butcher	Touboro	Mayo-Rey	FCFA 40 million (€61 000)
June 2020	Cattle trader's son	Touboro	Mayo-Rey	FCFA 30 million (€46 000)
October 2020	Farmer's children	Madjolé	Benoué	FCFA 15 million (€22 660)
February 2023	Herder	Madingring	Mayo-Rey	FCFA 20 million (€30 500)
February 2023	Cotton farmer	Laodjougoy	Mayo-Rey	FCFA 6 million (€9 100)
March 2023	Herder's mother	Touboro	Mayo-Rey	FCFA 17 million (€26 000)
March 2023	Farmer's children	Laodjougoy	Mayo-Rey	FCFA 18 million (€27 000)
April 2023	Farmer	Tchéboa	Benoué	FCFA 10 million (€15 200)
May 2023	Farmer	Lagoye (Touboro)	Mayo-Rey	FCFA 15 million (€22 660)

FIGURE 3 Selected kidnapping incidents in Cameroon's Nord region, 2016–2023.

Note: Systematic data collection on the value of ransom payments was not possible. Anecdotal evidence suggests ransom payments range between FCFA10–FCFA30 million (€15 000–€45 000), but the amount demanded by hostage-takers is highly erratic and varies considerably depending on the target's ability to pay.

farmers.²¹ In February 2023, a cotton farmer named Vakama was abducted in Laodjougoy, a small village 50 kilometres south of Madingring in Mayo-Rey department. He was freed six days later once his family had paid the ransom of FCFA6 million (approximately €9 100).²²

Today, for fear of being kidnapped or murdered, thousands of herders and their families have sold their livestock and moved elsewhere. Others have changed jobs altogether, embracing new professions such as transport and trade in basic foodstuffs, among others, industries that are far less lucrative than the livestock sector.²³

The proliferation of kidnapping for ransom has thus contributed to a gradual dislocation of the rural economy, in the Nord region but also in northern Cameroon more broadly, underpinned by people abandoning rural areas in favour of town centres, which are still relatively more stable, even if not entirely safe. Because of the more difficult living conditions these villagers face in urban areas, they are often forced to resort to crime, from minor misdemeanours such as pickpocketing to burglary and even physical assault, to survive. Consequently, this rural exodus has not only reinforced the high cost of living in large cities but has contributed to the development of urban insecurity.

The role of military operations

Despite the escalation of the phenomenon, there have been some successes in the response to kidnapping for ransom in northern Cameroon, with two military operations taking place in 2022. Between 25 April and 30 May 2022, following a spike in kidnapping incidents in Touboro, authorities launched Operation Clean Touboro 1. Comprising 300 members of the Bataillon d'Intervention Rapide (Rapid Intervention Battalion, BIR), an elite unit of the Cameroonian armed forces created to

tackle the threat of terrorism and armed groups, Operation Clean Touboro 1 made some gains against kidnapping, displacing criminal actors from the northern flank of the district. Having pushed the criminals southwards, the BIR undertook Operation Clean Touboro 2 from 15 June to 20 July 2022. According to sources from the BIR, the two operations resulted in the liberation of 18 hostages, the arrests of 27 suspects, the killing of four suspected criminal actors and the seizure of a wide range of weapons and ammunition, among other equipment.²⁴

To respond specifically to the kidnapping of farmers, particularly those in the cotton industry, authorities ran Operation Safe Harvest between September and November 2022 to coincide with the harvest period. Although all 21 units of the BIR across the north took part, the operation was concentrated primarily in Mayo-Rey, given its status as the main cotton-harvesting area. Thanks to this operation, farmers in the region were afforded a degree of safety and security when carrying out their harvests. As the president of a local group of cotton farmers in Mayo-Rey said, 'At last this past year we were able to harvest and sell our cotton without a farmer or a member of a farmer's family being kidnapped.'²⁵

Regardless of these gains, kidnapping for ransom remains a major security threat across a large section of Cameroon's Nord region. Although the government's initial responses to the *coupeurs de route* were relatively effective, they precipitated a displacement effect, with the increased law enforcement and security service repression in the region driving a different form of criminality. This raises questions around the limitations of securitized approaches to illicit economies such as kidnapping for ransom and highlights the need for alternative strategies that address the drivers of insecurity to accompany such responses.

Notes

- 1 The victim's name has been changed to protect his identity. Interview with an intelligence officer of the 4th Rapid Intervention Battalion, Garoua, June 2023.
- 2 Interview with a local journalist, Garoua, February 2023.
- 3 Observatory of Illicit Economies in West Africa, ISWAP's extortion racket in northern Cameroon experiences growing backlash from communities, Risk Bulletin, Issue 7, GI-TOC, April 2023, <https://riskbulletins.globalinitiative.net/wea-obs-007/04-iswaps-extortion-racket-in-northern-cameroon.html>.
- 4 The term *zaraguina* may have its origins in the Chadian Arabic word *zarâg* (an indigo fabric), referring to the blue that was 'used to mark the faces of robbers caught red-handed in the markets'. See International Crisis Group, Armed groups in the Central

- African Republic, *Central African Republic: The roots of violence* (2015), 2–15; and Christian Seignobos, The phenomenon of the zaraguina in northern Cameroon. A crisis of Mbororo pastoral society, *Afrique contemporaine*, 239, 3 (2011), 35–59.
- 5 DW, Chadian power again threatened from the south of the country, 24 January 2023, <https://www.dw.com/fr/le-pouvoir-tchadien-de-nouveau-menac%C3%A9-depuis-le-sud/a-64495244>.
- 6 International Crisis Group, Armed groups in the Central African Republic, *Central African Republic: The roots of violence* (2015), 2–15.
- 7 Since their emergence in the 1980s, the *zaraguinas* have comprised a mixture of different profiles, including former soldiers

from CAR, Chad, Sudan and Cameroon; mercenaries from rebel groups operating in the region; former herders who had their cattle stolen, and opportunistic and disaffected youth. Interview with an army intelligence officer, Garoua, June 2022. See also International Crisis Group, *Armed groups in the Central African Republic, Central African Republic: The roots of violence* (2015), 2–15. For a detailed overview of the *zaraguina* phenomenon in northern Cameroon, see Christian Seignobos, *Le phénomène zargina dans le nord du Cameroun: Coupeurs de route et prises d'otages, la crise des sociétés pastorales mbororo, Afrique Contemporaine*, 3 (2011), 239, 35–59.

- 8 Interview with an army intelligence officer, Garoua, June 2022.
- 9 Interview with a local journalist, Garoua, February 2023.
- 10 Interview with a local journalist, Garoua, April 2023.
- 11 Northern Cameroon comprises the three northernmost regions of Extrême-Nord, Nord and Adamaoua. Interview with a member of civil society, Garoua, April 2023.
- 12 Data provided by sources from Cameroon's security services.
- 13 Interview with an officer of the 4th Rapid Intervention Battalion, Garoua, April 2023.
- 14 Ibid.
- 15 Data provided by sources from Cameroon's security services.
- 16 Interview with an officer of the 4th Rapid Intervention Battalion, Garoua, April 2023. The hostage was freed after the Rapid Intervention Battalion intervened.
- 17 Interview with a local herder, Touboro, June 2020.
- 18 Interview with an officer of the 4th Rapid Intervention Battalion, Garoua, April 2023. This view is also shared by others, including local journalists reporting on security issues in northern Cameroon.
- 19 Interview with a local farmer, Touboro, May 2023. Cameroonian authorities formally prohibit the payment of ransom due to the belief that it encourages criminal activity and enables criminals to buy weapons.
- 20 Interview with a local resident, Touboro, May 2023.
- 21 Mayo-Rey is a major cotton-growing area, providing resources for the cotton development company SODECOTON, which remains among the most important industries in northern Cameroon. The cotton industry underwent significant reform which allowed the sector to boom from 2019.
- 22 Interview with a local journalist, Garoua, April 2023.
- 23 Ibid.
- 24 Interview with an officer of the 4th Rapid Intervention Battalion, Garoua, April 2023.
- 25 Interview with the president of the cotton farmer common initiative group, Touboro, June 2023.

Trafficking of high-calibre firearms is fuelling deadly violence in Bawku, northern Ghana.

In April 2023, gunmen shot at a private vehicle carrying three uniformed immigration officers near the police station in Bawku, a town in northern Ghana on the border with Burkina Faso.¹ One person was killed and two others wounded. The armed men, believed to be youth from the Kusasi ethnic group, attempted to stop the vehicle, which they suspected was carrying a rival chief to Bawku, for inspection; the officers ignored them.² They then opened fire on the vehicle.

The protracted conflict between the Mamprusi and Kusasi groups began in Bawku in the 20th century, stemming from a dispute over the town's chieftaincy. After a long period of relative peace, the conflict flared up again in November 2021 as members of the two tribes engaged in violent clashes. Rumours circulated that the Mamprusi were planning to perform the final funeral rites for their last chief, and this reignited the violence. The new chief's accession traditionally comes after his predecessor's funeral, so any talk of the funeral was seen as an indication that the Mamprusi were plotting to install their own chief to the role, in place of the current (government-recognized) Kusasi chief.³

Since 2021, an increased flow of weapons from abroad, predominantly Burkina Faso, has significantly contributed to higher levels of violence in Bawku, which is taking a toll on civilians.⁴ In contrast to earlier phases of this conflict, when small arms were mainly deployed, over the past year and a half, high-calibre arms and ammunitions have triggered deadlier violence, contributing to the death of over 260 people in the Bawku area.⁵

Civilians increasingly under fire

While the conflict in Bawku may have started as clashes between armed members of the Mamprusi and Kusasi, since March 2022, civilians in the area have been increasingly bearing the brunt of the violence (see Figure 2). According to data from the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data project, of the 26 incidents of political violence in Bawku recorded since November 2021, 13 were acts of violence targeting civilians.⁶

From 5 September 2022 to 8 February 2023, over 29 people were reportedly killed by armed men in 12 incidents of banditry, robbery and reprisal attacks on roads in the Upper east and Northeast regions (all major national trading and commuting routes leading to the border crossings between Ghana and Burkina Faso and Togo). Several other incidents have been reported since. In Bawku, areas around the Bawku Senior High School, highway transport station and the police station have been hotspots for armed attacks.⁷

On 17 April 2023, a Mamprusi man was shot dead near the school; his companion was rescued by state security personnel. The survivor spoke about his ordeal: 'They nearly shot me, but for an oncoming vehicle that intervened. I ran into the bush near the school and hid for about 40 minutes until the police arrived. They are wicked.'⁸

Demand for weapons surges

In Bawku, gun ownership has long been popular, in line with trends across northern Ghana, and to a lesser extent the country as a whole. Data from the Small Arms Survey showed that as of 2017, 2.3 million small arms were in the hands of civilians in Ghana, of which almost half were thought to be unregistered.⁹

Guns are employed for various purposes, not least in the context of the ongoing chieftaincy issues but also other related issues such as natural resource and land disputes, retaliatory attacks and banditry. The Bawku police posit that there is a culture of gun ownership that contributes to the high levels of demand for weapons.¹⁰ However, since the conflict reignited in 2021, and as civilians became increasingly caught in the crossfire, there has been a surge in demand for weapons, as many residents of the town and surrounding areas feel compelled to arm themselves for their own protection.

Demand is also driven by the growing number of youth groups, organized along ethnic lines, created to protect their communities.¹¹ Teenagers as young as 14 have joined these groups and are praised for their bravery in doing so, highlighting a degree of community support for

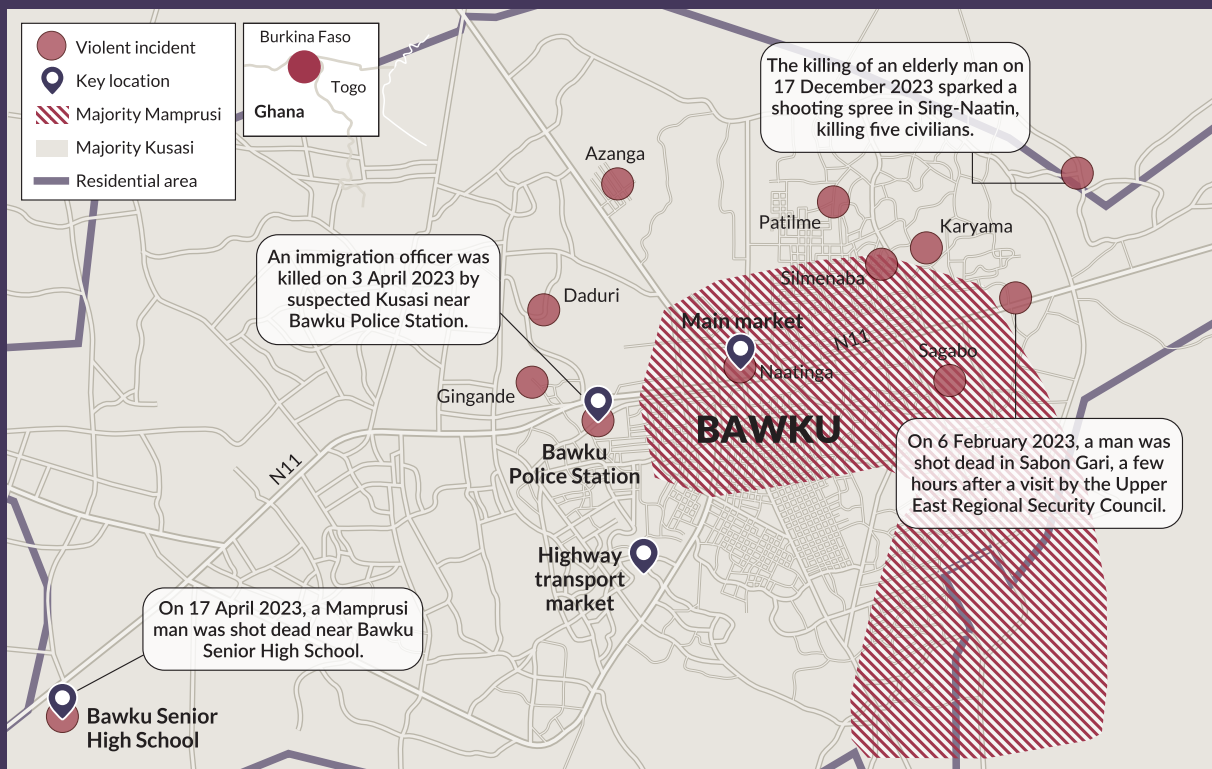


FIGURE 1 Violence hotspots in Bawku.

Source: GI-TOC, ACLED

these self-defence groups.¹² These groups, made up along ethnic lines, operate in marketplaces and lorry parks, as well as the outskirts of Bawku.¹³ As of April 2023, the number of self-defence groups operating in Bawku was estimated at 23.¹⁴ While these groups have always existed, their numbers have materially increased, with the escalation of the conflict over the past two years driving their proliferation.

Many civilians and vigilante group members turn to the illicit market to arm themselves, where gun prices are usually lower than in the licit market, as a significant number of guns are second-hand and smuggled.¹⁵ But the increasing demand for high-calibre weapons, as opposed to locally made artisanal guns, combined with a depreciating currency, are likely to have contributed to increased prices of arms and ammunition.¹⁶ Guns are considered to be expensive, and as rampant inflation since 2022 has contributed to growing cost of living

challenges, they are likely to become even less affordable for many.

One traditional leader in Bawku explained that communities are doing whatever it takes to protect themselves, often at great cost: 'We will not allow ourselves to cower before them. We will sacrifice all we have to buy guns to protect ourselves. About seven people have died in my community since August 2022 [until March 2023].'¹⁷ Given that the predominant economic activities of the residents of Bawku are farming, and cattle rearing and trade, those who cannot afford firearms sell cattle or family farmland to buy them.¹⁸

Residents in Bawku concur that gun use is rising; gunfire, they say, is a more regular occurrence. Not only does the number of weapons in circulation appear to have increased, but since 2021, the kinds of weapons used in the Bawku conflict have also shifted. Today, the firearms are as sophisticated as those used by the police. The

armed groups also appear to be well trained in the use of those weapons.¹⁹

Businessowners also reportedly finance the purchase of high-calibre arms on behalf of their ethnic groups.²⁰ By inciting and facilitating clashes between armed groups, those with a vested interest in the local economy have been able to block access to the main market, controlled by Mamprusi, driving locals to the highway transport market instead, which is controlled by Kusasi businesspeople (see Figure 1).²¹ This appears to have been the result of a strategy on the part of the Kusasi seeking to impose an economic embargo on the Mamprusi-dominated town centre.²²

Tracking supply

According to the 2021 Organised Crime Index Africa, an expert-led assessment measuring levels of organised crime in Africa, Ghana's arms trafficking market has a moderate but increasing influence across the country as a whole.²³ At a subnational level, of the 16 illicit hubs in Ghana identified by the GI-TOC as part of the West Africa illicit hub mapping initiative, the illicit arms trade was identified as a major market in half of them.²⁴

These include the country's second-largest city, Kumasi, where Suame Magazine area is located, an industrialized zone known for its workshops and vehicle repair shops. It is also one of Ghana's most established gun-manufacturing centres, where skilled craftsmen have facilitated the proliferation of high-quality weapons. Other arms trafficking hubs in Ghana include Tamale, another major artisanal weapon manufacturing hub, and Bawku, which has long operated as a cross-border smuggling hub.²⁵

These 'gun hubs' illustrate the three main sources supplying weapons to meet demand in Bawku: artisanal

manufacture, leakage from official weapon stocks and smuggling networks moving weapons from elsewhere in the country or the region. This is reflected in the seizures of weapons: between November 2021 and June 2022, at least 23 people were arrested for illegal possession of firearms and ammunition in or around Bawku.²⁶ Among the seizures made following the arrests were AK-47 assault rifles, ammunition for a wide range of other guns and foreign pistols, and locally manufactured pistols.

Artisanal production of weapons is particularly concentrated in the north of the country, where numerous protracted local chieftaincy conflicts have spurred demand for weapons. A significant number of blacksmiths in Bawku are believed to possess expertise in manufacturing weapons and repairing imported firearms. However, due to frequent and targeted law enforcement operations, arms manufacturing and repair activities are conducted sparingly, and workshops tend to be discreetly situated. Moreover, the sale of weapons involves trusted agents exclusively, serving as intermediaries.²⁷

High-calibre arms and ammunitions are filched from police and military armouries, aided by corruption, while some local blacksmiths also supply the illicit arms market. Local media have reported a recent uptick in the number of police guns lost or stolen.²⁸ There have also been incidents of ambushes targeting state security forces who are officially assigned to patrol unauthorized routes. These attacks are reportedly carried out by bandits and self-defence groups with the intention of acquiring the weapons possessed by these forces.²⁹

Most weapons smuggled into Bawku enter Ghana by land, largely through the country's porous northern and eastern borders.³⁰ According to data from the West Africa Network for Peacebuilding, in 2019 there were 44

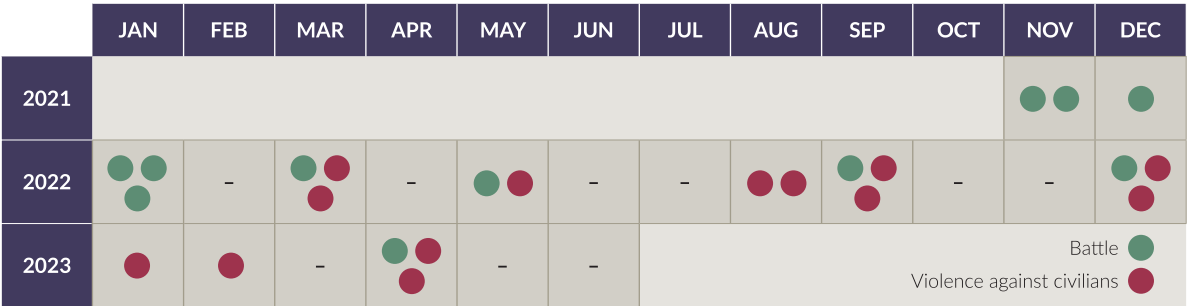


FIGURE 2 Violence in Bawku: battles versus violence against civilians.
Source: ACLED

official migration entry points in Ghana; in reality, there were over 189 unofficial entry points on the Burkina Faso border alone.³¹ Arms and ammunition purchased in Burkina Faso (allegedly from suspected violent extremists) are trafficked across the border into Bawku.³² They are concealed in vehicles, in cargo loads and transported by trucks across official border crossing points. Others enter through unofficial border crossing points, primarily by motorcycles that travel through the bushland.³³

In April 2022, a communication from police headquarters confirmed that arms were smuggled from

Burkina Faso to the Bawku conflict. It also confirmed the involvement of Burkinabé fighters from the province of Boulgou in the armed conflict. However, the police confirmed that there were no proven links between the fighters and 'terrorist cells', instead suggesting that their involvement in the gun battles may have been motivated by ethnic ties and financial interests.³⁴

In addition to arms flows from Burkina Faso, conflict actors in Bawku have, since the beginning of the conflict in 2021, increasingly used pre-existing trafficking routes from Niger, Mali, Côte d'Ivoire and Libya to import high-



In July 2022, a 22-year-old man was arrested in Patilme, Bawku, with an AK-47 and a loaded magazine containing at least 600 rounds of ammunition. He claimed that the weapons were supplied by political actors who belonged to his ethnic group.

Photo: Supplied

calibre arms and ammunitions. Reports indicate that returnees with established contacts in Libya continue to receive arms supplies in Bawku.³⁵ There have also been reported instances of high-calibre arms and ammunition imported through the Ghana's largest seaport, Tema, from Turkey and the United States.³⁶

Looking ahead

The chieftaincy dispute at the root of the conflict in Bawku has catalyzed a cycle of deadly violence, fuelled by an influx of sophisticated, high-calibre weapons. With civilians increasingly being targeted, demand for weapons has soared. But while the two warring factions

have been at the heart of the violence in Bawku, fuel has been added to the fire not only by commercial interests, but by the local political context too. Not only do some Kusasi and Mamprusi – who are politically aligned to the two main political parties, the National Democratic Congress and New Patriotic Party, respectively – exploit their ethnic base to mobilize support for their respective political partners, but political actors are also thought to be linked to the supply of arms to members of warring factions.³⁷ A further escalation of violence in the run-up to the 2024 elections, therefore, is an all-too-real risk.

Notes

- 1 Graphic.com.gh, Immigration officer shot dead on Bawku road; 2 others injured, 4 April, 2023, <https://www.graphic.com.gh/news/general-news/immigration-officer-shot-dead-on-bawku-road.html>.
- 2 Iddi Yire, Six MPs condemn purported enskinment of rival chief for Bawku, 16 February 2023, <https://gna.org.gh/2023/02/six-mps-condemn-purported-enskinment-of-rival-chief-for-bawku/>; interview with ethnic youth group, Bawku, April 2023.
- 3 James Courtwright, A small town in Ghana erupted in violence. Were jihadists fueling the fight?, *New Lines Magazine*, 25 January 2023, <https://newlinesmag.com/reportage/a-small-town-in-ghana-erupted-in-violence-were-jihadists-fueling-the-fight/>.
- 4 GhanaWeb, Burkinabe nationals involved in conflict in Bawku – Report, 28 April 2022, <https://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/NewsArchive/Burkinabe-nationals-involved-in-conflict-in-Bawku-Report-1526204>; interview with ethnic group leader, Bawku, April 2023.
- 5 Interview with civil society, youth and police, Bawku, April 2023; The Signal Room, Ghana – let's talk about Bawku, 21 April 2023.
- 6 See ACLED, www.acleddata.com.
- 7 Owula Mangortey, Bryan Acheampong blacklisted as Bawku rented gunmen itch to assassinate Politicians! – Part 2 of a monitoring report, February 2023, <https://myinfo.com.gh/2023/02/bryan-acheampong-blacklisted-as-bawku-rented-gunmen-itch-to-assassinate-politicians-part-2-of-a-monitoring-report/>.
- 8 Interview with victim of armed conflict and ethnic youth leader, Bawku, April 2023.
- 9 Civilian firearms holdings, Small Arms Survey, 2017, <https://www.smallarmssurvey.org/sites/default/files/resources/SAS-BP-Civilian-held-firearms-annexe.pdf>.
- 10 Interview with police officer, Bawku, April 2023.
- 11 Interview with youth group and traditional leader, Bawku, April 2023.
- 12 Interview with civil society and member of defunct inter-ethnic group, Bawku, April 2023.
- 13 Kusasi and Mamprusi self-defence groups' areas of operation are not limited to Bawku and are active in other towns in the Upper East region as well as the Northeast region.
- 14 Interview with youth group, Bawku, April 2023.
- 15 In 2018, the price of a Smith and Wesson pistol ranged from GHs 3 000 to GHs 4 000 (€545 to €727) on the illicit market while the same gun on the licit market ranged from GHs 9 000 (€1 636) to 12 000 (US\$2 182). Interview with Civil Society, Tamale and Bolgatanga, April 2023; interview with conflict expert, Accra, April 2023.
- 16 In 2018, a second-hand high-calibre gun, such as an M16, an AK-47 or a G3, cost a minimum of GHs 18 000 (€3 272) on the illicit market. By April 2023, most high-calibre arms were priced from GHs 25 000–30 000 (€2 200–€2 600), an increase of almost 39% in nominal terms.
- 17 Interview with a traditional leader, Bawku, 18 April 2023.
- 18 Focus group discussion with youth group, Bawku 2023. The average annual income of farmers is GHs 2 000 per year (GHs 167 per month); traders' income is approximately GHs 1 000–2 000 per month.
- 19 Interviews with various stakeholders, Bawku, April 2023.
- 20 Ibid.
- 21 Interview with civil society and police officers, Bawku, April 2023; Ambrose Dery issues warning to Bawku conflict perpetrators, Ghanaweb, 23 January 2023, <https://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/NewsArchive/Ambrose-Dery-issues-warning-to-Bawku-conflict-perpetrators-1689764>.
- 22 James Courtwright, A small town in Ghana erupted in violence. Were jihadists fuelling the fight? *New Lines Magazine*, 25 January 2023, <https://newlinesmag.com/reportage/a-small-town-in-ghana-erupted-in-violence-were-jihadists-fueling-the-fight/>.
- 23 See ENACT, Organised Crime Index Africa 2021, <https://africa.ocindex.net>. Preliminary findings from the 2023 Organized Crime Index suggest that the arms trafficking criminal market has proliferated further in the past two years.
- 24 Lucia Bird and Lyes Tagziria, Organized crime and instability dynamics: Mapping illicit hubs in West Africa, GI-TOC, September 2022, <https://wea.globalinitiative.net/illicit-hub-mapping/map>.
- 25 Ibid.
- 26 Arrests were made in Kolore, Patilime, Siliminaba, Gingande, Goziese and Sing-Natinga. See Owula Mangortey, No matter how long it takes, Ghana Chief Justice and Attorney-General shall be liable for criminal negligence in Bawku!, 28 March 2023, <https://ghananewsonline.com.gh/no-matter-how-long-it-takes-ghana-chief-justice-and-attorney-general-shall-be-liable-for-criminal-negligence-in-bawku/>.
- 27 Interview with blacksmith and civil society, Bolgatanga, April 2023.
- 28 5 AK-47s, 100 rounds of ammunition missing from armoury of Tamale Police – Auditor General, 22 November 2021, Myjoyonline.com, <https://www.myjoyonline.com/5-ak-47s-100-rounds-of-ammunition-missing-from-armoury-of->

- tamale-police-auditor-general/; Jonas Nyabor, Daboya: Robbers break into police armory, steal AK-47 rifles, 15 October 2018, <https://citinewsroom.com/2018/10/daboya-robbers-break-into-police-armory-steal-ak-47-rifles/>.
- 29 Interview with civil society, Tamale and Bawku, April 2023.
- 30 ENACT, Organised Crime Index Africa 2021: Ghana, https://africa.ocindex.net/assets/downloads/2021/ocindex_summary_ghana.pdf.
- 31 Promediation, The jihadist threat in Northern Ghana and Togo: Stocktaking and prospects for containing the expansion 2022, <https://www.kas.de/documents/261825/16928652/The+jihadist+threat+in+northern+Ghana+and+Togo.pdf/>.
- 32 Interviews with civil society, Bolgatanga, April 2023; Ghana Police Service, Burkinabe national involved in the Bawku conflict, April 2023; Ghana arrests 'Burkina Faso arms dealer' in Kumasi, BBC, 15 December 2016, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-35101131>; interview with civil society, Tamale, April 2023; interview with police, Bawku, April 2023; focus group discussion with youth group, Bawku 2023.
- 33 Interview with civil society, Bolgatanga, April 2023.
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Can cocaine seizures act as indicators of political instability in West Africa?

The number and volume of recorded cocaine seizures in West Africa spiked in 2019 and, barring a drop in 2020 (most likely the effect of operating restrictions from COVID-19), have remained unprecedentedly high since: over 25 tonnes of cocaine were seized in 2022. This glut aligns with global trends of increased seizures in the post-COVID period.¹

Although this surge in seizures occurs alongside record-breaking levels of global cocaine supply,² it is recognized that seizures are unreliable indicators of product supply, and more accurately reflect the efficacy of law enforcement agencies.³ Less explored, however, is how seizures – and in particular clusters of material seizures – may be able to provide insight into current and forthcoming political instability.

As is characteristic of high-value transit criminal economies, cocaine trafficking in certain West African countries has sustained organized protection infrastructures that can often be traced to the higher echelons of the state and its security apparatus.⁴ Precedent has shown that periods of political fracture or conflict in the region can be correlated to clusters of large cocaine seizures, representing cracks in the political protection complex, which (for a fee) enables trafficking to occur unimpeded.⁵

Recent analysis suggests that seizures tend to cluster in periods when the political system is damaged, and law enforcement agencies are able to operate with greater independence. Seizures would also appear to act as a barometer of pending instability resulting from power struggles or fracturing political systems.

We consider the contrasting cases of Guinea, Guinea-Bissau and Ghana to explore how seizure patterns can provide insight into political instability in West Africa.

Guinea: More political instability?

Guinea has long played a central role in the transit of cocaine through West Africa en route to Europe. Nevertheless, the country's criminal economy has received limited scrutiny, with the spotlight typically shone on its more infamous neighbour, Guinea-Bissau. Supply and retail

indicators suggest that Guinea's cocaine economy is currently in a phase of rapid expansion.⁶

Guinea's cocaine economy has been characterized by a small number of long-standing, high-level Guinean players exerting significant influence over the market with close links to the state. At least three major players started operating during President Lansana Conté's regime in the early 2000s, faced court proceedings in 2010 under Dadis Camara (who led the military coup that displaced Conté), and appeared to continue operations under Alpha Condé: Sidiki Mara, Mamady Kallo and Moussa Traoré.⁷ Whether these figures are still central to Guinea's current cocaine dynamics is disputed.

As shown in Figure 1, there has been an unprecedented spike in seizures in Guinea since 2022. Notably, this spike has largely been driven by seizures of large maritime consignments – 299 kilograms in February 2022; 2.6 tonnes in September; and 1.5 tonnes in April 2023. This is uncharacteristic, as large maritime drug shipments usually enjoy a higher level of operational protection than smaller consignments trafficked by air.

This cluster of bulk seizures began shortly after the 2021 coup that dislodged Condé and ushered Mamadi Doumbouya into power. It also disrupted the existing political infrastructure: not only were senior political incumbents overturned, but over 40 officers in the military, which has long been a key node in elite protection of the country's cocaine trade, were moved into forced retirement, while several senior military posts were reshuffled.⁸ This is likely to have created fissures in the established, well-oiled, protection systems, resulting in the seizures by law enforcement since the new regime came to power.

This recent spate of seizures would appear to suggest that although cocaine continues to transit Guinea, the protection system that has facilitated it – and perhaps the broader system of criminal entrepreneurs – is more fragmented than it was under Condé. This has left more space for law enforcement intervention, granting novel insights into the opaque criminal cocaine economy.

The second element of the hypothesis – seizures as a forerunner of political instability – is, of course, difficult to confirm. Figure 2 tracks Guinea's political stability, as measured by the World Bank Governance Indicators, against recorded cocaine seizures. The data clearly shows that the surge in seizures immediately preceded a dramatic deterioration in Guinea's stability in the wake of the 2021 coup.

Looking to the future, there have been doubts about Doumbouya's grip on power since the coup, and while he has been able to withstand clashes with senior officials of the ruling military junta, his support base is by no means consolidated. Although Doumbouya is a member of the Guinean Special Forces, he is seen as relatively young and spent several years overseas. As a result, elements of the influential military old guard reportedly still perceive him as an outsider. The current political dynamics in Guinea are extremely fragile – the military junta seems fractured, focused on muzzling freedom of expression and providing little clarity on a path towards democracy. The recent spate of bulk

seizures do indeed appear to presage yet more political instability in Guinea.⁹

Guinea-Bissau: The protection system slides back into place

Two bumper cocaine seizures in 2019 (789 kilograms and 1 869 kilograms) underscored Guinea-Bissau's ongoing prominence as a transshipment point in global cocaine trafficking routes. The timing of these cocaine imports – which happened immediately before the 2019 parliamentary and presidential elections, respectively – tells a revelatory story.

Firstly, the seizures are widely believed to have been dictated by the need to fund electoral campaigning.¹⁰ Secondly, they occurred during a period in the run-up to elections that was shrouded in political uncertainty. The country's Judicial Police service were operating with independence, unfettered by the executive and supported by senior officials, including the prime minister and justice minister.

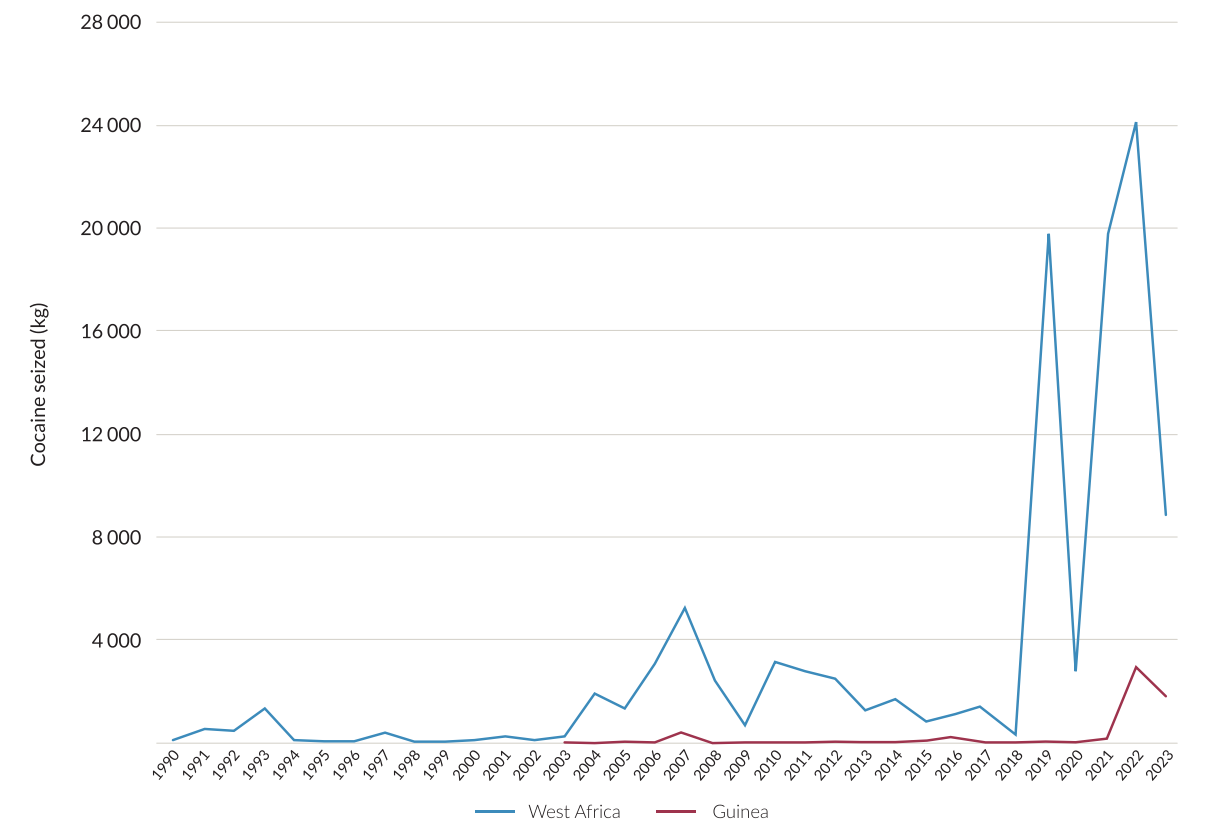


FIGURE 1 Cocaine seizures in Guinea and West Africa, 1990–2023.

Note: 2023 figures as of May.

Source: Data collated by the GI-TOC from various sources, including UNODC, media publications and confidential sources

Shortly after these seizures, the political system was once again shaken to its roots: the elections closed with military forces occupying state buildings in March 2020, breaking a six-year period of military non-interference in the affairs of the state. Notably, two indicators used to compose the Fragile States Index show a marked increase in fragility since 2020.¹¹ Looking back through Guinea-Bissau's history, the previous cluster of recorded seizures in 2006 also shortly preceded convulsions in the political system, marked by coups and a string of political assassinations.

In the wake of the power transition, the number of seizures diminished once more. Shortly after coming to power in February 2020, President Embaló publicly stated to international media that his inauguration as president had 'closed a chapter' in Guinea-Bissau's history, referring to the country's long-running reputation as a cocaine trafficking hub.¹²

The seizures may have declined, but well-positioned sources state there was an increase in cocaine trafficking over this period.¹³ Intelligence from national and international law enforcement authorities point to the continued, and escalating, discharge of cocaine from mother ships in Bissau-Guinean territorial waters, transhipped onto smaller vessels for unloading at points along the coastline.¹⁴

Stakeholders close to investigations into cocaine seizures in the territorial waters and ports of neighbouring countries, most prominently Senegal and Gambia, repeatedly pointed to Guinea-Bissau as the intended destination of consignments.¹⁵ For example, the 2 026 kilograms of cocaine seized on the vessel *La Rosa* off Dakar in October 2021 is believed to have been en route to Guinea-Bissau.¹⁶ And according to people who use drugs (PWUD) in Bissau, the price of powder cocaine is currently lower than previously. The fall in the price of cocaine suggests no current shortage of supply.¹⁷

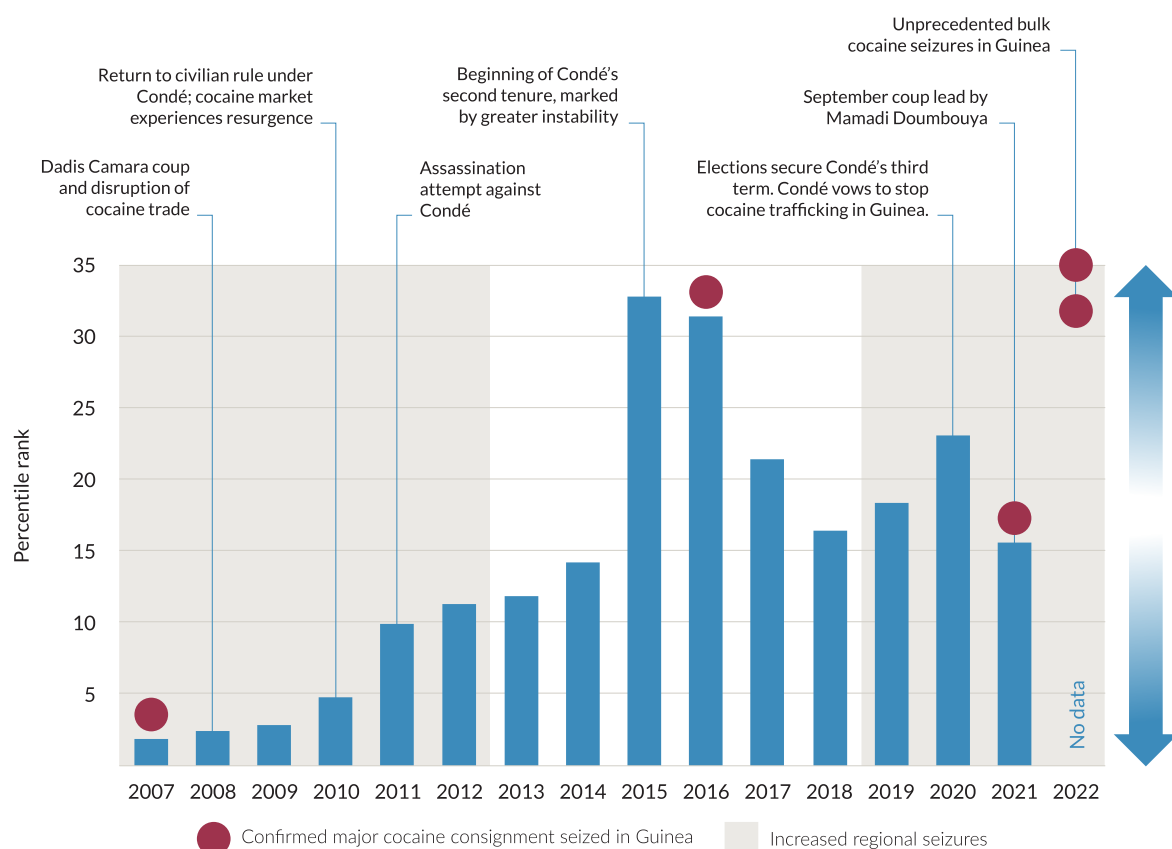


FIGURE 2 Political stability and cocaine seizures in Guinea.

Note: Percentile rank indicates the country's rank among all countries regarding perceptions of political stability and absence of violence/terrorism, with 0 corresponding to the lowest rank and 100 indicating the highest rank.

Source: GI-TOC, World Bank

Consequently, the marked decline in seizures in Guinea-Bissau since early 2020 appears to be an indication of the system protecting cocaine operations snapping back into place, and dramatically diminished operational freedoms among the criminal justice infrastructure, most notably of the Judicial Police.¹⁸ While 2022 saw numerous indicators of political instability – an alleged failed coup attempt, the redeployment of ECOWAS peacekeeping troops and the dissolution of the National Assembly by the president on grounds of ‘political emergency’ – many stakeholders in Guinea-Bissau do not believe presidential power is under serious threat. Instead, the political protection system appears to have re-consolidated, with growing concentration of power in the hands of the president.

Ghana: Contested trends

Ghana has long operated as a transit point for cocaine destined for Europe. However, seizures in the country

dropped after 2013 and have remained low ever since. The UNODC’s drug monitoring platform has tracked only one seizure in the country over 100 kilograms since 2014.¹⁹ This dearth is occurring against a backdrop of escalating seizures across West African coastal states. What is driving it?

Some international and national stakeholders have suggested that enhanced security systems at ports of entry – most prominently Tema, the largest maritime port in the country and the primary entry point for cocaine – have made it more difficult for traffickers to import cocaine, leading to displacement of the trade to other countries.²⁰ This approach uses decreased numbers of seizures as evidence of volumes. However, this is an unreliable analytical approach.²¹

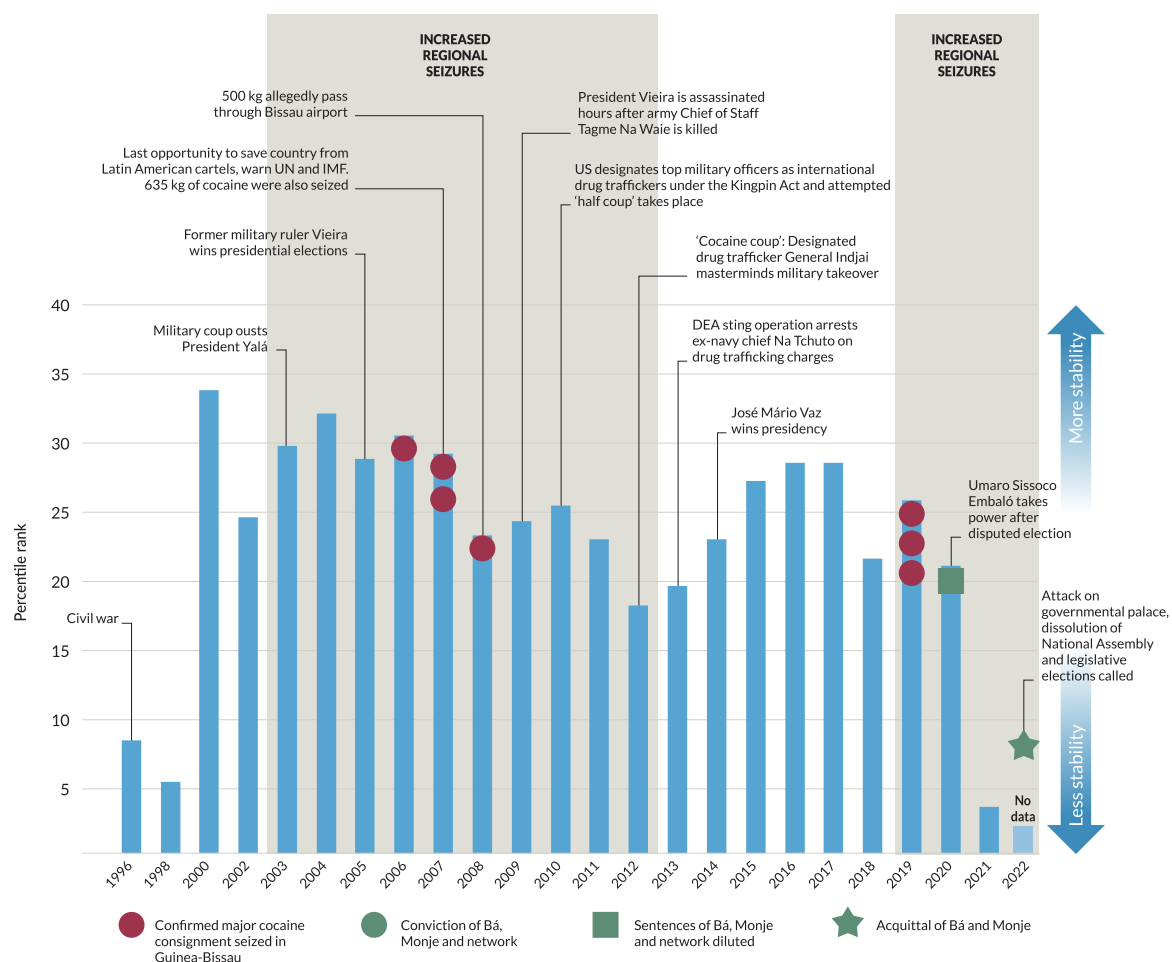


FIGURE 3 Cocaine seizures, coups and political events in Guinea-Bissau, 1996–2022.

Note: Percentile rank indicates the country’s rank among all countries regarding perceptions of political stability and absence of violence/terrorism, with 0 corresponding to the lowest rank and 100 indicating the highest rank.

Source: GI-TOC, World Bank

Others working in the criminal justice system and beyond disagree with these conclusions.²² Instead, they suggest that high-level protection of cocaine trafficking, which has been long documented, means the trade is able to continue uninterrupted by the arm of the law.²³ In parallel, growing intimidation of journalists has led to increased self-censorship and little coverage of the politically sensitive cocaine trade.²⁴

Data supports this second hypothesis, namely that the seizure drought is due to uninterrupted protection. Firstly, transshipment from mother ships onto smaller vessels in the high seas, with disembarkation at coastal entry points outside official maritime ports, is common across West Africa. This form of shipping drugs to land is unaffected by enhanced screening in official ports. Secondly, there have been a number of recent large seizures in Brazil, a key export point to West Africa, of cocaine destined for Ghana.²⁵

Thirdly, retail prices for crack cocaine in Accra, 30 kilometres from Tema, have, according to PWUD, remained the same in nominal terms – at around 10 Ghanaian Cedis per ball – between 2017 and 2023 (equivalent to €1.9 in 2017, €0.8 in 2023).²⁶ PWUD in

Accra in 2023 also report that the purity of crack cocaine has remained broadly stable since around 2015.²⁷ Dealer testimonies indicated no change in the ease with which they purchase powder cocaine from wholesale retailers.²⁸

Taking into account inflation, the price of crack cocaine dropped by over 60% between 2017 and 2023.²⁹ Notably, data tracking the affordability of cocaine in European retail markets, the destination for most of the cocaine transiting Ghana, points to a 38% increase in 'affordability' of cocaine on European retail markets between 2015 and 2020.³⁰

The drop in price in real terms, alongside reportedly stable purity,³¹ would suggest that there is more, not less, powder cocaine feeding Ghana's crack cocaine markets. Ghana's established consumption market has long been supplied through overspill from the transit flow of cocaine through the country, rather than primarily as a destination country in its own right. This suggests the bulk transit flow of cocaine through Ghana remains stable, or has increased, since the mid 2010s, aligning with broader regional trends. While some is

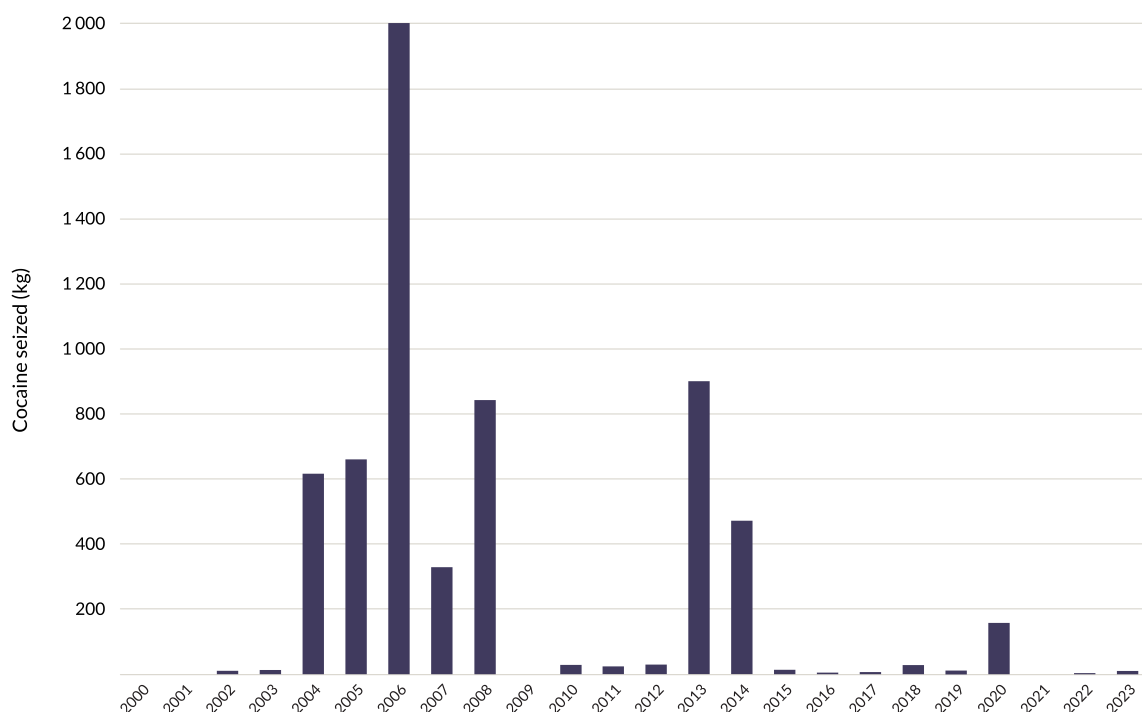


FIGURE 4 Recorded cocaine seizures in Ghana, 2000–2023.

Note: 2023 figures as of May.

Source: Data collated by GI-TOC from various sources, including UNODC, media publications and confidential sources

likely to be entering through land borders, a proportion is likely to be imported through Ghana's coastal areas.

The lack of disruption to retail markets, alongside ongoing seizures destined for Ghana at key export points, would appear to suggest the second analysis – pointing to a seamless protection system – may underpin Ghana's seizure drought. The political protection system has shown little sign of fracture, even during the closely contested 2016 elections, which triggered a change in powerholders, bringing the National Patriotic Party into power.

Notes

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- 13 Interview with former Minister of Justice for Guinea-Bissau, June 2022, by phone.
- 14 Between March 2020 and December 2021, law enforcement authorities tracked the offloading of at least four large cocaine consignments in Bissau-Guinean territorial waters. Authorities were reportedly unable to act due to high-level political and military protection of the operations. Interviews with sources close to law enforcement authorities in Guinea-Bissau, January to March 2022.
- 15 Interviews with law enforcement officials in Dakar, Senegal and Banjul, Gambia, October–December 2021.
- 16 Interviews with security officials in Guinea-Bissau, Senegal and Gambia, October–December 2021.
- 17 Trending at between FCFA 15 000 and FCFA 18 000 (€23–27) per gram in April 2023. Interviews with PWUD in Bissau, April 2023.
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Cocaine seizures as a tool for analyzing and predicting political instability

Analysis of illicit economies is, broadly speaking, hampered by a lack of reliable data. Seizures, whether of cocaine or other commodities, have long offered rare insights into these opaque operations. In the case of cocaine – where the nature of the trafficking market means that it is often protected by high-level elements in the state – these insights offer clues not only into the operations of the trafficking market itself, but also into the provision of protection, and in some cases the high-level political system. Strategic application of this analytical lens to cocaine seizures may hold promise for analyzing, and perhaps foretelling, political instability in transit states of West Africa and beyond.

- press freedoms, fell in 2022 and 2023 to its worst record in 18 years. See also Press Freedom Index 2023: Ghana, Reporters without Borders, <https://rsf.org/en/country/ghana>.
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