

OBSERVATORY OF ILLICIT ECONOMIES IN WEST AFRICA

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Summary highlights

1. Armed bandits extort crop farmers amid dwindling alternative illicit revenue sources in Zamfara, north-western Nigeria.

On 11 July 2022, residents of Dangulbi and Kango in Zamfara State, north-west Nigeria, were attacked by armed bandits for failing to pay a tax imposed on them by the bandits. This incident reflects the growing trend, first tracked in 2019, of bandits engaging in a new form of extortion by taxing farming activities in Zamfara as a way of gaining revenue. In addition to illegally imposing taxes on farmers, since 2022 in particular, bandits have become increasingly engaged directly in farming activities. Not only does the bandits' shift from drawing financing from illicit economies to the taxation of licit activities pose a significant threat to farmers' livelihoods and food security in the region, but as revenue becomes increasingly dependent on territorial control, this growing practice could indicate escalation in conflicts in Zamfara as different groups vie for control.

2. Is wildlife crime in Cameroon's Bouba Ndjida National Park financing an emerging separatist group in the north?

On 12 June 2022, in a forest in north-eastern Cameroon, clashes erupted between military forces and elements of the Mouvement de libération du Cameroun (Movement for the Liberation of Cameroon, MLC), a nascent separatist rebel group established in Chad. According to official sources, the MLC have been engaging in elephant poaching in the Bouba Ndjida National Park, situated near the border with Chad and CAR, highlighting the important role played by national parks and forests to armed groups. While poaching by the Sudanese Janjaweed, the primary actors involved in the illicit activity in the park over the past decades, has dwindled, it is possible that the MLC will seek to target wildlife in the national park to finance itself. Although the evidence thus far suggests that they are not currently a major threat, a failure to act may allow the rebels to exploit the perceived marginalization of communities in northern Cameroon.



3. As Casamance rebels are weakened, is the Niokolo Koba National Park a potential fallback zone?

Since early 2021, the Senegalese military have launched a series of offensives in the country's Casamance region against the Mouvement des forces démocratiques de Casamance (Movement of Democratic Forces of Casamance, MFDC). Following the dismantling of their bases, seizure of their weapons and weakening of traditional havens, the MFDC's ability to translate territorial influence into revenue streams from illicit economies may be weakened. However, as witnessed in other countries in West Africa, armed groups often retreat into national parks following military and law enforcement action against them. The Niokolo Koba National Park, situated fewer than 400 kilometres from the Casamance region, could offer numerous possibilities to rebel groups to draw revenues from illicit activities they have long relied on, including the illicit trade in timber, cannabis and wildlife products.

4. The number of civilian casualties is growing in West Africa as conflict areas increasingly overlap with illicit economies.

On 5 September 2022, a convoy of vehicles struck an improvised explosive device in Burkina Faso. The suspected Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin attack killed 35 civilians and injured several dozen more. Such incidents are evidence of the growing number of civilian casualties resulting from conflicts in the region. The findings of the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime's 'Mapping illicit hubs in West Africa' initiative show that the overwhelming majority of regions in West Africa that are most affected by conflict and violence are also home to at least one illicit hub. This highlights the increasing geographic overlap between conflict areas and zones of illicit activity, which has important implications not only for policymakers seeking to implement stabilization policies, but also for the prospective livelihoods of communities across the region.

ABOUT THIS ISSUE

The fifth issue of the Risk Bulletin of Illicit Economies in West Africa explores several new trends emerging in the region, all of which are related to the exploitation of natural resources – or of those involved in harvesting natural resources – by armed actors. While in Nigeria a new form of extortion has emerged, targeting farming communities, recent developments in Senegal and Cameroon suggest that rebel groups may be turning to poaching in national parks as a source of financing.

This issue begins with the African continent's largest economy, Nigeria. Over the past year, the Risk Bulletin has explored issues of armed banditry, cattle rustling, kidnap for ransom and communal violence, among other important security issues facing the country. This quarter, we turn our attention to an emerging trend in Zamfara State, where armed bandits are using the farming industry as a source of financing, either by imposing illegal taxes on farming communities or by directly engaging in illicit farming practices themselves.

The second and third articles explore the possibility of rebel groups engaging in illicit activity in national parks as a means of financing. The first focuses on Cameroon, where recent clashes have occurred between military forces and elements of a newly established separatist

rebel group known as the Mouvement de libération du Cameroun (Movement for the Liberation of Cameroon). These clashes were the result of a military operation in response to suspected poaching activity by the latter in north-eastern Cameroon's Bouba Ndjida National Park.

The other explores the significant shift in the balance of power in West Africa's most longstanding conflict, following successful Senegalese military offensives against the Mouvement des forces démocratiques de Casamance (Movement of Democratic Forces of Casamance). The Niokolo Koba National Park, situated fewer than 400 kilometres from the Casamance region, could offer numerous possibilities to rebel groups to draw revenues from illicit activities.

These stories have emerged in the context of a broader trend witnessed across West Africa, the Sahel and parts of central Africa, in which armed groups are increasingly seeking refuge and entrenching themselves in national parks, wildlife reserves and forests.

Finally, the fourth article in this issue of the Risk Bulletin takes a step back to look at the relationship between conflict and illicit economies, centred around the findings of the Observatory of Illicit Economies in West

Africa's new initiative, 'Mapping illicit hubs in West Africa'. As the number of civilians falling victim to conflict and violence in the region continues to rise, the increasing geographic overlap between conflict areas

and zones of illicit activity has important implications for stabilization policies and for the prospective livelihoods of communities across the region.

Armed bandits extort crop farmers amid dwindling alternative illicit revenue sources in Zamfara, north-western Nigeria.

On 11 July 2022, armed bandits attacked residents of Dangulbi and Kango communities in Maru local government area (LGA) of Zamfara State, north-west Nigeria. Sixteen people were killed while working on their farms. A week before the attack, a bandit leader named Damina had imposed a 5 million naira (N) (US\$11 650) farming tax on the communities, with a threat to exact it with force. Damina's men carried out the killings after residents failed to raise the money.¹

A growing trend, first tracked in 2019, sees bandits carry out a new form of extortion by taxing farming activities

in Zamfara as a way of gaining revenue, as income from cattle rustling, a key source of financing, has dwindled. While bandits have also diversified revenue streams to include increased reliance on kidnap for ransom, the growing dependence on taxing farming presents a shift from drawing financing from illicit economies to the taxation of licit activities.

The threat of violence, and precedent deadly attacks, means most villages try to pay the sums demanded.

Earlier this year, some 10 villages in Talata Marafa LGA escaped reprisal after raising N3.7 million (US\$8 500) to

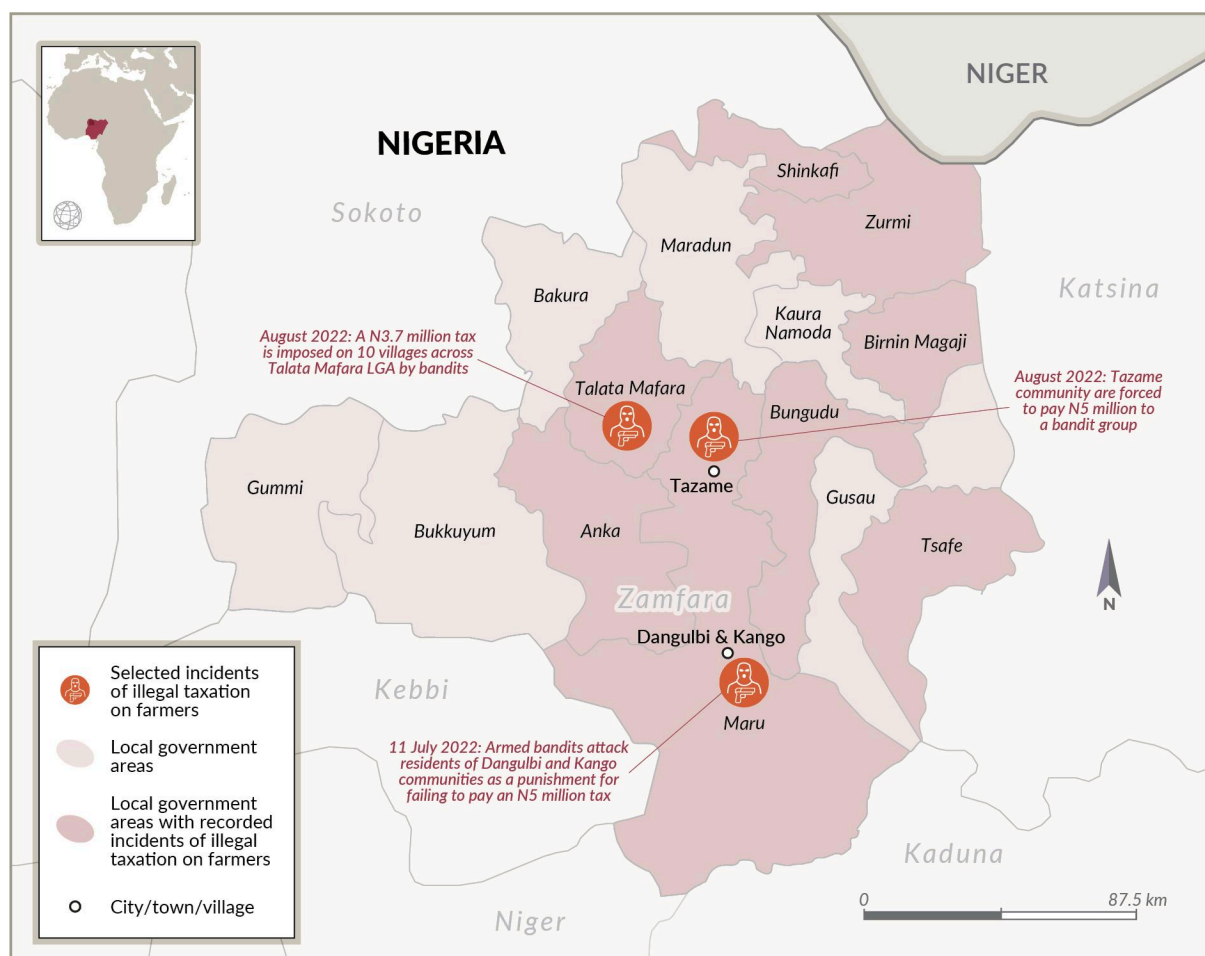


Figure 1 Incidents of illegal taxation on farmers by bandits in Zamfara State.

Source: Information gathered from interviews in Zamfara State, September 2022.

pay the tax imposed on them by another group of bandits. The group had threatened to block access to farmlands and ransack the villages if the money was not paid by 30 August.² In the neighbouring LGA of Bungudu, the Tazame community were forced to pay N5 million (US\$11 650) to another bandit group in August 2022, before its members were allowed to have access to their farms.³

Six more LGAs (Anka, Shinkafi, Zurmi, Gusau, Birnin Magaji and Tsafe) are trapped in this web of extortion that appears to have emerged in Magami community (Gusau LGA) in 2019.⁴ According to a journalist based in Zamfara, bandits now 'raise more money from imposing tax than abductions',⁵ a point reiterated by a number of stakeholders. The spread of this practice since 2019 has significantly affected farmers' livelihoods and poses a threat to food security.⁶ Furthermore, as revenue becomes increasingly dependent on territorial control, this growing practice could indicate escalation in conflicts in Zamfara as different groups vie for control.

In addition to illegally imposing taxes on farmers, bandits have become increasingly engaged directly in farming activities. This new development involves the confiscation of farmers' lands by bandit groups, who subsequently use forced labour, mainly from local villagers, to cultivate the land. While communities in Maru noted the new trend in 2021, it has proliferated considerably since the beginning of 2022.⁷

So far, state responses have largely overlooked new trends, focusing more on responding to established (but dwindling) illicit economies, such as kidnap for ransom. A farmer in Dangulbi explained that the Nigerian government has stationed about 30 soldiers in the community as a protection against banditry, and yet bandits still go about collecting farming tax and seizing lands.⁸

Emergence of bandit farming extortion

Since 2011, Zamfara has been one of the states in north-western Nigeria most affected by banditry. The groups have drawn revenues from a range of illicit economies, and such financing is used to sustain the groups and to acquire weapons.⁹

Until 2019, the armed bandits had relied heavily on cattle rustling for revenue. While its impact is still widely felt across the state, cattle rustling as a source of income has become less profitable to bandits due to depletion



A farmer returns from his farm in the village of Dangulbi, Zamfara State, the site of an armed bandit attack in July 2022.

Photo: supplied

of the cattle population, with many herds moved elsewhere as a result of insecurity.¹⁰

Bandits responded to dwindling revenues from cattle rustling by increasingly turning to kidnap for ransom. Rural communities have repeatedly reported a decrease in kidnapping incidents since the peak of 2021, which coincided with the marked surge in incidents of illegal farming taxation by bandit groups from early 2022.¹¹

At its most rampant, between 2019 and 2021, kidnappings targeted primarily wealthy farmers and businessmen, from whom bandits collected millions of naira in ransom payments. However, the pool of possible targets for kidnappers shrank.¹² The farmers and businessmen who had, in most cases, been kidnapped on more than one occasion by one or more groups of bandits, had either lost their wealth (as a result of previous ransom payments), fled, or been killed by their abductors for failing to raise the ransom fee.¹³ Between 2019 and 2020, a steady stream of villagers paid up to N350 000 (over US\$800) to transporters to be relocated away from their communities.¹⁴

'They have rustled all the livestock; if you go to 50 villages, you cannot find a goat. They moved to kidnapping and got people to flee. Those who remain

and cannot run are the ones being taxed,' a local official of a farmers' association said regarding the emergence of bandit farming taxation.¹⁵

Data on abductions and forced disappearances from the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED), however, do not show a decrease in the number of kidnapping incidents between 2021 and 2022.¹⁶ Following meteoric yearly increases in the number of kidnapping incidents in Zamfara in 2020 and 2021, the kidnapping rate stagnated in 2022 (see Figure 2).¹⁷ While incidents remain high, a shrinking pool of possible targets is likely to have contributed to the decreased revenue that bandit groups have earned from kidnappings.

The evidence suggests, therefore, that while kidnapping incidents across the state remain high, the ransoms solicited, and therefore the total revenue earned, by bandit groups have decreased.

The resulting shift to farming taxation since 2019 has helped channel millions of naira to bandit groups. From March to August 2022, bandits are estimated by members of local farming associations to have generated over N45 million (over US\$100 000) in illicit tax revenue from farming communities in Dansadau district alone.¹⁸

These figures are expected to spike at harvest time, during November and December, when farmers have more money.

Local communities bear the costs of illicit farming taxation

The illicit taxes imposed by bandits are levied on individuals, single villages and groups of villages, as highlighted in Figure 3. One farmer from Magami targeted by bandits said:

In 2021, they asked me to pay money before they would allow me to harvest my three farms. They threatened to burn all the crops that were due for harvest if I did not comply. So, I had to pay N170 000 [US\$390] for a bean farm and N70 000 [US\$160] and N30 000 [US\$70] respectively for maize farms.¹⁹

Where individual farmers do not have the funds to pay the illegal tax, they are instead told to surrender 50% of their harvest to the bandits.²⁰

Where a tax is imposed on a village or group of villages, members of the villages bear the cost. Most of the times, adult male members are tasked with raising the amount, with each of them contributing a set amount

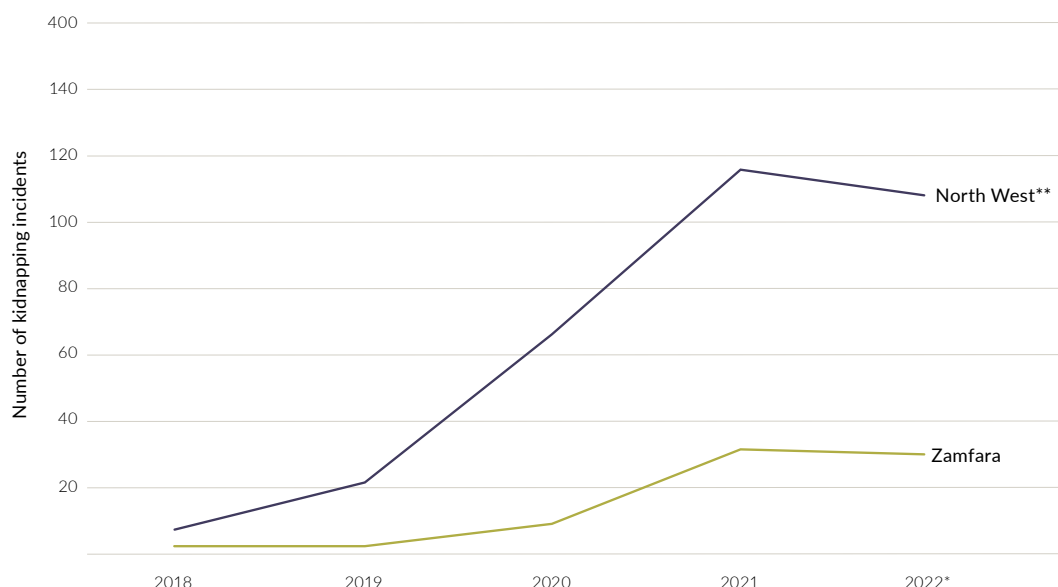


Figure 2 Kidnapping incidents in Zamfara and north-western Nigeria, 2018–2022.

Note: *As of 14 September. **Includes the following states: Jigawa, Kaduna, Kano, Katsina, Kebbi, Sokoto and Zamfara.

Source: ACLED

based on their financial status in the community. For instance, to pay the N5 million requested by bandit kingpin Damina, some family heads in Dangulbi and Kango contributed between N10 000 and N60 000 (US\$25–US\$140) each.²¹

As a local community member explained:

In the end, the amount we raised fell short of our N5 million [US\$11 650] target by N700 000 [US\$1 600]. So, we asked for a loan from one member of our community to settle the debt with the bandits. We then asked each household to contribute an additional N1 000 [US\$2.50] in order to pay back the loan. By the time we went back to our farms, over 40 days had passed and most of the crops were damaged by weed.²²

These types of interruptions to farming activity are capable of crippling livelihoods in rural areas. The damage is compounded by the fact that often illegal taxes are imposed on the same communities several

times (either by the same bandit group or a different one) within a short period.

The community leader in Talata Mafara, who spearheaded gathering the required payment of N3.7 million (US\$8 500) to bandit leader Halilu Buzu in March 2022, said:

Last week, they asked us to buy another motorcycle for them. We have told them that we cannot raise another N370 000 [US\$850]. Everyone here has overborrowed to meet their previous demands, but [the bandits] are unrelenting and are threatening to ban us from farming and to ransack our communities. If government does not intervene, we may be harmed. This is a new thing to us. Previously, they had rustled our cattle and repeated that last year, but this is the first time they are asking us to pay money before we go to our farms. Unfortunately, even after doing that, they are coming up with more and more demands. We can no longer afford their demands.²³

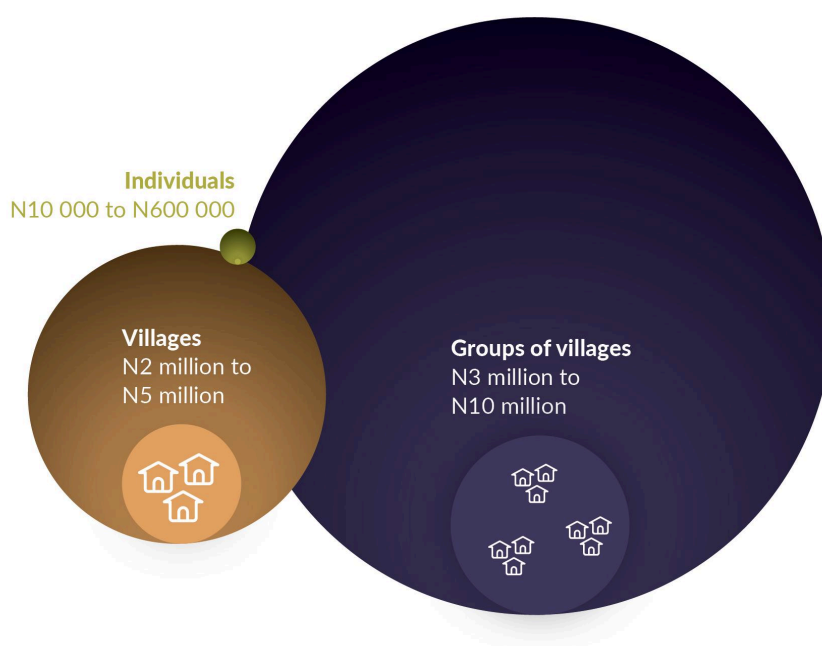


Figure 3 Illegal taxation structures imposed by bandit groups.

Note: When individuals are targeted, a farmer is ordered to pay anywhere from N10 000 to N600 000, depending on the size of his farm (seen by the bandits as a proxy for overall wealth). In other instances, the tax – which is fixed between N2 million and N5 million – will be imposed on the village as a whole. Finally, bandits sometimes group together small villages and ask them to pay a lump sum, ranging from N3 million to N10 million.

Source: Information gathered from interviews with residents, journalists and law enforcement officials in Zamfara State, September 2022.

Less than two weeks later, the community was again threatened by the bandits, forcing them to sleep in a nearby forest out of fear of violent reprisals.²⁴

These developments are already taking a huge toll on the agrarian economy of Zamfara. A spokesperson for the All Farmers Association of Nigeria estimated that in Zamfara, about N43 billion (US\$100 million) in potential farming revenue is lost to banditry,²⁵ a huge consequence for a state with the highest percentage of the country's poor and vulnerable.²⁶

Bandits getting their hands dirty

As other sources of revenue have dwindled, farming now offers a significant available revenue stream, enabling bandits to sustain and potentially expand their activities. Since 2021, with a further upsurge since March 2022, bandits have increasingly established their own farms. Bandit farms are now common in all the eight LGAs where the groups impose taxes on farming.²⁷ According to a resident of Anka, since the beginning of 2022, more farming activity is now carried out by bandit groups than by local farmers.²⁸

Heightened military responses to bandit groups in neighbouring Kaduna, Sokoto, Kebbi, Katsina and Niger states are believed to be a key reason for which the bandits are returning to their bases in Zamfara.²⁹ However, seizing farmlands may also be an attempt to assert territorial control and diversify income sources. Such tactics risk prolonging instability throughout the north-west as local communities arm themselves for protection and establish vigilante self-defence groups in response.

Since bandits have begun to farm themselves, residents of several LGAs have been forced to work on the farms belonging to the bandit leaders.³⁰ Tracing the emergence of the practice, a local journalist said, 'It started last year, when a bandit kingpin around the Magami, Dankurmi and Dansadau axis told farmers to work on his farm first, before they could work on their own. Since then, the practice has become rampant, and compliance is extremely high.'³¹

Bandit groups send emissaries to community leaders asking for a specific number of people to work on their farms. Villagers who fail to comply are rounded up, flogged and forced to work. While the practice has caused some people to vacate their villages in parts of the state, it is having an opposite effect in other areas,

such as Anka.³² Some residents who fled their communities before 2021, to escape attacks and kidnappings, are now returning to cultivate their own lands, knowing that they will also be forced to work in farming for the bandits.

Security and livelihood implications

As with other forms of extortion, levying taxes on farmers is to a degree dependent on territorial control. As armed bandits increasingly rely on these rents, they may seek to exert greater control on territories and expand their territories of influence, triggering territorial tussles and turf wars, with potentially devastating impact on stability. Bandits would not only clash with rival groups in such territorial struggles, but also with local communities and security forces.

Furthermore, with heavy taxes and levies, farming looks set to become less lucrative. Some local farmers may abandon farming and seek alternative livelihoods. This could enable bandit groups to capture additional territory, and revenue flows, with an overall criminalization of farming practices having potentially significant implications for food security.



Villagers flee a bandit attack in Zamfara.

Photo: Shehu Umar

The government's response to the armed bandit crisis in Zamfara has thus far largely involved a military approach. This strategy often helps to temporarily lull the problem, but relief frequently proves temporary. In December 2021, Zamfara governor Bello Matawalle, at a meeting with former bandits and law enforcement, adopted a different approach by appealing to bandit groups to allow farmers to harvest their crops.³³

The communities most affected by banditry are clear on the need for policies that will improve livelihoods in

rural areas. Poverty is believed to be the driving factor behind banditry. According to one local community member, informants will accept as little as N5 000 (just over US\$10) to spy on their own community, such is the scarcity of economic opportunity.³⁴ Moreover, the feeling among many local communities is that the authorities are failing to hold the bandits to account, allowing them to act with impunity.³⁵ If there is any hope of improvement in the security dynamics in Zamfara, it must start with the application of the rule of law.

Notes

1. Interview with a farmer in Dangulbi, Maru LGA, Zamfara, 9 September 2022.
2. Interview with a community leader in Gwaram, Talata Mafara LGA, Zamfara, 10 September 2022.
3. Interview with an official of a local branch of a farmers' association, Zamfara, 8 September 2022.
4. Interview with an official of a local branch of a farmers' association, Zamfara, 8 September 2022; interview with a journalist in Gusau, Zamfara, 9 September 2022; Maiharaji Altine, *Reign of terror: Zamfara bandits take over villages, impose harvest levies, burn crops*, Punch, 26 November 2021, <https://punchng.com/reign-of-terror-zamfara-bandits-take-over-villages-impose-harvest-levies-burn-crops/>.
5. Interview with a journalist in Gusau, Zamfara, 9 September 2022.
6. Ibid.
7. Interview with a vigilante leader in Magami, Maru LGA, Zamfara, 8 September 2022.
8. Interview with a farmer in Dangulbi, Maru LGA, Zamfara, 9 September 2022.
9. Observatory of Illicit Economies in West Africa, In north-western Nigeria, violence carried out by bandit groups has escalated so fast that killings now rival those that take place in Borno state, where extremist groups hold sway, Risk Bulletin – Issue 1, GI-TOC, September 2021, <https://globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/WEA-Obs-RB1-GITOC.pdf>.
10. Ibid.
11. Conclusions drawn from fieldwork in numerous communities across Zamfara, including Dangulbi, Kango and Magami in Maru LGA, as well as communities in Anka LGA.
12. In addition to a shrinking pool of possible targets, media reports suggest that government action to block telecommunications networks in parts of north-western Nigeria, in a bid to stem banditry and kidnappings, contributed to the decline in kidnap for ransom, as bandits found it increasingly difficult to make ransom calls. See Maiharaji Altine, *Reign of terror: Zamfara bandits take over villages, impose harvest levies, burn crops*, Punch, 26 November 2021, <https://punchng.com/reign-of-terror-zamfara-bandits-take-over-villages-impose-harvest-levies-burn-crops/>.
13. Interview with a vigilante leader in Magami, Maru LGA, Zamfara, 8 September 2022; interview with a journalist in Gusau, Zamfara, 9 September 2022.
14. Interview with an elderly kidnapping victim (who paid N350 000 to a truck driver to be relocated out of the community, after he escaped from bandits. His two brothers paid various amounts in ransom before they were released), Magami, Maru LGA, Zamfara, 8 September 2022.
15. Interview with an official of a local branch of a farmers' association, Zamfara, 9 September 2022; interview with a journalist in Gusau, Zamfara, 9 September 2022.
16. ACLED dashboard: <https://acleddata.com/dashboard/#/dashboard>.
17. Ibid.
18. Interview with an official of a local branch of a farmers' association, Zamfara, 9 September 2022; interview with a journalist in Gusau, Zamfara, 9 September 2022.
19. Interview with a farmer in Magami, Maru LGA, 8 September 2022.
20. Interview with an official of a local branch of a farmers' association, Zamfara, 9 September 2022.
21. Interview with a farmer in Dangulbi, Maru LGA, Zamfara, 9 September 2022.
22. Ibid.
23. Interview with a community leader in Gwaram, Talata Mafara LGA, Zamfara, 10 September 2022.
24. Interview with a community leader in Gwaram, Talata Mafara LGA, Zamfara, 20 September 2022, by phone.
25. Oluwafemi Morgan and Daniel Ayantoye, *Insecurity: Zamfara farmers negotiate with bandits today*, Punch, 20 August 2022, <https://punchng.com/insecurity-zamfara-farmers-negotiate-with-bandits-today/>.
26. Sam Tunji, *Zamfara home to highest number of poor Nigerians – NSR*, Punch, 23 June 2021, <https://punchng.com/zamfara-home-to-highest-number-of-poor-nigerians-nsr/>. According to data released in 2021 by the National Social Registry, a Nigerian government and World Bank partnership, the state has 3 836 484 people from 825 337 households.
27. Interview with a journalist in Gusau, Zamfara, 9 September 2022.
28. Interview with a businessman with close ties to local traditional rulers, Anka, Zamfara, 10 September 2022.
29. Ibid.
30. These include Anka, Tsafe, Bukkuyum, Maru, Talata Mafara, Birnin Magaji, Shinkafi, Zurmi and Bungudu.
31. Interview with a journalist in Gusau, Zamfara, 9 September 2022.
32. Interview with a businessman in Anka, Zamfara, 10 September 2022. The businessman has a close link to the traditional institution in the area.
33. Interview with a journalist in Gusau, Zamfara, 9 September 2022.
34. Interview with an official of a local branch of a farmers' association, Zamfara, 9 September 2022.
35. Conclusions drawn from interviews with several sources, including officials of a local branch of a farmers' association and a farmer in Dangulbi, September 2022.

Is wildlife crime in Cameroon's Bouba Ndjida National Park financing an emerging separatist group in the north?

On 12 June 2022, in a forest just outside Sorombeo in north-eastern Cameroon, clashes erupted between elements of the bataillon d'intervention rapide (4th Rapid Intervention Battalion, BIR), an elite unit of the Cameroonian Armed Forces created to tackle the threat of terrorism and armed groups, and members of the separatist rebel group Mouvement de libération du Cameroun (Movement for the Liberation of Cameroon, MLC). The military operation was launched after the BIR received information that armed men were present in the Sorombeo area, situated fewer than 30 kilometres from the Bouba Ndjida National Park. According to members of the BIR, around 10 MLC members armed with Kalashnikovs were involved in the incident. Although three of the rebels were injured, and subsequently arrested, the remaining assailants were able to flee across the border into Chad.¹

The BIR and members of the MLC were involved in a similar clash in the Bouba Ndjida National Park a year earlier, with information gathered from the resulting arrests showing that the rebels had been engaging in elephant poaching in the park. Armed groups participating in the illicit wildlife trade as a source of revenue is not a new phenomenon. The Sudanese Janjaweed militia, and criminal actors linked to them, have been the primary actors involved in the poaching of and illicit trade in animals in the Bouba Ndjida National Park over the past two decades.²

Poaching by the Janjaweed in Bouba Ndjida appears to have dwindled, with no recorded incidents since June 2021, when militiamen were intercepted in the park by the BIR and forced to flee.³ This decrease is largely attributed to an enhanced military presence in the area. Yet will we see the MLC – the new rebel group emerging in the already fragile political and security context of Cameroon – increasingly targeting wildlife in the national park to finance itself? A number of wildlife trafficking experts in Cameroon have informed the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC) that they have no indication that the MLC is involved in poaching in the park.⁴ Yet, information received directly from the military units stationed in and

around Bouba Ndjida suggests otherwise, arguably pointing to a nascent phenomenon.

Nascent rebel group entering the poaching game?

In August 2020, a video emerged online, shared widely on social media, in which a new military outfit introduced themselves as the MLC.⁵ In the video, the self-proclaimed coordinator of the group announced that their primary objective was to militarily combat the regime of Cameroon's long-serving ruler, Paul Biya. The group also seeks the independence of northern Cameroon. The MLC was reportedly established just across the border in Chad but operates across the tri-border area between Cameroon, Chad and the Central African Republic (CAR), and is led by a man known as General Fafour.⁶

According to leading figures in the MLC, the movement is driven by several grievances against the Cameroonian government, including attacks on the pastoralist community from which many of its members hail, as well as a perception of marginalization more broadly. In March 2021, an MLC spokesperson reiterated the group's intention to take up arms against the Biya regime, whom they have accused of embezzlement and corruption, warning the 'armed civilians' that have been recruited by the state to fight the MLC to stand aside, lest their villages be burned down.⁷

In a country facing two separate major conflicts – the anglophone crisis in the south-west and the Boko Haram insurgency in the far north – the current threat posed by the MLC to Cameroon's national security is by no means comparable. In April 2021, Cameroon's Minister of Defence, Joseph Beti Assomo, told the country's parliament that while the MLC posed no threat, investigations into the group were underway.⁸ This notwithstanding, there have been clashes between elements of the MLC and Cameroonian military and law enforcement in and around the Bouba Ndjida National Park.

National parks and other natural areas, such as forests and wildlife reserves, are increasingly being used as

strategic sanctuaries by armed actors in West Africa, often as bases from which to launch attacks.⁹ Furthermore, criminal actors operating in and around the parks are often involved in illicit economies, either directly (as a source of financing) or by allowing local residents to engage in informal economic activity (in order to earn the trust and support of local populations).¹⁰ Figure 1 shows national parks and forests that have been identified as key hubs of illicit activity as part of the GI-TOC's illicit hub mapping initiative.¹¹

The Bouba Ndjida National Park, located close to Cameroon's borders with Chad and CAR, is home to important reserves of faunal, floral and mining biodiversity, with over 25 species of large and medium-sized mammals, including lions, antelopes, giraffes and, crucially, elephants. And as with many areas rich in biodiversity, the national park has experienced high levels of poaching. The elephant population, once the park's star attraction, has significantly diminished following acts of poaching orchestrated by cross-border criminal groups. Although data on elephant poaching



Figure 1 National parks, reserves and forests in West Africa identified as illicit hubs.

Note: Although not included in this map, several other broader crime zones also incorporate one or more national parks, reserves or forests that may be sites of illicit activity.

Source: 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>

across the country is hard to come by, according to park officials, approximately 480 elephants were killed in Bouba Ndjida between 2003 and 2021.¹²

In response to the slaughter of over 200 elephants in the park by suspected Janjaweed militants in 2012, Operation 'Peace at Bouba Ndjida' was launched, under the command of the BIR. Each year, the operation is activated on 1 December and runs until May, when the beginning of the rainy season makes excursions into the national park unfeasible (for law enforcement and the poachers) due to flooding. In June 2021, following the yearly dismantling of the operation, five elephant carcasses were found in the park by conservation eco-guards.¹³

The search operation activated by elements of the 42nd Light Intervention Unit (LIU) of the 4th BIR stationed in Ray-Bouba, a city located around 40 kilometres from the national park, resulted in a clash with the combatants of the rebel group MLC.¹⁴ Further elephant carcasses were found the following month, provoking another confrontation with elements of the MLC.

As one MLC member and poacher who was arrested as a result explained, 'We are a recent rebel group that seeks to establish itself, [but] we do not yet have the means to recruit and maintain enough combatants.'¹⁵ According to him, the illicit trade in animal products sourced in Bouba Ndjida is a temporary activity for the group while they try to establish other sustainable sources of financing: 'Since we have mastered the bush in this park, poaching appears to us as a fast activity,' he said.¹⁶

If, going forward, the MLC does establish the illegal wildlife trade as a main source of financing, the history of illegal activity perpetrated by other armed groups in the Bouba Ndjida National Park, such as the Sudanese Janjaweed, can give us an indication of the possible future dynamics.

Janjaweed poaching in Bouba Ndjida National Park

Armed groups have had a presence in Cameroon's national parks and forest areas for the past two decades. The poaching of rare animal species by armed actors is driven in part by the fact that they are highly coveted by armed criminal groups seeking to finance their activity.¹⁷ The national park is situated at the gateway to Chad, CAR and,



Operation 'Peace at Bouba Ndjida' departs towards Bouba Ndjida National Park, 2021.

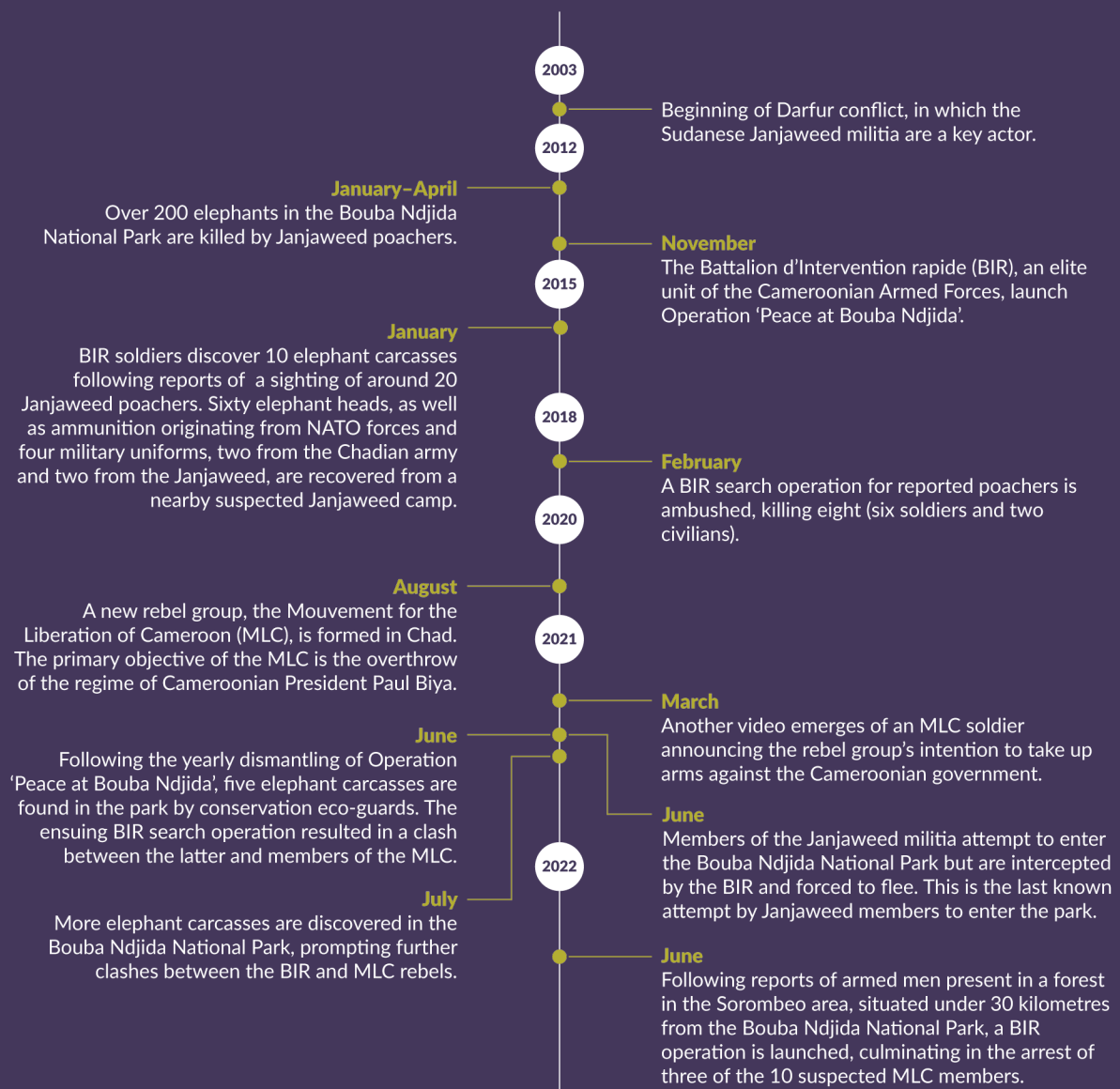
Photo: Moussa Bobbo

to a lesser extent, Sudan – all countries with turbulent socio-political pasts (and presents). It is no coincidence that the rise in elephant poaching incidents in the park since 2003 took place at the same time as the start of the crisis in Darfur, which was then followed by the acceleration of conflicts in CAR (2004) and Chad (2005).

In 2012, over 200 elephants were poached by the Sudanese Janjaweed militia in the Bouba Ndjida National Park.¹⁸ Six years later, in 2018, six soldiers from Operation 'Peace at Bouba Ndjida' were assassinated.

Following years of attempted incursions by poachers reported in the south of the park, at the border with Chad, a search operation was mounted by the commander of the 42nd LIU in the area where these poachers were reported on the night of 8 February 2018. The first group of BIR commandos were ambushed by the Sudanese poachers, resulting in the deaths of six soldiers, including Captain Liman, the commander of the 42nd LIU, and two civilians.¹⁹

INCIDENTS AND EVENTS IN THE BOUBA NDJIDA NATIONAL PARK



Investigations following the elephant massacre in 2012, the 2018 BIR ambush, and several other incursions mostly by the Janjaweed for the purposes of killing elephants and other wildlife have revealed important information about the dynamics of the illicit activity and the modus operandi of the perpetrators involved.

According to the commander of Operation 'Peace at Bouba Ndjida', cross-border poaching activity in the Bouba Ndjida National Park is the work of a group of around 200 poachers operating in south-western Sudan and associated with the Janjaweed, who work in collaboration with certain Chadian rebel factions.²⁰ They have a long tradition of hunting elephants and organize large-scale cross-border hunts every year during the dry season in almost all the countries of the Lake Chad basin. They usually operate in groups of 15 to 20 and are armed with AK-47s and axes. They are reportedly associated with powerful warlords in Sudan and allegedly have links to the Sudanese armed forces. They are said to operate in the park through alliances with local sheep herders, who act as guides.²¹

Members of rebel factions often use villages on the outskirts of Bouba Ndjida, such as Sinassi, Baikwa and Madingrin, as logistical bases from which to launch their poaching excursions. The armed poachers cross the border into Cameroon from neighbouring Chad or CAR, meet up with their guides in the surrounding villages and then break into the park. It is then inside the national park itself that the armed actors set up their camps, as the vastness of the area allows them to go unnoticed. According to one local resident, now in prison, who collaborated with the armed men:

They arrived in our village [of Madingrin] in the evening, at around 6 p.m., mounted on horses. They told us that they had come from Sudan looking for ivory tips, and wanted us to help them gain access to the park. They told us that they had a very large, established ivory trading network, as far away as China. If we helped them enter the park and kill the elephants, they would pay us hundreds of thousands of francs. And as an advance of the promised money, they gave us FCFA200 000 to share between us.²²

The profits made by the illegal trade in animal products, primarily elephant ivory, have been used to purchase weapons and ammunition, as well as motorcycles and other vehicles, fuel, foodstuffs and salaries for the group

combatants. The ivory from the various poaching campaigns is sold to Asian cartels and helps finance the activities of these criminal rebel groups.²³ Poaching in the park has reportedly decreased over recent years, partly due to significant increases in surveillance and security of the park given its historical links to armed-group financing.²⁴ One wildlife expert in Cameroon told the GI-TOC that the Bouba Ndjida National Park is now among the most secure in the country.²⁵

Cameroon's role in the illegal wildlife trade

Cameroon plays a major role as a source country for illegal wildlife products, assessed by the Global Organized Crime Index to have the joint-fifth most pervasive fauna-crimes market in Africa.²⁶ The Bouba Ndjida park is not the only source: in December 2021, three suspected poachers were arrested for allegedly poaching elephants in Lobeke National Park, in eastern Cameroon, on the border with CAR.²⁷ According to Francis Durand Nna, the highest government forestry and wildlife official in the country's East region, the number of elephants killed illegally is likely to be underestimated by official figures, as patrolling areas regularly attacked by armed groups from CAR is increasingly difficult.²⁸

Cameroon also operates as a key transit point for wildlife trafficking originating from other central African states, largely exported from Douala by sea, Yaoundé by air, or trafficked overland into Nigeria for export.²⁹ The city of Garoua, approximately 170 kilometres north-west of the Bouba Ndjida National Park, is just one key transit point for illegal wildlife products coming from Chad and CAR (as well as from the park itself). Garoua has increased in importance following a shift in supply chains from the nearby city of Maroua, in light of escalating Boko Haram attacks in the latter.³⁰ Stakeholders in Cameroon reported to the GI-TOC that law-enforcement vigilance is more lax in the north compared to the coastal routes, facilitating smuggling.³¹

Although wildlife crime is not among the illicit economies most heavily associated with conflict and instability – compared to arms trafficking, cattle rustling, kidnap for ransom and the illicit gold trade, for example³² – it is clear that in West and central Africa, the illicit trade in wildlife products has repeatedly been used as a source of financing for armed actors.

Operation 'Peace at Bouba Ndjida' and the reinforcement of the security forces in the national



Soldiers from the Cameroonian bataillon d'intervention rapide on patrol in Bouba Ndjida National Park, March 2022.

Photo: Moussa Bobbo

park's neighbouring villages near the borders with Chad and the CAR, the main entry points for these poachers, have yielded significant successes in decreasing poaching in the park. Yet attempted forays into the park appear to persist. The complicity of local villagers in the illicit activities of the poachers illustrates the need for the government to engage local populations in any proposed responses. The enhanced military presence

appears to have deterred the Janjaweed militias (who are reluctant to make the 1 400-kilometre journey from Sudan to then be foiled by the BIR). Although the true extent of armed group activity remains unknown, several incidents since 2021 have highlighted the potential for armed actors closer to home, in the form of the MLC emerging just across the border in Chad, to exploit Cameroon's natural resources.

Notes

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13. Interview with senior figure in the Chief Intelligence Unit of Operation 'Peace at Bouba Ndjida', Rey-Bouba, August 2021.
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As Casamance rebels are weakened, is the Niokolo Koba National Park a potential fallback zone?

Located in southern Senegal, between Gambia and Guinea Bissau, the Casamance region has since the early 1980s been rocked by a separatist conflict between the Mouvement des forces démocratiques de Casamance (Movement of Democratic Forces of Casamance, MFDC) and the Senegalese state. Recent developments appear to have dramatically altered the balance of power in West Africa's most longstanding conflict.

Since early 2021, the Senegalese authorities have launched a series of military offensives against the MFDC rebels. In March 2022, the Senegalese army opened a new front in northern Casamance, in the department of Bignona. The objective of this operation, according to a statement released by the Ministry of Armed Forces, was to dismantle the bases of one MFDC faction led by Salif Sadio, stressing the need to ensure 'territorial integrity', as well as to eliminate all criminal groups carrying out illicit activities in the area.¹ This operation resulted in the dismantling of almost all MFDC bases in the region – potentially a significant turning point, divorcing the rebels from traditional revenue streams linked to illicit economies in the Casamance region.

The Casamance separatists have long been involved in numerous illicit economies, exploiting the abundance of natural resources in the country's southern region to finance their operations. Contested state control has been one enabling factor for the emergence of Casamance as a key transit point for a wide range of illicit flows between Guinea-Bissau, Senegal and Gambia, including cocaine.² The trafficking of timber and cannabis, in addition to wildlife products, has been a mainstay of the MFDC's revenue streams over the past two decades.³

However, the rebels have been significantly weakened by law enforcement action against them since 2021. Across West Africa, armed actors targeted by military operations have increasingly turned to national parks as fallback zones. For example, the W-Arly-Pendjari (WAP) complex in the tri-border area between Burkina Faso, Benin and Niger has long operated as a fallback zone and safe haven for Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin

(Group to Support Islam and Muslims) elements, resting after offensives from international actors in Mali.

Will the decisive military offensives, and weakening of traditional fallback areas in Guinea-Bissau and Gambia, mark the beginning of the end for the MFDC? Or will the rebels merely displace geographically, searching for alternative sources of funding? If the latter, will the regional trend be replicated here, and will Niokolo Koba, one of the largest national parks in West Africa located fewer than 400 kilometres from the Casamance region, become the armed group's new home?

Renewed Senegalese military offensive pushes Casamance rebels to breaking point

Created in 1947, the MFDC was founded as a political party, before becoming a separatist movement in 1982, seeking independence for the Casamance region.⁴ An August 2022 peace agreement was preceded by six other ceasefires and peace agreements between the MFDC and the Senegalese government since 1991.⁵ None brought peace; instead, these agreements caused tensions within the MFDC and led to the creation of several factions. In 1991, the armed wing of the independence group split into two factions: the Southern Front and Northern Front. Today, the two fronts have several factions, the most important being those of Salif Sadio and César Atoute Badiate.

A January 2021 Senegalese offensive against the rebel factions in the south led to the dismantling of at least three rebel bases, known respectively as '2', '9' and 'Sikoun'.⁶ Authorities seized large stocks of ammunition, mortars, rocket launchers, rifles and motorcycles and destroyed cannabis fields in the area controlled by the rebels.⁷

A March 2022 offensive in the northern area of the Casamance, in the Bignona department, targeted rebel bases scattered on the border with Gambia. A key objective of the operation was also to put an end to the illicit trafficking of timber in the Casamance region.⁸ This offensive dismantled most of the rebels' bases in the area,⁹ and seized important quantities of weapons and

various materials, including stolen vehicles.¹⁰ While most of the fighters reportedly fled across the border to Gambia, many of them returned to their respective villages shortly after.¹¹

Rebel-led illicit economies may be dwindling

Since the early 2000s, MFDC rebels have been tapping into the natural resources available in the Casamance region to finance their operations. The trafficking of timber from the forests of Casamance has been the group's main source of funding.¹² The lack of state reach in areas of the Casamance region bordering Gambia and Guinea-Bissau allowed the MFDC to consolidate its presence there and allowed them to engage in extensive timber trafficking.¹³

The MFDC rebels granted timber licences to Senegalese and Gambian traffickers, a prerogative that should belong exclusively to the Senegalese state.¹⁴ To transport timber purchased in the rebel-controlled territories to Gambia, buyers had to pay for an export document issued by the rebels.¹⁵ Timber trafficking is estimated to have generated US\$19.5 million between 2010 and 2014, much of which would have benefited the factions involved in this criminal activity.¹⁶

In the past, rebels could easily retreat to Guinea-Bissau or Gambia when there were clashes with the Senegalese army, as they enjoyed the protection of important actors in both countries. Yahya Jammeh, the long-time ruler of Gambia, was reportedly one of the biggest supporters of the Casamance rebels.¹⁷ His exile in 2017 greatly weakened the MFDC. Similarly, in Guinea-Bissau, the MFDC rebels had the support of some army officers.¹⁸

The regime changes in Gambia in 2017 and Guinea-Bissau in 2021, which brought Adama Barrow and Umaro Sissoco Embaló to power respectively, redefined the balance of power and offered an important advantage to the state of Senegal in its operations against the Casamance rebels. The close relationship of Macky Sall, president of the Senegalese republic, to both leaders has translated into greater ability for Senegalese troops to pursue rebels into traditional havens in Guinea-Bissau and Gambia.¹⁹

Niokolo Koba National Park as a potential MFDC fallback zone?

Following the dismantling of their bases, seizure of their weapons and weakening of traditional havens, the MFDC's ability to translate territorial influence into revenue streams from illicit economies may be weakened.

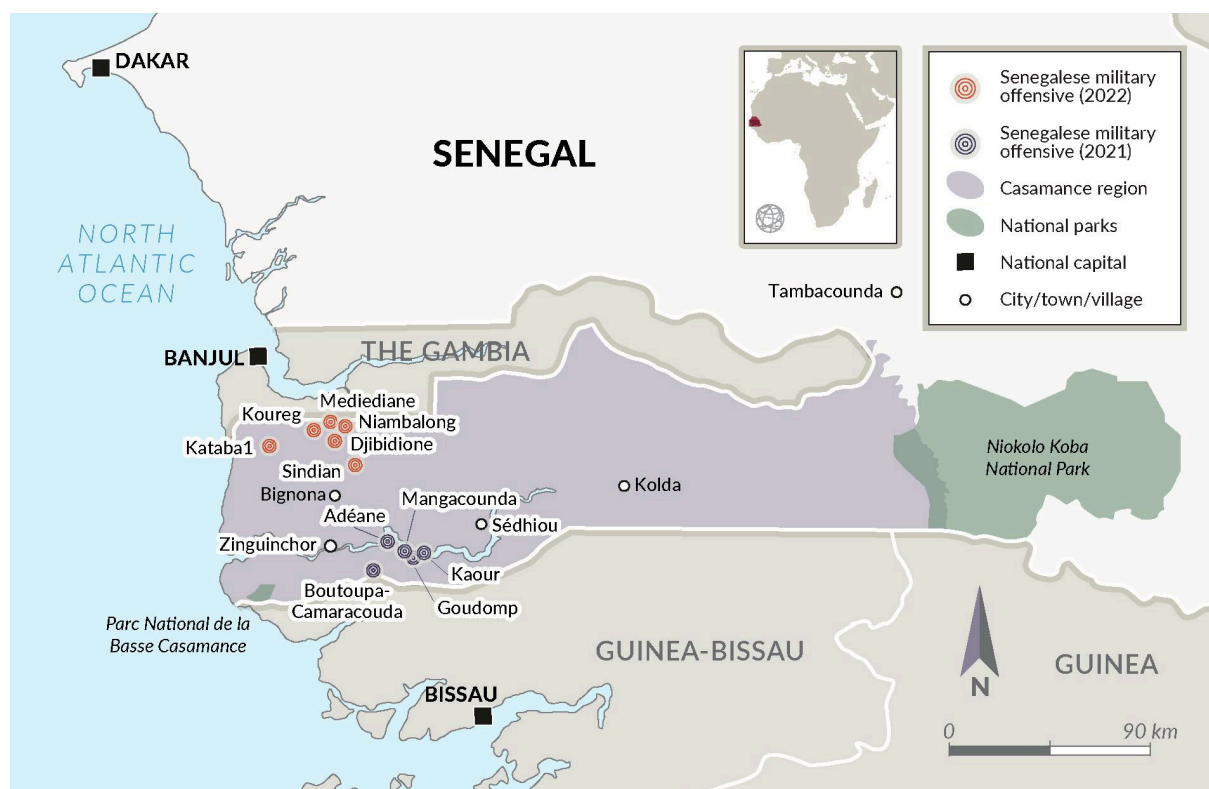
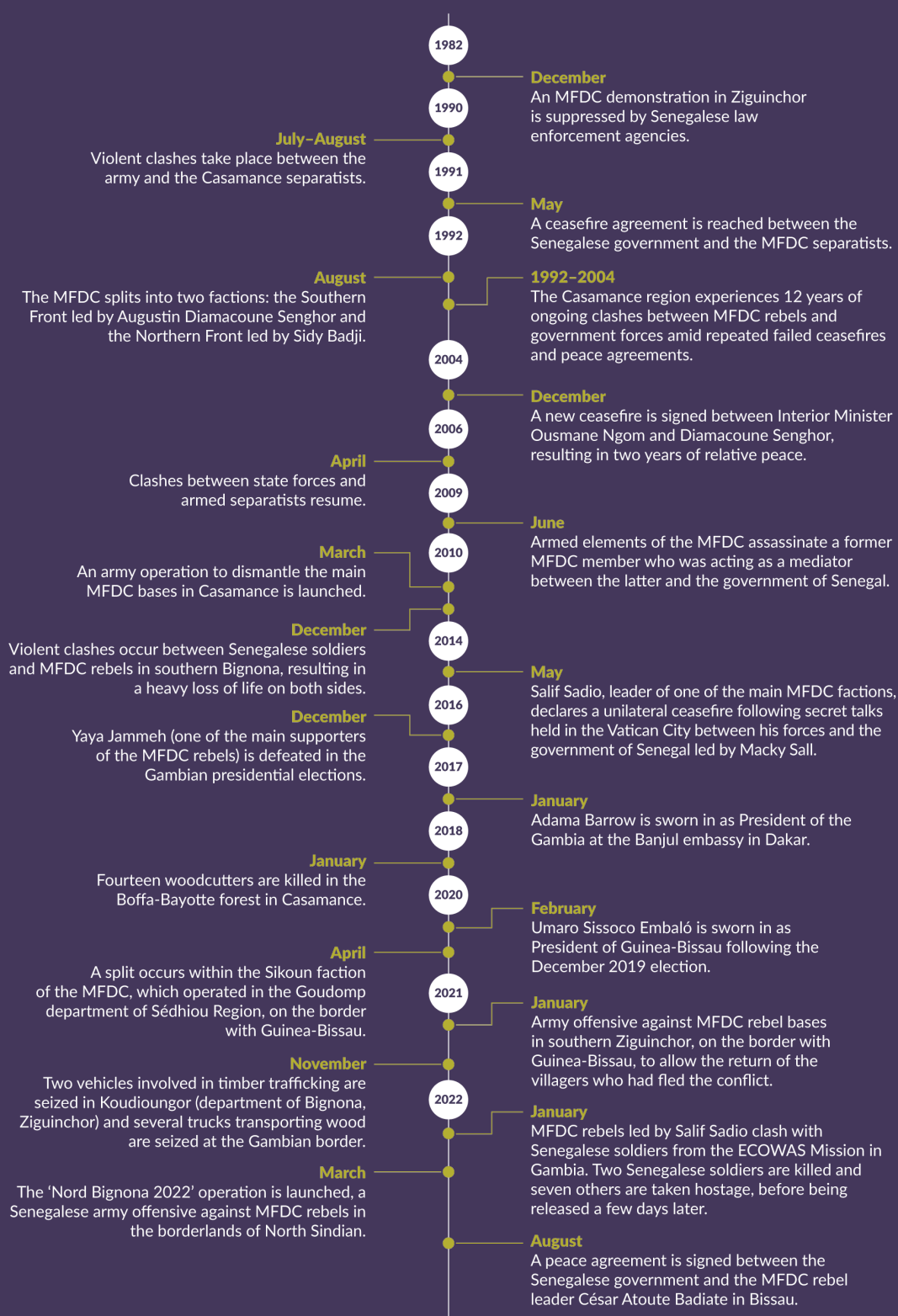


Figure 1 Senegalese military offensives against MFDC rebels.

Source: Data drawn from available media sources.

EVOLUTION OF THE CASAMANCE SEPARATIST CONFLICT



For now, the MFDC rebels appear to have no intention of laying down their arms. A specialist of the Casamance conflict told the GI-TOC that he believes the rebels will return sooner or later.²⁰ But deprived of their natural bases in Casamance, the rebels will need new bases.

The Niokolo Koba National Park offers significant opportunities to the rebels as a new fallback zone. Located in south-eastern Senegal in the region of Tambacounda, on the banks of the Gambia River, Niokolo Koba National Park is one of the largest parks in West Africa, with an area of 913 000 hectares.²¹

Boasting an abundance of natural resources and rich in biodiversity, while strategically located close to the border with Mali and Guinea, the Niokolo Koba National Park could offer numerous possibilities to rebel groups to draw revenues from illicit activities they have long relied on, including the illicit trade in timber, cannabis and wildlife products. Furthermore, the geographic configuration of the park, presenting access difficulties, heavy forests stymying air surveillance, and a low level of on-land surveillance (only 164 rangers patrol the entire park), makes the park an obvious choice for armed groups to conceal themselves and launch attacks of their own.²²

Niokolo Koba is already often subject to incursions by unidentified armed groups, some believed to have crossed the border from Mali.²³ Exploiting the porous borders and the low level of park surveillance, these actors have engaged in the poaching of rare animal species, often in complicity with the villagers living in the vicinity, who act as informants, refusing to share information with law enforcement agents and offering shelter when required.²⁴ The sale of meat and animal trophies is a very lucrative activity that has been known to finance armed groups across Africa. In Uganda, for example, the trafficking and sale of ivory was the main source of funding for the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA).²⁵

Furthermore, owing to a strong belief in the mystical virtues of these hunting spoils, the skins of certain animals can be sold for between FCFA500 000 and FCFA1 200 000 (US\$750–US\$1 800), depending on the size and type of animal.²⁶ The skin of a Derby Eland – the largest species of antelope and the park's emblem – which is highly prized by Malian and Nigerian traditional healers, is sold for up to FCFA300 000 (US\$450) on the black market. The teeth and claws of lions, also highly sought after by Nigerien marabouts, are sold for FCFA250 000 (US\$ 375) each.²⁷



The Niokolo Koba National Park, one of the largest parks in West Africa.

Photo: BSIP/Universal Images Group via Getty Images

Gold mines in the park could also offer a source of revenue. According to the Senegalese authorities,²⁸ part of the park in the department of Kédougou is rich in mineral resources, and gold in particular. Gold reserves in the park have recently been subject to illegal exploitation by criminal networks. In 2019, police in Kédougou arrested three Ghanaian nationals and 13 Chinese nationals for illegal gold mining, together with the director and deputy director of the Niokolo Koba National Park and other regional government officials for their involvement in the illicit activity.²⁹

A boom in artisanal gold mining throughout large parts of the Sahel region over the past decade has provided new revenue streams for conflict actors, particularly in Mali and Burkina Faso.³⁰ Gold sites in protected areas across the region – including in Comoé National Park in northern Côte d'Ivoire, and the WAP complex – have been identified as potential sources of revenue for

armed groups increasingly operating in the northern areas of the littoral states. Regional precedent suggests that the Niokolo Koba National Park is currently vulnerable to exploitation by the MFDC, as their traditional revenue streams and areas of territorial control diminish.

In countries such as Côte d'Ivoire, Benin, Burkina Faso and Niger, military and law enforcement action against violent extremist groups and other armed groups has seen these groups retreat into national parks, such as the Comoé National Park and the WAP complex. These national parks are used by armed groups as strategic sanctuaries and as bases from which to launch attacks.³¹ In Côte d'Ivoire's Comoé National Park, jihadist elements aim to control access to the park, in order to use it for concealment and training and as a base for rest and recuperation. Furthermore, jihadist groups have reportedly promised mining communities situated inside



Figure 2 Niokolo Koba National Park as an illicit hub.

Source: Lucia Bird and Lyes Tagziria, *Organized crime and instability dynamics: Mapping illicit hubs in West Africa*, GI-TOC, September 2022, <https://globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/>

GI-TOC-WEAObs-Organized-crime-and-instability-Mapping-illicit-hubs-in-West-Africa-1.pdf

the park protection and access to the gold as a form of governance arrangement.³²

It is clear, therefore, that the Niokolo Koba National Park is an area at risk of being exploited by MFDC separatists. However, that the rebels are likely to be able to engage in illicit activities predicated on the natural resources of the national park, providing them with much-needed financial resources, is not the only risk. As has been experienced in other parts of West Africa,

not just in Côte d'Ivoire as outlined above but in the Sahel region too, jihadist groups have used national parks and wildlife reserves as a means to ingratiate themselves with the local population by allowing residents to engage in economic activity prohibited by the state, including logging and artisanal gold mining.³³ If MFDC rebels are allowed to put down roots in the Niokolo Koba National Park, there is a risk that the park will experience the same fate.

Notes

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The number of civilian casualties is growing in West Africa as conflict areas increasingly overlap with illicit economies.

On 5 September 2022, a convoy of vehicles struck an improvised explosive device (IED) in Burkina Faso. At least 35 civilians were killed and several dozen more injured. The vehicles were travelling southbound on the road between Bourzanga and Djibo, in the country's Sahel region, headed to the capital city, Ouagadougou.¹ While no group has claimed responsibility for the attack, it was almost certainly the work of violent extremists affiliated with al-Qaeda, the Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM), who have been operating in the country since the beginning of the insurgency in 2015.² According to an internal security report for aid workers, this is the fifth explosion to have taken place in the province of Soum since the beginning of August.³ This latest IED attack was quickly followed by a suspected

jihadi massacre of nine people, the vast majority of whom were civilians, in the village of Tassiri in the Sahel region, close to the border with Niger.⁴

Such incidents are evidence of the growing number of civilian casualties resulting from conflicts in the region, not only in Burkina Faso, but also in neighbouring Mali.⁵ From 2020 to 2021, violence linked to militant Islamist groups in the Sahel almost doubled.⁶ This grim trend looks set to continue, with civilians paying the price: the first six months of 2022 saw the killing of more civilians in the central Sahel than in all of 2021.⁷ So far in 2022, jihadist groups in Mali have killed roughly three times as many civilians as in 2021.⁸ These patterns confirm research noting that civilians are increasingly the targets



Dori, Burkina Faso. In July 2022, a bridge on the main road connecting Dori and Kaya was attacked by suspected jihadists, in one of many attacks targeting arterial roads connecting the capital Ouagadougou to cities in northern Burkina Faso.

Photo: Giles Clarke/UNOCHA via Getty Images

of attacks in the region, and that conflicts are more commonly spreading across borders.⁹

It is a key point to consider the role that illicit economies are playing in fuelling and sustaining these growing conflicts in the Sahel and West Africa more broadly. Conflicts are unfolding across areas bisected by trafficking routes, and conflict actors are becoming key players in some illicit economies, as consumers, providers of protection, or direct participants. Understanding the intersection of conflict and illicit economy dynamics is therefore key to addressing the issue of growing civilian casualties.

The GI-TOC's illicit hub mapping initiative identified over 280 illicit hubs in West Africa, Cameroon, the Central African Republic (CAR) and Chad.¹⁰ The initiative pinpointed 65 locations in the region in which illicit economies are operating as significant vectors of conflict and instability.¹¹ Almost all of the most violence-affected areas in West Africa – namely, areas where conflict fatalities have exceeded 500 between 2011 and 2021, referred to henceforth as 'high-fatality regions'¹² – are also home to at least one illicit hub. It is clear that there is an increasing geographic overlap between conflict areas and zones of illicit activity, which has implications not only for policymakers seeking to implement stabilization policies, but also for the prospective livelihoods of communities in the region. For more in-depth analysis of illicit hubs in West Africa, readers are encouraged to read the full report, 'Organized crime and instability dynamics: Mapping illicit hubs in West Africa'.¹³ Moreover, the online tool, which allows users to visually explore the 280 illicit hubs, as well as access further data related to conflict and instability, can be accessed at wea.globalinitiative.net/illicit-hub-mapping.

Geographic overlap between crime and conflict

Although Mali and Burkina Faso are among the most violence-affected countries in the region, violence against civilians at the hands of violent extremists, separatist groups and private military companies alike has been all too common in countries such as Nigeria, Cameroon and CAR. Of the 18 countries covered by the research,¹⁴ eight are home to at least one administrative region that has experienced particularly high levels of violence over the past decade, the so-called high-fatality regions, as introduced above. These include the Sahelian states of Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger, as well as Nigeria, Cameroon, CAR, Chad and Côte d'Ivoire.

We identified 46 high-fatality regions. Forty-three of them encompass at least one illicit hub, whether that be a hotspot, transit point or crime zone. In other words, nearly all of the most violence-affected regions in West Africa are also sites of illicit activity. Conflict areas and areas of instability more broadly, including spaces shaped by political volatility, often have a range of characteristics that allow illicit economies to flourish. For example, in conflict areas, state presence is often weak, enabling criminal actors to act with impunity. Furthermore, conflicts usually lead to a surge in demand for a range of illicit commodities, not least weapons, but also illicit drugs, such as Tramadol.¹⁵ A variety of legal economic activities also move into the grey zone, or become illicit, when armed groups take control of them – the exploitation of natural resources being a key example.¹⁶

Looking at the overlap from the opposite perspective, the findings of our research show that a significant percentage of illicit hubs are located in areas affected by high levels of conflict and violence. Of the 280 illicit hubs identified across West Africa, over 30% are located in high-fatality regions.

Not only does the research show that conflict settings almost always encompass illicit economies (see Figure 1), but there is also a strong overlap between conflict-affected areas and illicit hubs that act as vectors of conflict and instability (although this is due in part to the nature of the Illicit Economies and Instability Monitor [IEIM], in which links to conflict dynamics play an important role). Twelve of the 280 illicit hubs were assessed to have a 'very high' score on the IEIM, a new metric designed to assess the degree to which illicit economies in identified illicit hubs drive conflict and instability. In other words, these 12 hubs were identified to play a very significant role in fuelling conflict and instability in the region. Of these 12 very high-IEIM hubs – which include the Lake Chad area and places such as Bamenda and Kousséri in Cameroon, which operate as transit points for arms and illicit drugs – 10 are located in high-fatality regions.¹⁷

Liptako-Gourma, the tri-border area of Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger, is both one of these 12 very high-IEIM hubs, and is the region with the highest number of conflict fatalities in the 18 countries under study in the 10-year period between 2011 and 2021.¹⁸ Since the insurgency in northern Mali in 2012, violence has surged in the Liptako-Gourma region. Many illicit economies concentrated in the area have flourished, and major

economies now include arms trafficking, cattle rustling, the trafficking of various drugs – primarily cannabis but also pharmaceuticals such as Tramadol and Diazepam, as well as cocaine – and the illicit gold trade, together with human smuggling, human trafficking and illicit trade and counterfeit goods.

Both JNIM and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara are prominent actors across a range of these thriving illicit economies, including cattle rustling, where they are key perpetrators. The presence and capacity of the states of Niger, Mali and Burkina Faso to provide security and basic services in the tri-border area have been impeded by the deterioration of the security situation in the region. While it is too early to assess the impact on state presence in the Liptako-Gourma area, there have been significant shifts in the conflict dynamics since the beginning of the French military withdrawal from Mali, which culminated in the complete departure of all French troops in August 2022. The northern city of Gao, for example, has been effectively cut off from the rest of the country since June due to a JNIM-imposed blockade of the town of Boni,

located on the only road connecting the north of the country to the south.¹⁹

Armed groups have in turn benefitted from the weakening of state presence and drawn substantial revenues from illicit markets.²⁰ In the Mopti region of the wider Liptako-Gourma area, for example, the uptick in cattle rustling that occurred in 2021 transpired in parallel with Mali's growing political isolation and associated shifts in the country's security landscape.²¹ Similarly, a more recently reported increase in cattle rustling in Ménaka has also been linked by close observers to the increasing instability in the context of the withdrawal of French troops.²²

Certain illicit economies are more prominent in conflict settings

The prominence of certain illicit economies varies considerably across the IEIM spectrum, underscoring the differing relationships of illicit economies to conflict (see Figure 2). Cocaine displays the largest disparity, featuring as a major market far more commonly in low scoring hubs (33%) than in high- or very high-scoring hubs (8%).

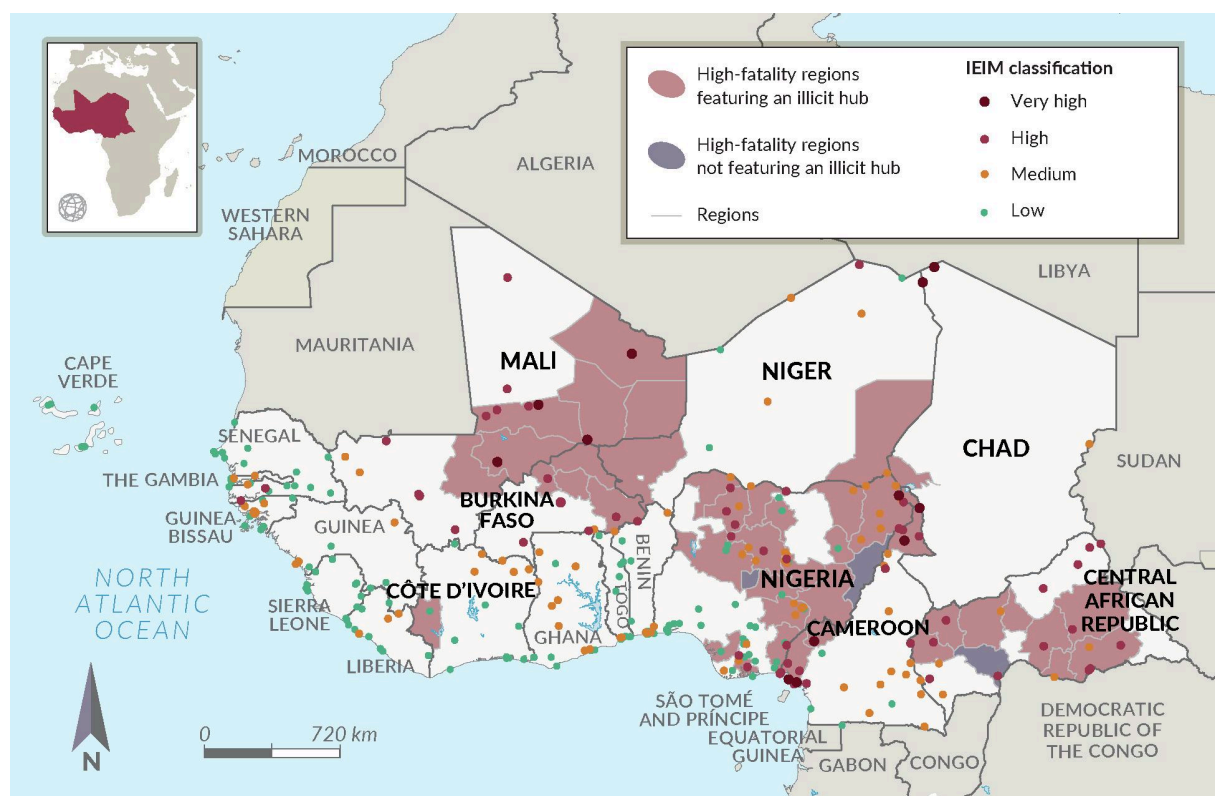


Figure 1 Most conflict-affected areas in West Africa encompass hubs of illicit economies.

Note: High-fatality regions are defined as administrative level 1 areas where conflict fatalities have exceeded 500 between 2011 and 2021. Crime zones are represented by the geographic coordinates of their central points.

Source: 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>. Fatality data from ACLED.

The differences are very similar when assessing the prevalence of illicit economies in areas with high levels of violence.

The cocaine trade only features in 9% of illicit hubs in high-fatality regions. These include Lerneb in Mali, through which consignments of cocaine (and cannabis resin) trafficked through Mauritania (as well as cocaine consignments trafficked into Mali via Kayes region) pass.²³ These findings reflect the fact that, given the high monetary value of cocaine, trafficking networks often seek to avoid the most high-risk environments, such as the Sahel region, for example.²⁴

By contrast, arms trafficking, is assessed to be a major market in more than half (54%) of all illicit hubs in the high- and very high-IEIM classifications, illustrating the strong link between the illicit market and conflict and instability. This finding is further supported by the fact that arms trafficking is by far the most prominent criminal market in illicit hubs in high-fatality areas, featuring in 56% of them.²⁵

There exists a self-reinforcing relationship between arms trafficking and instability. The illicit economy amplifies violence by weaponizing conflict,²⁶ while heightened insecurity fuels demand for weapons for self-protection, swelling the arms market. In Nigeria, for example, demand for weapons for self-protection has skyrocketed in response to unprecedented levels of violence perpetrated by armed bandits, particularly in the north of the country. This largely involves artisanal weapons that cater to the self-defence market in states such as Plateau, Kaduna, Katsina and Borno, where banditry is rife.²⁷

The cycle of increasing demand for weapons amid growing instability is also illustrated by dynamics in the Malian city of Ber (see Figure 3), a hotspot for illicit economies assessed to have one of the highest IEIM scores in the region. Since 2020, Ber has been a key node in the transnational weapons trafficking industry, which is largely operated by actors from northern Mali's Arab communities. Demand for arms has increased, particularly since 2016, from armed groups, self-defence militias, and communities for protection.²⁸

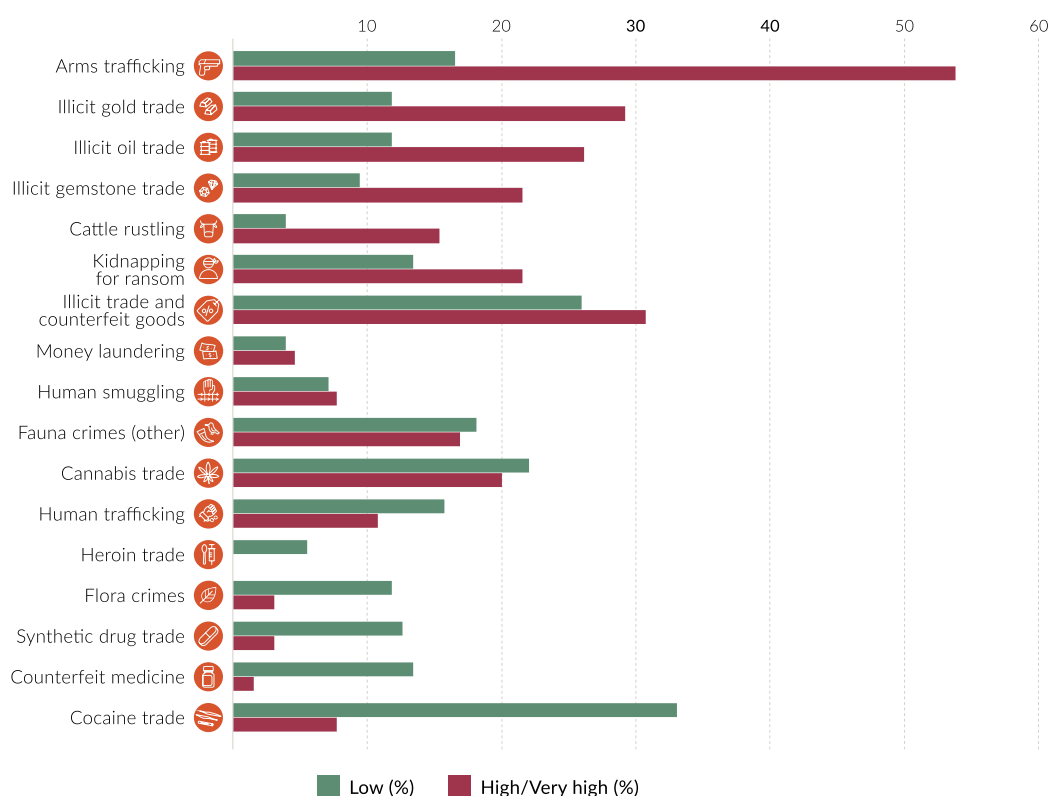


Figure 2 Illicit economy prevalence in high- and very high-IEIM hubs compared to low-IEIM hubs.

Source: Lucia Bird and Lyes Tagziria, *Organized crime and instability dynamics: Mapping illicit hubs in West Africa*, GI-TOC, September 2022, <https://globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/>

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Arms trafficking is a major driver of conflict and violence, not only because weapons themselves are tools for violence, but because the illicit trade in weapons strengthens non-state actors in opposition to the state and contributes to the fragmentation of conflict. A key finding of the research is that arms trafficking is closely linked to several other illicit economies, which can be described as ‘accelerant markets’, which have a close link to conflict and instability, such as kidnapping for ransom and cattle rustling.²⁹ Figure 4 shows the most prominent illicit economies in illicit hubs situated in high-fatality regions.

The fact that kidnapping for ransom (an illicit economy identified in just 17% of illicit hubs in West Africa) features in almost 40% of all illicit hubs in high-fatality regions underscores the role the criminal activity plays in conflict dynamics, particularly in Mali, Burkina Faso and Nigeria.³⁰ Another illicit economy disproportionately pervasive in areas affected by high levels of conflict and violence is cattle rustling: 66% of illicit hubs featuring cattle rustling are located in high-fatality regions. This includes many cattle rustling hotspots throughout Nigeria, but also in the north-eastern borderlands of Côte d'Ivoire and the Central African towns of Kaga-Bandoro, Batangafo and Kabo, for example, where

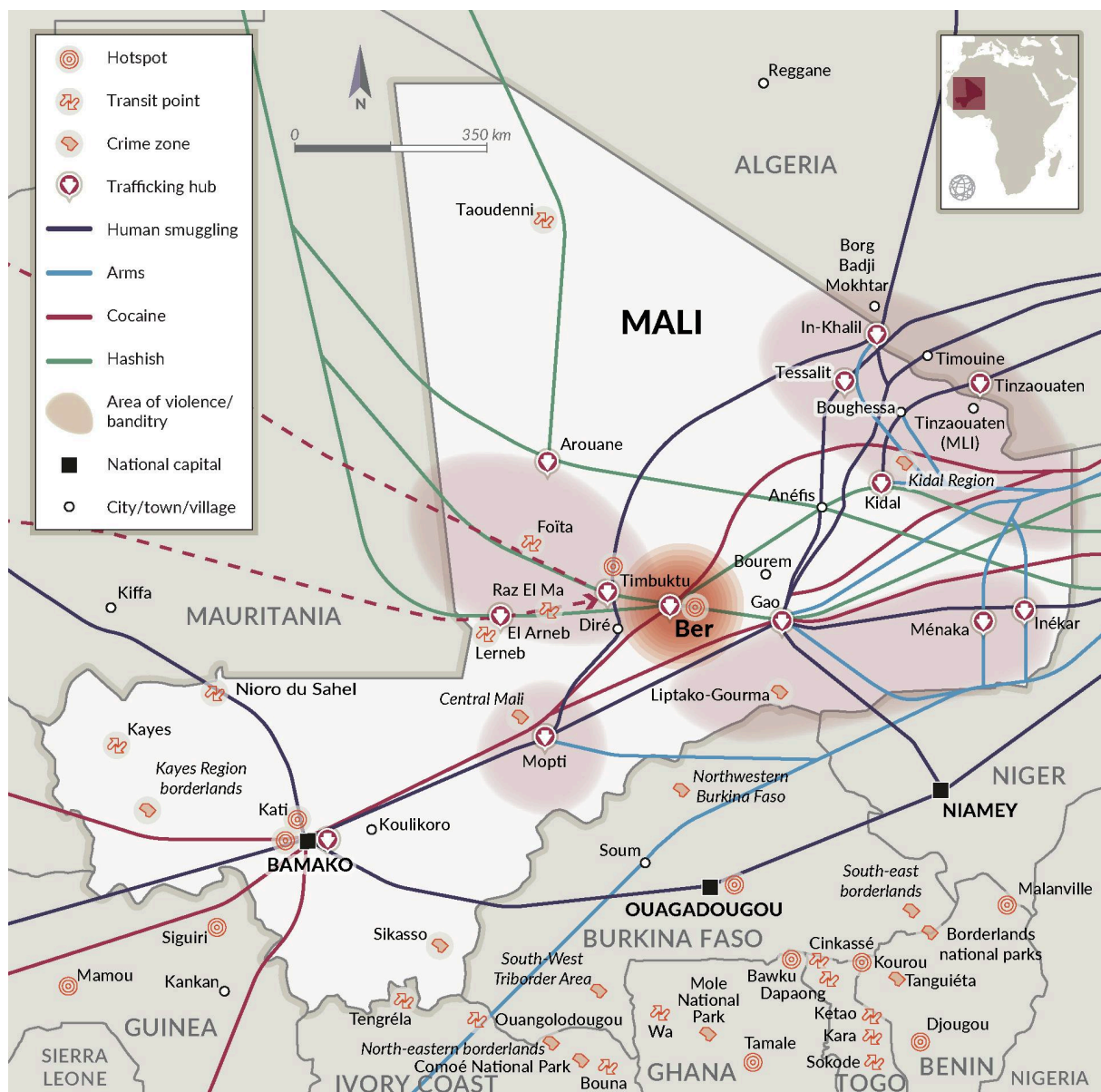


Figure 3 Illicit flows through Ber, Mali.

Lucia Bird and Lyes Tagzira, *Organized crime and instability dynamics: Mapping illicit hubs in West Africa*, GI-TOC, September 2022, <https://globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/>

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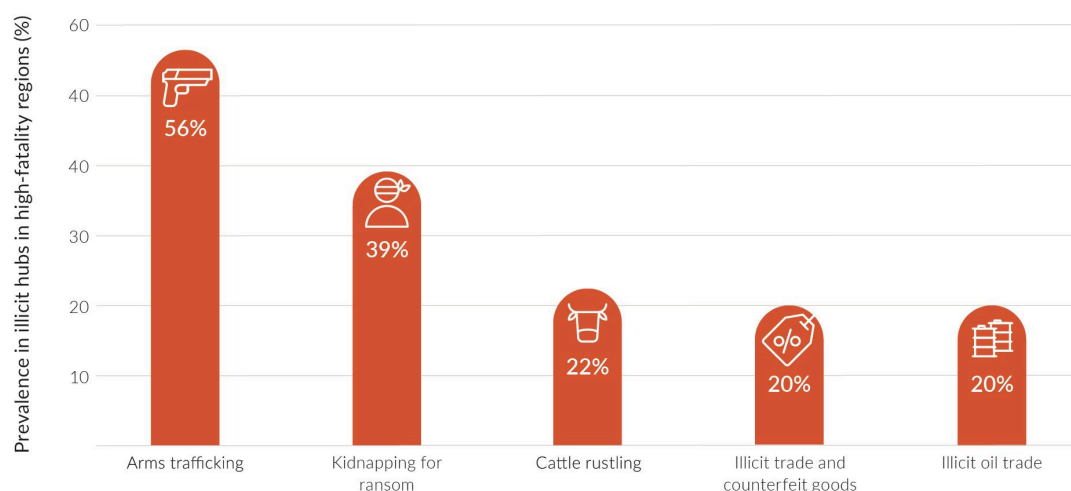


Figure 4 Most prominent illicit economies in 'high-fatality region' illicit hubs.

soldiers in the Central African army and armed group highwaymen known as *coupeurs de route* ('road cutters') have made significant profits through the illicit taxation of herders.

These links between certain illicit economies, arms trafficking and conflict and instability have important implications for policymakers seeking to anticipate and prevent violence, rather than merely respond to it. Illicit

economies known to exacerbate community tensions, such as cattle rustling and kidnapping for ransom, should be regarded as indicators of potential future conflict. Responses specific to these illicit economies, both developmental and from a law enforcement perspective, should therefore be encouraged. This should include prioritizing areas in which illicit economies strongly link areas of greater stability with those in conflict, either through the flow of commodities or financing.

Notes

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12. As defined as at least 500 conflict fatalities between 2011 and 2021, using ACLED data; see <https://acleddata.com/dashboard/#/dashboard>.
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14. The 18 countries that fall under the scope of this research are: Benin, Burkina Faso, Cabo Verde, Cameroon, CAR, Chad, Côte d'Ivoire, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone and Togo.
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