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Summary highlights



Pitfalls in responding to armed groups' supply chains: lessons from Cameroon and the Sahel.

Armed groups and terrorist organizations rely on illicit financial flows, and both licit and illicit supply chains of goods to finance their operations and acquire the resources they need. Countering these illicit flows of finances and resources is a challenging task. Approaches premised on 'blocking' flows have been used to counter both financial and operational resource flows – and the latter method is having significant unintended consequences, particularly through harms to communities. The Ambazonian separatists in Cameroon and their use of international money transfers, and Jama'at Nusrat al Islam wal Muslimin's acquisitions of key goods for their operations, such as fuel and motorbikes, provide case studies of how such approaches to 'blocking' flows have generated contrasting results.



The challenge of tackling illicit economies with international sanctions regimes: the Kimberley Process in the Central African Republic.

The Central African Republic (CAR) has been under varying levels of restrictions through the Kimberley Process Certification Scheme – the international trade regime that aims to prevent the export and sale of 'conflict diamonds' – over the past decade. However, the scrutiny and trade restrictions on diamonds has led to armed groups shifting the focus of their role in the extractives sector to gold. This means that in terms of overall conflict financing there is more of a shift in focus, rather than a reduction in illicit activity. These impacts cannot be said to be contributing to the broader goal of peace and security in the CAR. The CAR case study highlights a discrepancy between expectations and realities seen in international sanctions regimes.





Benin introduces mini fuel stations as a window opens to tackle illicit fuel supply chains and armed groups.

In May 2023, the 50-year fuel subsidy in Nigeria was lifted, leading to a substantial price increase and considerable knock-on effects on the illicit fuel trade in areas of northern Benin. Some months later, a fire at an informal fuel warehouse in Sèmè-Kraké, at Benin's border with Nigeria, claimed 35 lives. Together, these developments have spurred political will in Benin and created a significant window of opportunity to disrupt the informal trade. In October 2023, Benin's government announced a programme to build 5 000 mini fuel stations across the country, aimed at bringing informal fuel traders into the formal sector. If implemented successfully and focused on the north of the country, given the close links between the illicit fuel sector and non-state armed actors, shrinking the informal fuel economy may have a positive impact on instability in the country and the wider region.



Understanding the motives for kidnapping in north Benin is a crucial initial response to the security crisis.

In October 2023, suspected violent extremists attempted to kidnap three fishermen in the northern Beninese village of Porga, on the border with Burkina Faso; one escaped, the other two were killed trying. As violent extremist organizations (VEOs) have expanded into Benin since 2021, kidnapping incidents have surged. Kidnap for the purposes of forced recruitment is one way in which VEOs have sought to extend their areas of influence, and while kidnap for ransom is sometimes used as a means of financing, kidnapping is often perpetrated for more strategic purposes by armed non-state actors in the country. Tracking overlaying motivations, and ensuring a more nuanced understanding of the kidnapping market, is a central step in shaping responses and protection structures.

ABOUT THIS ISSUE

At the end of 2022, the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC)'s Observatory of Illicit Economies in West Africa highlighted the increasing overlap between conflict zones and areas of illicit activity, with conflict actors often playing a significant role in a number of illicit economies. Throughout 2023, conflict and violence continued, with violent extremist organizations (VEOs) – primarily Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM) – expanding their activities in some northern parts of coastal West Africa, particularly Benin.

Over the past years, GI-TOC research has underscored the need for nuanced analysis of the intersection between illicit economies and conflict as a prerequisite for effective stabilization measures. This issue of the West Africa Risk Bulletin, therefore, focuses on a range of responses to illicit economies linked to (in)stability taken across the region.

Such responses often focus on the ways in which armed non-state actors are financed by, and draw resources from, illicit economies. Indeed, armed groups and terrorist organizations rely on illicit financial flows, and both licit and illicit commodity supply chains to finance their operations and acquire the resources they need.

Although responses based on tracing and preventing financial flows have had some success, when such approaches attempt to block operational resource flows, they have had significant unintended consequences, particularly in the form of increased harm to communities in countries affected by non-state armed violence. The first article in this 10th issue of the West Africa Risk Bulletin therefore examines how such responses focused on blocking illicit financial and operational resource flows have produced contrasting results in the cases of the Ambazonian separatists in Cameroon and JNIM in the Sahel.

National responses are often implemented in the context of other responses at the international level. One such response is the use of international sanctions as a tool to combat many types of illicit activity. The Central African Republic (CAR), for example, has been subject to varying levels of restrictions over the past decade under the Kimberley Process Certification Scheme – the international trade regime designed to prevent the export and sale of 'conflict diamonds'. The second article in this issue, which explores how sanctions can reshape illicit economy ecosystems – as evidenced by the decline of the CAR's diamond market and the growth of its gold sector – highlights a discrepancy between expectations

and reality that can be a common feature of international sanctions regimes, and questions whether reshaping in the context of the CAR has had any impact on the financing of conflict actors.

How can governments effectively manage the tension at the heart of the issue, namely that informal economies are proving to be instrumental in the strength and expansion of armed groups, but also a crucial means of survival for large sections of the population in West and Central Africa? The third article looks at the informal fuel trade in Benin, a sector that is essential to the financing of VEOs, but also a major source of livelihoods in the country. A series of developments, both in neighbouring states and in the country itself, has created a significant window of opportunity for the government of Benin to harness the potential of the fuel sector in the country, while disrupting its links to regional instability. Could a programme to introduce 5 000 mini fuel stations aimed at bringing informal fuel traders into the formal sector do just that? This article recognizes that timing – as

much as the shape of an intervention – can be decisive in determining the impact of stabilization programming.

However, the timing and the substance of an intervention can only be appropriately tailored to the context on the basis of an accurate diagnosis of the illicit economy, its links to (in)stability and its embeddedness in local economies. Staying in northern Benin, the final story examines how kidnapping has risen sharply since 2022 as VEOs, particularly JNIM, have expanded their influence in the coastal state. But while it is commonly assumed that kidnapping is for ransom (in line with the continued focus on the financing of armed groups), this is not the only – or even the primary – motive for JNIM's escalating use of kidnapping in northern Benin. JNIM uses kidnapping for a range of strategic purposes, including intelligence gathering and, as is the focus of this article, forced recruitment. Tracking and analyzing these different motivations, and the impact on communities, is pivotal in shaping responses.

Pitfalls in responding to armed groups' supply chains: lessons from Cameroon and the Sahel.

Policy interest in how armed groups and terrorist organizations fund their operations was elevated throughout the 'War on Terror' and has remained a significant concern. This interest has generally been primarily focused on financing, and on attempts to block financial flows to armed or proscribed groups. Much of this depends on trying to regulate their use of banking infrastructure and electronic payment systems, rather than cash-based transfers.

While financing is key to buying the materials that armed groups may need for their operation – arms, fuel, cars, fighter salaries and so on – it does not, as a unit of analysis, consider the other ways in which armed groups acquire those resources. In recognition of this, there is also a growing focus on responding to supply chains providing operational resources to non-state armed groups in West Africa. This has typically sought to apply the same logic around 'blocking' or banning flows.

But transplanting such approaches to countering operational resource flows carries significant risks – some of which have crystallized in the wake of attempts by West African governments to block flows of fuel, motorbikes and other commodities to non-state armed groups.¹ The key harms from such approaches have been felt by communities in the relevant regions, who often rely on the same supply chains.

Ambazonian separatists: Following the money in armed group financing

Ambazonian separatist armed groups are a cluster of armed groups, of varying size and degrees of organization, that began forming in 2017 after a crackdown by the Cameroonian government on activism by the Anglophone population, who were campaigning for better representation of the English language and speakers in national institutions, which have been dominated by Francophones since independence. Sensing a dead end in their opportunities for social and political advancement in Cameroon, and with no clear peaceful avenue to compromise, a more militant, separatist agenda emerged from protests that had previously been calling for a federalist state. Diaspora activists, based mostly in the

United States and Europe, have been instrumental in shaping the conflict and its direction.

From the beginning of the armed conflict in late 2017, groups willing to fight Cameroonian state forces have needed money. One of their significant needs was arms, given that the groups were originally poorly armed – either with sticks or bladed weapons, or with hunting rifles. While Ambazonia fighters were able to seize various military arms during their clashes with Cameroonian forces, they also took to buying large numbers of weapons from Nigeria, which were trafficked to the Anglophone region.²

In the early days of the conflict, separatists benefitted from substantial support from the Anglophone Cameroonian diaspora. Certain activists in the diaspora developed large, influential followings on social media, and also pushed hard-line separatist narratives, supporting armed struggle over potential political solutions such as federalism. These activists also became effective fundraisers, soliciting donations from the wider diaspora.³ As described by a journalist who has extensively covered the conflict:

At the time when the armed groups were being formed, you would see some of the diaspora leaders who published videos [on social media] of the guys on the ground. And they are saying (in the video): 'We are here, we just formed this group and this is the village where we find ourselves. We don't have shoes. We don't have this. We don't have that. We are pledging allegiance to this diaspora person.' And there's always a way for the diaspora leaders to reach out to them, provide these things and then start controlling them. These groups came up on their own and simply pledged allegiance to Ayaba Cho [a prominent diaspora activist] and other leaders who are in the diaspora.⁴

Ambazonian fighters and close observers say that the financial transfers were chiefly for buying weapons.⁵ These might be purchased in Nigeria by diaspora networks or by the armed groups themselves.⁶ The

Cameroonian government made substantial and varied efforts to counteract and intercept the money transfers being sent from the diaspora to Ambazonian armed groups. These efforts took several forms.

One such initiative was lobbying the activists' countries of residence, particularly the United States, for assistance in preventing these transfers. This has yielded some encouraging results. For example, in September 2023, Eric Tataw Tano, a US-based businessman and activist in Cameroon's Ambazonian separatist movement, was arrested in the US. Tano was accused of trying to intimidate a witness and shape their testimony in an ongoing investigation into his business practices surrounding allegations of wire fraud. He allegedly tried to instruct the witness on how they would testify to a grand jury on several issues, including his 'role in the Cameroonian separatist movement, or about various kidnappings and acts of violence in Cameroon'.⁷ This suggests the grand jury case (details of which are not public) may be related to financial support for the separatist movement. This case comes just months after another case was concluded, which, like Tano's, took place in Maryland, where several people were convicted of a conspiracy to illegally export a container of firearms – including sniper rifles, assault rifles and ammunition – to Nigeria for onward movement to separatists in Cameroon.⁸

However, despite these recent developments, Cameroonian officials express frustration at the limited cooperation they have received from western governments in regard to Ambazonian separatists, including tackling diaspora financial transfers.⁹

A more promising avenue of intervention for the government, at least for a time, proved to be tracing the money transfers and arresting those who came to collect them. According to the Cameroonian National Agency for Financial Investigations, they began to realize that money transfers for armed groups that had been sent through commonly used international transfer services (including MoneyGram and Western Union) tended to be collected early in the mornings in the Anglophone provinces.¹⁰ Monitoring these collections, according to the agency, led to intelligence and arrests. The government also increased taxes on mobile money payments and limited the amounts that could be sent in a single transfer.¹¹

As a result of these arrests, senders of the transfers diversified the means through which they sent money, with the government attempting to keep up with these adaptations. The use of informal intermediaries rose. Cameroonian individuals or businesses would be handed a sum of money by an intermediary (often based in Nigeria), who in turn had been given it by diaspora activists or their contacts. They would then either pass it on to an appointed person or deposit it on the premises of a business frequented by intermediaries of the armed groups. Such transfers, according to an activist from Bamenda who has contacts with the armed groups, were much harder for security services to follow. Cryptocurrency payments were also used, although these are not believed to be a widespread form of transfer.¹²

Attempts to trace financial flows thus yielded some successes, although the separatists were able to diversify external funding channels to evade such tracking. Notably, there has been a gradual reduction in money transfers to the Ambazonian separatists, however these were primarily driven not by government interventions, but by a loss of trust in separatist leaders by the wider diaspora community. This was due to the rise in criminal activity and violence – particularly kidnapping – by the armed groups against civilians,¹³ as well as suspected financial mismanagement, political disagreements and, according to some observers, deception about how the money was being spent.¹⁴

JNIM in the Sahel and the dilemmas of countering resourcing

Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM) is the largest and most active armed group in the Sahel. JNIM is an amalgamation of four Sahelian jihadist movements, including the Sahelian branch of Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb that merged in 2017.¹⁵ Its objectives can be characterized as the overthrow of regional governments and the installation of Islamist governance, as well as expanding its influence beyond the Sahel, particularly into coastal West Africa.¹⁶

While also leveraging violence, JNIM has proven adept at presenting itself as the guardian of local livelihoods, particularly when those livelihoods involve illicit economies, and which state officials have attempted to regulate or crack down on. JNIM's 'offer' to communities dependent on illicit and informal economies is simple. They will repel the state's presence and ensure it does not return, in exchange for deference to their authority.

However, they will also exploit those illicit economies to resupply themselves.

One of the most widely smuggled commodities in the Sahel is fuel. In many places, this is simply because licit fuel is not available. Komienga province in Est region, Burkina Faso, does not contain a single licit fuel station.¹⁷ The entirety of northern Mali is likewise only supplied by smuggled fuel, in this case from Algeria.¹⁸ However, the price difference between smuggled and licit fuel is also an important factor where licit fuel is available, with most buyers preferring the cheaper smuggled fuel. For example, in 2022 on the border between Benin and Burkina Faso, licit fuel was priced at 650 CFA Francs (FCFA) per litre, but could be purchased for FCFA 250 per litre at the side of the road (notably, price dynamics in this area have changed following the May 2023 lifting of government subsidies on fuel in Nigeria).¹⁹ Given that fuel is an essential good for civilians as well as armed groups, helping to keep this illicit trade running is a valuable role JNIM can play.

As a Burkinabe journalist said of the situation in the W-Arly-Pendjari complex: 'The armed groups kill customs (officers) and foresters. But they get on well with the traders, because these traders are in charge of bringing

these products to market. Petrol, motorbikes – it's the same merchants who smuggle these that supply the armed groups.'²⁰

JNIM use the illicit fuel market for resupply in several ways. Although not ubiquitous, they were known to tax small-scale illicit fuel smugglers, justified as 'protection payment', including in Nadiagou, Est region, Burkina Faso in late 2022. They also reportedly resupplied their own stocks from this smuggled fuel.²¹ They have further been alleged to have close links with highly organized fuel smugglers that work on a larger scale. Some of the individuals arrested in a major fuel trafficking case in Burkina Faso in 2021 were businessmen who owned fuel warehouses for smuggled Nigerian fuel in areas where JNIM are extremely active and known to source fuel from, including Barsalogo, Pissila and Pensa.²²

However, interventions to try and stop fuel smuggling are extremely controversial in the eyes of residents, particularly if they are already struggling to afford the cost of living. Documented reactions to such efforts have ranged from indifference to outright resistance. Benin attempted to forbid fuel sales within 20km of national borders, to little avail. Attempts to tax and



Motorbikes in the Theatre Populaire district of Ouagadougou, known for its vehicle and parts shops. Reportedly, stolen motorbikes are frequently taken to shops here for modification and resale, even though most businesses in the area serve the licit market.

Photo: Eleanor Beevor

control fuel imports from Algeria in northern Mali were met with civil unrest in Gao in October 2017.²³

Although these fuel interventions were not always directly targeting armed groups, armed group use of fuel smuggling has been a source of concern for regional governments. For instance, military interventions on the Benin–Burkina Faso border, in the disputed smuggling hub of Kourou/Koualou in September 2021, were conceived in part to break JNIM’s control and exploitation of fuel smuggling networks. However, as the article examining state interventions in Benin’s fuel smuggling market in this Risk Bulletin shows, these operations have complex impacts also on civilians, who rely on smuggled fuel.²⁴

A similar situation is evident in regard to JNIM’s supply of motorbikes. Motorbikes are a significant source of expenditure for JNIM²⁵ and have been a game-changing addition to their operations. Motorbikes, particularly large or heavy models, are the only form of transport that functions in many parts of the rural Sahel. They are cheaper and more fuel-efficient than cars and can navigate roads and terrain that cars cannot access. Larger models also allow two or more riders per motorbike, allowing combatants to drive and shoot from a single vehicle.²⁶

JNIM’s suppliers are predominantly local dealers who source untaxed motorbikes from trafficking networks, or the trafficking networks themselves. (Since local JNIM units have substantial autonomy over their resourcing, there is no single source.)²⁷

These trafficking networks tend to source the motorbikes from importers based in major regional ports, such as Lomé or Lagos. The importers, who source from Asia, reportedly divert a significant proportion of motorbikes from the licit, taxed supply chain once they reach the port.²⁸ These are then sold on to illicit networks. Given the higher prices that goods fetch in landlocked Sahelian states, many of these motorbikes are smuggled north over the borders for resale in Burkina Faso, Niger or Mali.²⁹

The governments of Sahelian states are keenly aware of the importance of motorbikes to non-state armed groups, including JNIM. As a result, Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger have all made use of a variety of bans on the kinds of motorbikes that JNIM favours (larger, more durable models with larger fuel cylinders and stronger shock absorbers).³⁰ These include bans on the sale, circulation and import of these types of motorbikes in armed group affected zones. Bans on motorbikes have been experimented with by Sahelian governments since 2014,³¹ but the vast majority were put in place after 2019. The consistent renewal of many of these bans –

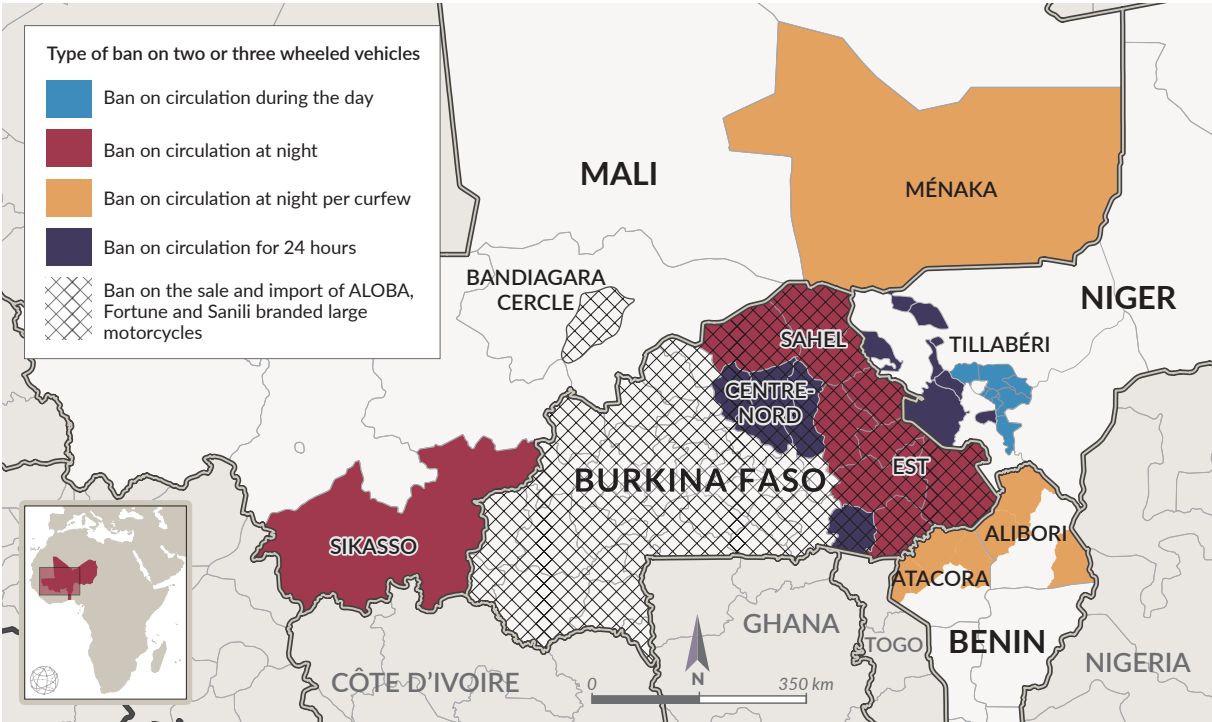


FIGURE 1 Motorbike bans in the region.

some of which have endured for several years – on the grounds of armed group activity makes clear that they do not seriously inhibit this activity.

In terms of restricting supply, the bans appear to have been fairly ineffective. Some observers, including some law enforcement officers, believe that the bans have actually increased reliance on motorbike trafficking networks by both armed groups and civilians, while damaging the business of legitimate suppliers.³²

A key factor in the lack of success of these bans lies in what they mean for civilians. Banning them effectively forces a halt to civilians' ability to access markets, schools, hospitals and so on. Even circulation bans that only apply in night hours have severe ramifications, particularly for the informal motorbike transport sector and the hospitality sector. This may risk causing resentment among local populations and, in turn, risks turning those who are ambivalent towards JNIM into supporters of the group, or at least towards tacit acceptance of it.

Civilian-centric interventions to counter armed group financing and resourcing

Both of these case studies make clear that there are few simple options when trying to counter armed group financing and resourcing, including through illicit supply chains. However, attempts to trace and block illicit financial flows to armed groups can – when finely targeted – yield substantial results.³³ Attempts to block armed group resourcing in West Africa have been less successful, and yielded significant unintended consequences, particularly in harming communities. This is particularly so because armed groups and civilians are similarly dependent on goods such as fuel and motorbikes, which underpin the operations of many non-state armed groups.

A 'civilian-centric' approach should guide future efforts to prevent armed groups from exploiting illicit supply chains for resourcing. However, for as long as civilians cannot afford price hikes or access licit supplies, policymakers may be forced to tolerate a degree of illicit activity. They would also be advised to target their interventions against armed groups much more precisely, if they wish to avoid alienating civilians and boosting support for armed groups.

Notes

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- 2 Ladd Serwat and Eleanor Beevor, Ambazonian separatists: Non-state armed groups and illicit economies in West Africa, GI-TOC and ACLED, forthcoming.
- 3 Ibid; Interview with Anglophone activist from Bamenda, Yaoundé, 15 June 2023; Telephone interview with an Anglophone Cameroonian journalist, 15 August 2023; Interview with Anglophone security expert, Yaoundé, 13 June 2023; Telephone interview with a former police officer who worked in Kumba, 26 July 2023.
- 4 Telephone interview with an Anglophone Cameroonian journalist who has covered the conflict extensively, 15 June 2023.
- 5 Interview with an Ambazonian separatist fighter from Kom, Douala, 25 July 2023.
- 6 Ibid; Interview with an Anglophone activist from Bamenda, Yaoundé, 15 June 2023; Telephone interview with an Anglophone Cameroonian journalist, 15 August 2023; Interview with an Anglophone security expert, Yaoundé, 13 June 2023.
- 7 Affidavit in the case of USA v. Eric Tano Tataw, filed 1 September 2023, <https://storage.courtlistener.com/recap/gov.uscourts.mdd.543821/gov.uscourts.mdd.543821.1.1.pdf>.
- 8 US Attorney's Office, District of Maryland, Member of conspiracy to illegally export firearms, ammunition and military-type items to assist separatists fighting against the government of Cameroon sentenced to 46 months in federal prison, 3 May 2023, <https://www.justice.gov/usao-md/pr/member-conspiracy-illegally-export-firearms-ammunition-and-military-type-items-assist>.
- 9 Interview with official from the Agence Nationale d'Investigation Financière (ANIF), Yaoundé, 15 June 2023.
- 10 Interview with Anglophone security expert, Yaoundé, 13 June 2023.
- 11 Interview with ANIF official, Yaoundé, 15 June 2023.
- 12 Interview with Anglophone activist from Bamenda, Yaoundé, 15 June 2023.
- 13 The practice of kidnap for ransom was deeply concerning to many in the diaspora, particularly when it targeted ordinary people or political figures seen as making constructive efforts. These, along with violence against civilians and persistent demands for 'tax payments' from Anglophone residents, led to diminishing support for the rebellion, both in the diaspora and in the Anglophone provinces.
- 14 Some donors had reportedly understood that they were donating to humanitarian efforts, rather than funding armed groups. Telephone interview with an Anglophone Cameroonian journalist, 15 August 2023; Interview with an Anglophone activist from Bamenda, Yaoundé, 15 June 2023.
- 15 Heni Nsaibia, Eleanor Beevor and Flore Berger, Jama'at Nusrat al Islam Wal Muslimin: Non-state armed groups and illicit economies in West Africa, ACLED and GI-TOC, October 2023, <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/non-state-armed-groups-illicit-economies-west-africa/>.
- 16 Caleb Weiss, AQIM's imperial playbook: Understanding al-Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghreb's expansion into West Africa, Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, 2022, <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/>

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- 17 United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), Fuel trafficking in the Sahel, Transnational organized crime threat assessment, 2022, https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/tocta_sahel/TOCTA_Sahel_fuel_2023.pdf.
 - 18 Ibid.
 - 19 Telephone interview with a Burkinabe journalist specializing in transnational crime, March 2022.
 - 20 Ibid.
 - 21 UNODC, Fuel trafficking in the Sahel, Transnational organized crime threat assessment, 2022, https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/tocta_sahel/TOCTA_Sahel_fuel_2023.pdf.
 - 22 Ibid.
 - 23 UNODC, Fuel trafficking in the Sahel, Transnational organized crime threat assessment, 2022, https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/tocta_sahel/TOCTA_Sahel_fuel_2023.pdf.
 - 24 Observatory of Illicit Economies in West Africa, Benin introduces mini fuel stations as a window opens to tackle illicit fuel supply chains and armed groups, GI-TOC, Risk Bulletin, Issue 10, 2023.
 - 25 While it is impossible to estimate accurately how many motorbikes the group buys or how much they spend on them in a given period, there is evidence to suggest that the organization as a whole is buying hundreds of new motorbikes every month. Eleanor Beevor, Motorbikes and armed groups in the Sahel: Anatomy of a regional market, GI-TOC, August 2023, <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/motorbikes-trade-armed-groups-sahel/>.
 - 26 Ibid.
 - 27 Heni Nsaibia, Eleanor Beevor and Flore Berger, Jama'at Nusrat al Islam Wal Muslimin: Non-state armed groups and illicit economies in West Africa, ACLED and GI-TOC, October 2023, <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/non-state-armed-groups-illicit-economies-west-africa/>.
 - 28 Eleanor Beevor, Motorbikes and armed groups in the Sahel: Anatomy of a regional market, GI-TOC, August 2023, <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/motorbikes-trade-armed-groups-sahel/>.
 - 29 António Sampaio et al, Reserve assets: Armed groups and conflict economies in the national parks of Burkina Faso, Niger and Benin, GI-TOC, May 2023, <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/armed-groups-conflict-economies-national-parks-west-africa/>.
 - 30 Eleanor Beevor, Motorbikes and armed groups in the Sahel: Anatomy of a regional market, GI-TOC, August 2023, <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/motorbikes-trade-armed-groups-sahel/>.
 - 31 Radio France Internationale, *Mali: une opération antimoto lancée autour de Kidal*, 29 September 2014, <https://www.rfi.fr/fr/afrique/20140929-mali-operation-antimoto-lancee-autour-kidal-jihadistes-minusma>.
 - 32 Telephone interview with police officer in Cinkassé, Togo, 28 May 2023.
 - 33 Floor Knoote and Thalia Malmberg, Zero risk mentality: The damaging effect of AML/CFT measures for civil society, GI-TOC, May 2021, <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/financial-resilience/>.

The challenge of tackling illicit economies with international sanctions regimes: the Kimberley Process in the Central African Republic.

International sanctions regimes and trade regimes often have ambitious publicly stated aims about advancing peace and security. The UN Security Council, for example, says its sanctions regimes pursue a 'variety of goals', from enforcing arms embargoes, constraining terrorism, protecting human rights, or deterring coups.¹ The US Office of Foreign Assets Control, likewise, sees sanctions as a tool 'to accomplish US foreign policy and national security goals'.²

In practice, however, the aims of these regimes are often more limited (or, some would say, pragmatic). Different stakeholders in these processes can have different views of what success looks like, and what these regimes should precisely aim for. The Kimberley Process Certification Scheme (KPCS) in the Central African Republic (CAR) provides a case in point.

The KPCS is a trade regime that aims to prevent the export and sale of 'conflict diamonds', defined in its core document as 'rough diamonds used by rebel movements or their allies to finance conflict aimed at undermining legitimate governments'.³ The KPCS was a product of the rising anxiety in the late 1990s around natural resources being used to fund conflict.

The KPCS has been an intensely politicized process and its impact on the illicit trade in diamonds and associated conflict is a contested issue. Its objectives, and the ways in which the process works, are sometimes at odds with popular expectations of what it should achieve.

This is demonstrated clearly in the CAR, a country that has faced suspensions and restrictions under the Kimberley Process for years. In the case of the CAR, the evidence suggests that the KPCS has not so much reduced conflict financing, as much as it has shifted the exploitative focus of armed groups to other resources.

Origins and objectives of the Kimberley Process

The KPCS was created in 2002. The impetus came in part from major diamond players who feared a consumer boycott, in response to rising global awareness around the role that natural resources – and diamonds in particular – had played in war economies.⁴ Conflicts such as those in Sierra Leone and Angola involved significant rebel exploitation of diamond fields, and diamond companies were under pressure to show that they were not complicit in such supply chains. KPCS member countries would have to have their diamond industries issue 'certificates of origin' prior to export to assure international buyers that their purchases did not come from conflict zones where rebels may have profited from them.

Essentially, the KPCS's chief aim was to keep what it termed 'conflict diamonds' out of formal supply chains.⁵ Yet many campaigns around conflict minerals over the years have implied that 'cutting off' natural resource revenue from rebel groups would help to bring about conditions for peace.⁶ These ambiguities make it important to consider how the impact of the KPCS falls within the broader objectives of achieving peace and security.

The Kimberley Process has faced major challenges and a crisis of faith among some stakeholders. The most recent plenary meeting in November 2023 ended in deadlock around a debate over broadening the definition of 'conflict diamonds' to include 'state actors' in light of Russia's war in Ukraine and financial flows to Russia from the diamond trade.⁷ Western countries pushed for this expansion while Russia and allies, including Belarus and the Central African Republic, stood against.

The Kimberley Process Civil Society Coalition, a non-governmental observer organization, walked out of negotiations on the final communiqué of the plenary at 2 a.m., lambasting the way the process has been politicized. 'We have been pushing tirelessly to break the links between diamonds and conflict,' said coordinator

Michel Yoboué. 'We want to see action, but we can't even agree on simple words.'⁸

Yoboué cited the CAR as an example of where the KCPS has become a politicized process, ignoring the inputs of an expert network in the country. 'Civil society regrets the lack of constructive attitudes in developing an approach to ensure that the Central African Republic and its people – rather than rebels, criminal networks or mercenaries – reap the full benefits of their diamond wealth,' said Yoboué's statement on behalf of the coalition.

The Central African Republic within the Kimberley Process

There are two major areas where diamonds are found in the CAR: the 'Carnot sandstone' area in the country's south-west, and the 'Mouka-Ouadda sandstone',

covering a large area of eastern CAR (see Figure 2). These are all 'alluvial' diamonds, which means the stones are scattered near to the surface across a large area, rather than mined from deeper geological deposits.'⁹

The CAR was fully suspended as a member of the KPCS in 2013. Yet there have been concerns around the use of minerals, and especially diamonds, by conflict actors in the country since the early 2000s. The CAR was the subject of a review in 2003 – the first year of the KPCS's existence – due to a coup by Francois Bozizé, which ejected the regime of Ange-Félix Patassé. Between 2010 and 2012, growing activity by armed groups, including their exploitation of diamond mining, led to increased vigilance around diamonds from the CAR, and particularly from eastern CAR, within the Kimberley Process mechanism.'¹⁰

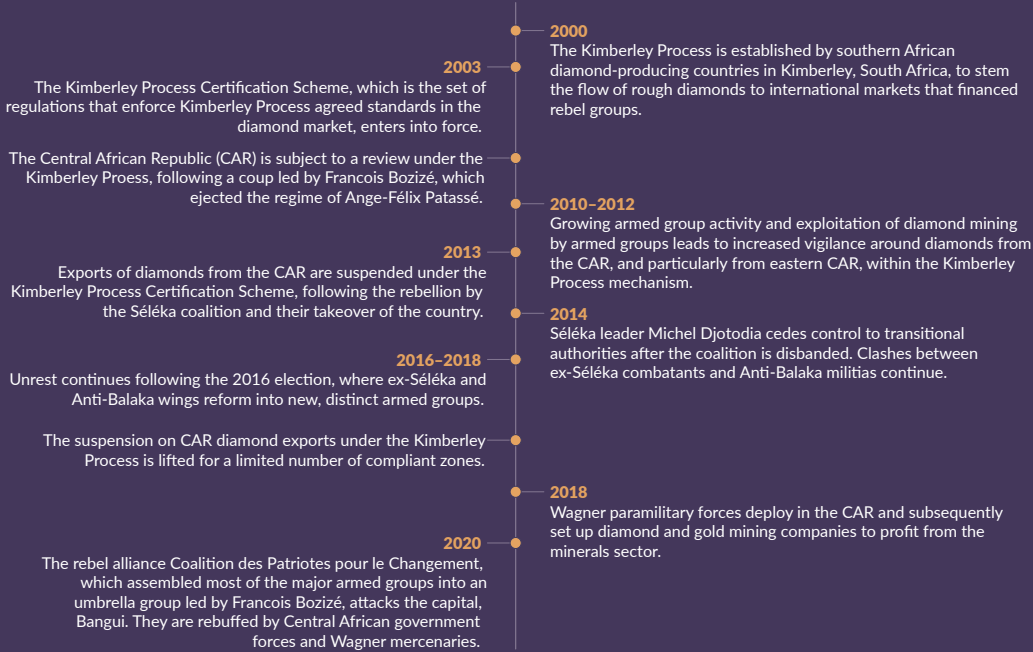


FIGURE 1 Key events in the CAR conflict, and diamond and gold sanctions.

Bozizé's takeover was an early challenge to the KPCS, since he went from being a rebel actor profiting from diamonds to taking the presidency. The KPCS suspended the CAR for two months in 2003, but then reinstated the country after Bozizé assured inspectors he would work to tackle conflict diamonds, although in practice insurgents continued to benefit from the illicit trade.¹¹

However, it was the rise of the Séléka rebel coalition in 2013 and their ensuing takeover that led to a full suspension of the CAR's diamond exports under the Kimberley Process. Séléka was disbanded by its leader Michel Djotodia in September 2013, but this did not prevent its constituent groups of militants from continuing to exploit diamond and gold deposits in eastern and western CAR.¹² Transitional authorities, whom Djotodia ceded control to in January 2014, were unable to stem clashes between ex-Séléka combatants and Anti-Balaka militias.

Persistent instability and the emergence of new armed rebel coalitions following the 2016 election led President Faustin Archange Touadéra to turn to Russia for support. Wagner paramilitary forces deployed in the

CAR in 2018. They, too, have made inroads into the CAR's minerals sector, and companies linked to Wagner trading in both gold and diamonds have been subject to international sanctions.¹³

Impact of the Kimberley Process on the CAR's diamond ecosystem

Today, state-aligned forces' control in the CAR varies substantially, with eastern CAR still dominated by armed group activity. Northern and north-eastern CAR continue to experience high levels of armed group activity, including profiting from mining sites. South-western CAR began to stabilize earlier than north-eastern CAR and, as a result, eight sub-prefectures in the south-west were exempted from the KPCS export ban in 2016.¹⁴ Today, the south-west is under the reasonably consistent control of the state and Wagner mercenary troops. Observers agree that the volume of legal diamond exports from the CAR is increasing.¹⁵ The country recorded almost US\$14 million of diamond exports in 2022, up from US\$11.6 million in 2021.¹⁶

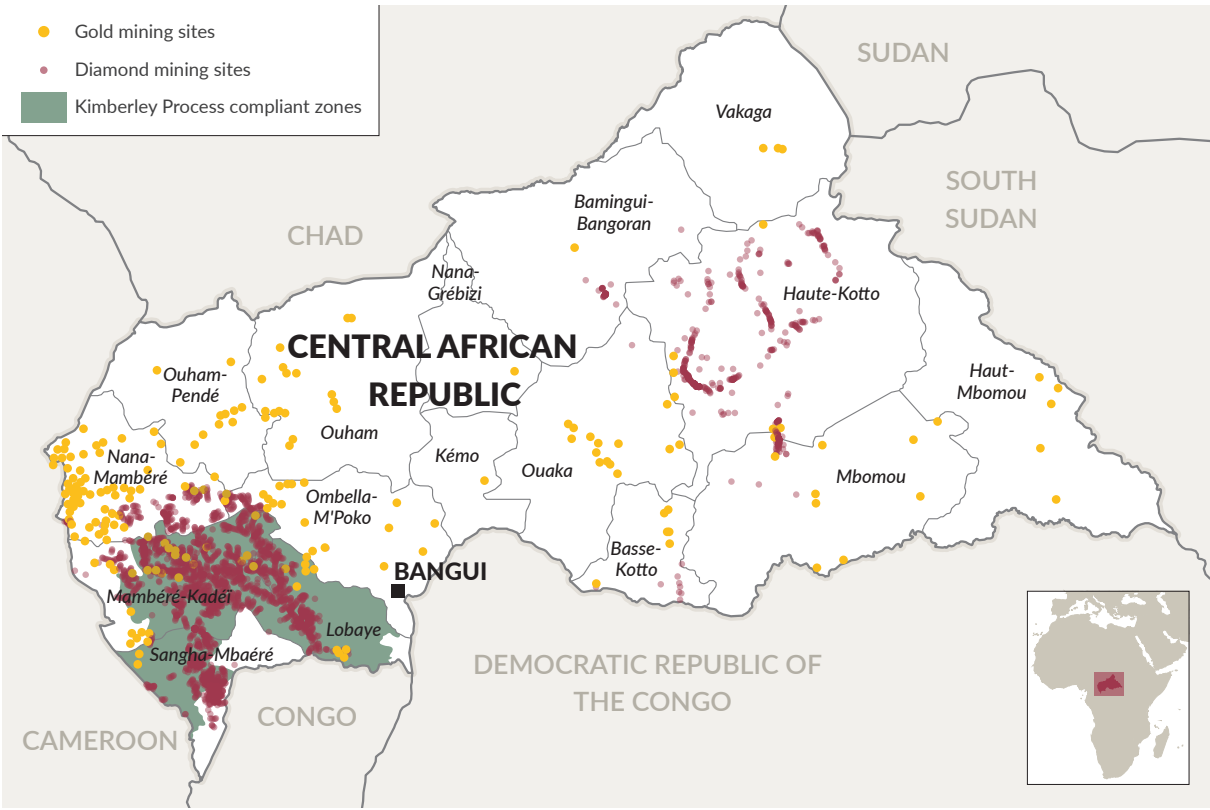


FIGURE 2 Kimberley Process green zones, and gold and diamond deposits in the CAR.

Source: Alexandre Jaillon and Guillaume de Brier, Mapping artisanal mining sites in the Western Central African Republic, IPIS and USAID, November 2019; US Geological Survey, Kimberley Process Permanent Secretariat

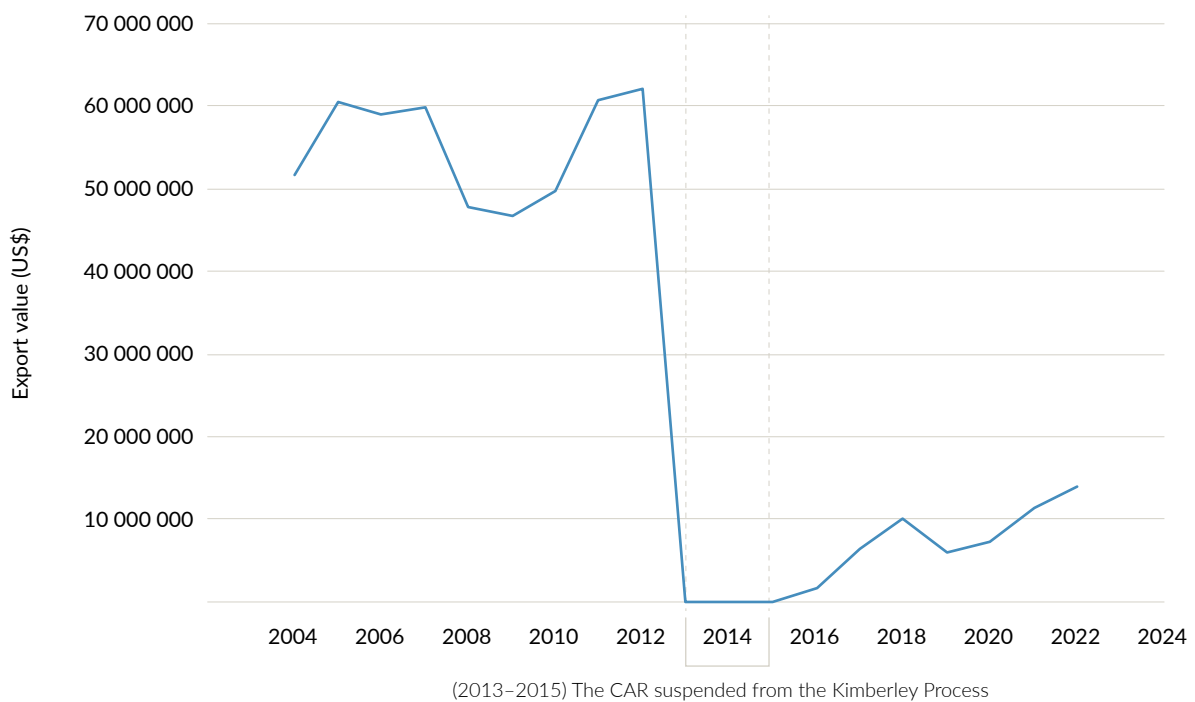


FIGURE 3 Legal diamond exports from the CAR, 2004–2022.

Source: Kimberley Process Secretariat, via <https://www.kimberleyprocess.com/en/central-african-republic-0>

While this means that the formal sector is gradually reanimating its diamond-buying networks in the south-west and winning back some of the trade from artisanal miners, two important factors dampen what should be positive news. The first is that licit diamond revenue for the CAR is still substantially lower than it was in 2012, prior to the suspension. This is in large part due to the CAR’s remaining 16 sub-prefectures still being banned from exporting rough diamonds, which means that diamonds mined in these areas can only be traded illicitly. The second factor is that, while there is still an illicit market for diamonds, which remains very active, the global drop in licit demand for Central African diamonds has led to a substantial shift towards artisanally mining and illicitly exporting gold.

The geography of south-western CAR’s diamond reserves provides an opportunity for traders to operate illicitly. Observers familiar with the CAR–Cameroon border region agree that, if an individual had diamonds and were willing to sell them illicitly, they would easily be able to find a buyer for them, particularly in the border towns of Cameroon such as Garoua-Boulaï and Kentzou.¹⁷ Buyers in these border towns are often West Africans from a clutch of countries. Given that diamond mines, including in western CAR, are often much closer to border towns than they are to Bangui (through which

Kimberley Process-compliant diamonds must be exported), a seller looking to recoup their money swiftly will inevitably be tempted to sell on the illicit market.¹⁸

This said, diamonds were a more complex commodity to trade than gold, even prior to the KPCS suspension. The CAR’s diamonds are all alluvial, and alluvial deposits are not necessarily clustered together, but scattered over very large areas.¹⁹ The risk for miners is that they may dig for weeks or months and not find diamonds to sell.²⁰

Gem-quality stones need to be cut and polished before acquiring value, a process that is typically done in Dubai, which means that diamond buyers must have international networks in order to profit.²¹ Diamond miners thus are typically embedded in pre-financing networks, in which a buyer or mine owner finances the dig, and shoulders the risk of diamonds not being found. When diamonds are found and sold, depending on the agreement with the pre-financier, the miners may also share in the revenue of the sold diamond.²² Given the high levels of trust needed to make these networks function, it is unsurprising that even after the suspension was partially lifted, formal buyers required time to re-acquire the trust of artisanal mining networks.²³

The Kimberley Process has, inadvertently, made this more difficult. Diamonds mined in these areas must be taken to the main town in the relevant sub-prefecture, where they will be sealed in bags, and then taken to Bangui for re-inspection by the monitoring team.²⁴

The KCPS has attempted to address bottlenecks. One widespread source of dissatisfaction was the wait time that the checks added to the process, reducing the speed at which miners could be rewarded for their efforts.²⁵ Measures such as an enhanced use of digital imagery for inspections have been adopted, to some positive effect.²⁶ However, most estimates suggest that a major portion of diamonds mined, even in the exempted south-west, are smuggled out rather than licitly exported. In the east, all diamonds mined can be assumed to be either bought and stockpiled, or smuggled into illicit supply chains.²⁷

The CAR has certainly seen examples of armed group leaders taking control of either mines or local diamond supply chains, and arranging their illicit sale directly. In 2017, anti-corruption NGO Global Witness documented the case of the 'General' Nama who, as a Séléka commander in 2013 in south-western CAR took over the local buying house, and also forced miners to sell diamonds to him at a fraction of their value.²⁸ However, there is also a more passive – and more common – role that armed groups adopt; namely that of taxing either mining activity or movement along roads leading to and from mining areas.²⁹ Generally speaking, transnational organized crime networks that sell the 'conflict diamonds' are thought to take the much larger share of a Central African diamond's revenue.³⁰

The KPCS has substantially reduced the attraction and the viability of diamonds as an avenue for conflict financing. While it has certainly not succeeded in stopping the trade in 'conflict diamonds' through illicit networks, it has reduced the prices that both illicit buyers and licit buying houses are prepared to offer miners.³¹

Gold booms as an alternative to diamonds

In the past decade, there has been a substantial shift of miners turning from diamonds to gold as a source of income. This includes miners operating in areas controlled by armed groups.

Gold is not sanctioned as a commodity in the CAR, and there is no particular restriction against buying (including in conflict-affected areas that are not KCPS compliant)

or selling gold. There are voluntary frameworks, notably one established by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. Designation under the United Nations sanctions regime is a possibility, if an individual is proven beyond doubt to be financing armed groups through the illicit trade in natural resources.³² However, given the targeted nature of this regime and the burden of proof required, ordinary miners and low-level dealers can generally expect to escape scrutiny.

The shift to gold has also been facilitated by some market characteristics. First, mining gold is a lower-risk economic activity. Once a seam (or *fillon*) of gold is discovered, it can be followed through rock, and as long as a miner can access the seam, they can be reasonably confident their efforts will pay off – unlike in the much more uncertain practice of diamond mining.

A secondary factor is that, while the vast majority of the CAR's gold is exported, it is also valued within the country and is a tradeable substance that can be accepted as a means of payment locally. A miner without an international network can be assured that they can exchange their gold in-country, for cash or for the commodities they need. Both of these factors increase the ease with which gold can be traded illicitly.

A former member of the UN Panel of Experts on the CAR described the shift as such: 'It has shifted from one extractive sector to another. In the Central African Republic, the main mineral was diamonds, and because of the restrictions, people shifted to gold ... In terms of overall conflict financing, there's probably not a reduction, it's just a shift.'³³ This shift has been confirmed by other observers.³⁴

Sanctions regimes and illicit economies: between expectations and realities

Many of the campaigns centring on 'conflict minerals' have sought to establish sanctions regimes to govern mineral supply chains as a way of promoting peace. However, the KPCS in the CAR appears to have triggered a displacement to the gold trade, rather than decreasing harm or reducing conflict.

While there is still a place for regulation of 'conflict diamonds' in international markets, there is a clear argument for the close tracking of the contexts in which the KCPS is applied to identify harms and risks, as the Kimberley Process Civil Society Coalition has called for.

Consistent efforts to constrict illicit economies more strategically – either through other sanctions regimes such as those created by the UN or through other policy instruments – whatever resource these economies might

be centred around, would be a practical way forward. However, as the recent geopolitical deadlock at the Kimberley Process meeting shows, a practical way forward is not always politically possible.

Notes

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Benin introduces mini fuel stations as a window opens to tackle illicit fuel supply chains and armed groups.

Timing is a key element determining the success, or otherwise, of stabilization interventions. A series of recent developments shaping the informal fuel market in northern Benin – primarily the lifting of the 50-year fuel subsidy in Nigeria in May 2023 and a deadly fire at an informal fuel station in Benin in September 2023 – have spurred political will and created a significant window of opportunity to disrupt the informal trade.

This presents a significant stabilization opportunity, given that northern Benin's informal fuel economy operates as a critical supply chain for non-state armed groups operating there and in the Sahel, most prominently Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM), and to a lesser extent the Islamic State Sahel Province (IS Sahel). Interventions drawing informal traders into the formal sector would not only shrink the informal market – raising government revenues – but could help erode connections between fuel traders and non-state armed groups, who are key consumers and whose protection is often required to smuggle fuel northwards into the Sahel.

The dispersed nature of the fuel trade, and the fact that not all informal fuel traders would leave the trade, means that non-state armed groups would no doubt retain supply sources. However, increasing the friction inherent in this illicit supply chain, and disrupting the ease with which non-state armed groups currently meet their fuel needs through northern Benin's informal fuel market, could place a greater burden – financial and logistical – on their operations. Informal fuel traders are exposed to forging relationships with their non-state armed group customers. These are vulnerabilities that would be somewhat mitigated, albeit not removed, through formal employment. Myriad small steps taken to raise the operational cost for non-state armed groups, and weakening their abilities to recruit combatants and service providers, must be part of a holistic response to their growing threat.

Tracing the development of this window in northern Benin is not only helpful in identifying opportunities for local improvement, but for exploring how distinct typologies of crime-sensitive stabilization interventions

can be designed and what kind of monitoring can ensure stakeholders are well positioned to act.

Northern Benin's informal fuel economy and its links to instability

Benin's informal fuel economy has long met the vast majority of demand across the country. Estimates suggest that illicit fuel accounts for approximately 80% of the fuel market in Benin.¹

This is particularly the case in areas far from urban hubs, including much of northern Benin, where access to formal fuel providers has been a longstanding challenge. The informal fuel trade thus underpins a significant proportion of local mobility and enjoys significant legitimacy among communities: 'We are not criminals but economic operators,' said the head of an informal fuel retailers' association in the town of Materi, on the border with Burkina Faso.²

Northern Benin lies on an established major fuel trafficking corridor connecting Nigeria, where fuel could historically be purchased far more cheaply from pumps than in neighbouring countries, and the Sahel. Fuel is trafficked in smaller quantities by motorbikes, and in larger volumes in 4x4 trucks, using a complex network of formal and informal roads, including through the W-Arly-Pendjari (WAP) national parks complex.³

Although northern Benin's role as a major fuel smuggling corridor has long roots, concerns around the trade have risen since Sahelian non-state armed groups started operating in the area in 2019 and it became clear that the informal fuel trade was a central supply chain for these groups to resource their operations. The modus operandi of such groups – relying on motorbikes and 4x4s for mobility – is underpinned by fuel, making it a central operational resource. The spike in demand since violent extremist organisations (VEOs) became major purchasers around 2020 led to increased black-market prices, enhancing the profitability of fuel smuggling.

Non-state armed groups, and particularly JNIM, the most active in the area, are not only important consumers of smuggled fuel; in some cases, they have provided protection to smugglers in return for rents. There is no single discernible taxation system between armed groups and fuel traffickers; rather, the formality of taxation appears to vary between time and place.

However, as of October 2023, this protection system appears to underpin successful trading on some routes between Benin and Burkina Faso: 'If you don't have a relationship with the people in the bush [local terminology for violent extremist groups], that's it for the eastern region, you can no longer trade peacefully,' reported a Natitingou-based fuel wholesaler. 'They're the ones who decide whether the fuel gets through.'⁴

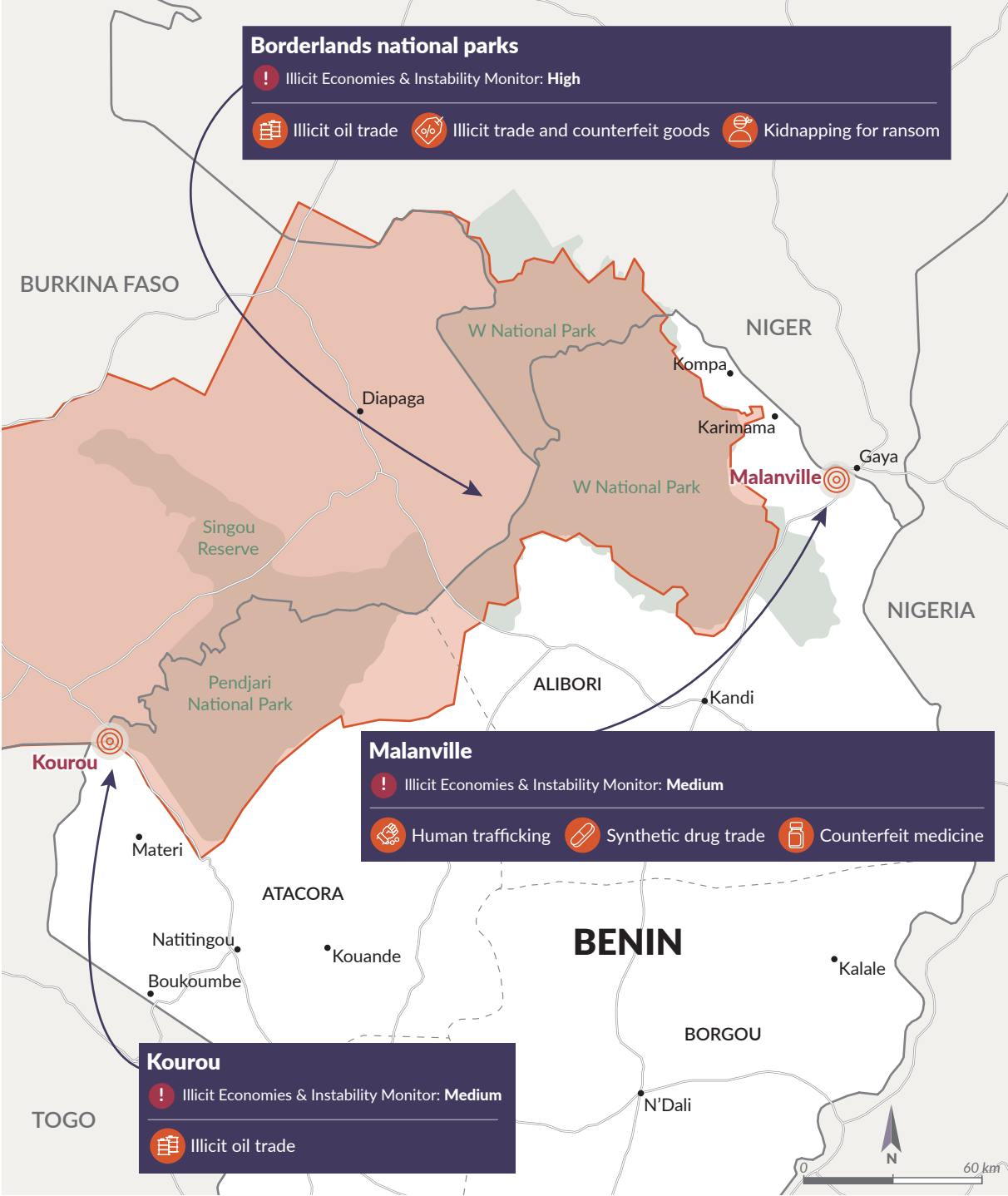


FIGURE 1 Illicit hubs in northern Benin.

Source: Illicit Hub Mapping initiative, GI-TOC, <https://wea.globalinitiative.net/illicit-hub-mapping>

Responses to the informal fuel trade and their impacts

The national government has adopted a range of approaches – aimed at tackling both supply and demand – in trying to address the fuel smuggling economy.⁵ These have escalated significantly with growing awareness of the role of the fuel trade in resourcing JNIM and IS Sahel.

In seeking to disrupt supply, military interventions have had a measure of success while at the same time contributing to increased prices for local communities who also rely on the trade in informal fuel. Illustratively, the disputed Koualou/Kourou area on the Benin–Burkina Faso border, which remains the subject of an open sovereignty dispute and has long operated as a significant fuel stockage and redistribution point, was significantly impacted by two supply side interventions from September 2021. Firstly, operations by the Benin military, triggered by heightened concerns about Koualou/Kourou operating as a significant resourcing node for non-state armed groups. Secondly, the dismantlement of a major fuel smuggling network operating through the area, which led to successful convictions in Burkinabe courts.⁶

Recognizing the changing role of Koualou/Kourou, the Materi retailers' chief, observed: 'Before, [when] many of us were based in Koualou, there were wholesalers and smaller retailers. Everything was done there. Since the jihadists came, the Beninese army has asked us to leave. Then they decreed that people coming to Benin for supplies were only allowed half a tank of petrol,' he said, explaining that this was driven by a perception that those who bought more were selling it to members of

the VEOs.⁷ While some fuel smuggling is believed to continue through the area, operations through Koualou/Kourou appear to have significantly diminished.

The government has also tried various measures to regulate the trade. Having struggled to enforce trading standards, in 2021 it introduced a flat-rate tax on smuggled petroleum products (5 000 CFA Francs [FCFA] per 25 litre can, approximately €7.60), in an effort to deter the practice.⁸ However, this was absorbed as part of the cost of doing business, and further legitimized the trade.⁹

Seeking to also address challenges in accessing licit fuel – a key driver of demand for informal fuel – the government also supported the building of new formal fuel stations, including by providing tax cuts for the construction process. These measures have had some impact, but demand continues to outstrip formal supply, noted Beidi: 'I've been in this business for at least 20 years. Before we were everywhere, there were only the state stations and us... then since [President Patrice] Talon came, we started to see one, two, three stations being built in towns like Natitingou, but here in Materi [commune], apart from the one in Porga, you won't find another station. We're the only fuel sellers in the town.'¹⁰

The measures above have been complemented by awareness-raising campaigns highlighting the risks of the informal fuel trade, as well as programming seeking to divert operators into other livelihoods, noted Beidi. For example: 'Here in Materi, we have two salespeople who have received loans to open shops and leave petrol on the sidelines.' However, not all sellers are open to this

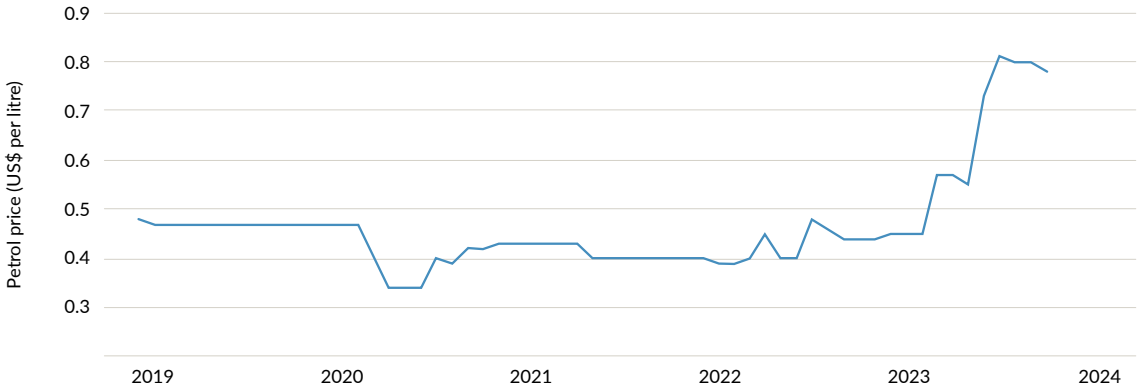


FIGURE 2 Fuel prices in Nigeria, 2019–2024.
Source: Petroleum Products Pricings Regulatory Agency, Nigeria

idea: 'Some of us have been doing this all our lives. We don't know how to do anything else.'¹¹

While a laudably multi-faceted set of responses, impacts have been limited, with supply-side disruptions dependent on an ongoing military and law enforcement presence and resources, and demand-side interventions struggling to operate at the required scale.

Windows of opportunity?

Recent developments domestically and in neighbouring Nigeria have presented an arguably unique window of opportunity. On 29 May 2023, Nigerian President Bola Tinubu, within his first 100 days in office, lifted the subsidy on petroleum products, bringing to an end a 50-year era of national subsidized fuel.¹² The impacts were immediate, with prices in Nigeria tripling overnight.¹³

A few months later, on 23 September, a fire at an informal fuel warehouse in Sèmè-Kraké, at Benin's border with Nigeria, claimed 35 lives – a tragedy unfortunately common among poorly regulated informal stockage facilities – heightening pressure on the government to act.¹⁴

Informal fuel sellers in northern Benin cited the lifting of the subsidy as a key factor disrupting their trade, and the fire as a key trigger for government action. A wholesaler in Natitingou noted: 'Our margins have not increased, but the price in Nigeria has; their new president has killed the market. Since the price has gone up in Nigeria, since the customs officers have started to block the border, it has become difficult for us to sell, our prices have gone up, and people don't have the money.'¹⁵ Another fuel trader added: 'Since the fire, they've announced their plans for mini stations all over the country... everything has accelerated since the fire.'¹⁶

By October 2023, the price of illicit fuel in some areas of northern Benin – particularly in the Atacora department – had almost doubled compared to the previous year, reaching circa FCFA 750-800 per litre (approximately €1.20), making it more expensive than licit fuel (retailing at FCFA 680 – €1.02 – throughout the country). This is unprecedented in Benin and offers a unique window of opportunity for intervention in the fuel trade.

In October 2023, the government announced a programme to build 5 000 mini stations across the country. The project encourages informal fuel sellers to



The burned-out remains of an informal fuel warehouse in Sèmè-Kraké, following a fire that claimed 35 lives, September 2023.

Photo: Yanick Folly/AFP via Getty Images

pool their resources to purchase such mini stations, and to employ other informal fuel sellers to run them.¹⁷ This previously unattractive proposition has become much more viable since the formal sector began to undercut the informal sector so drastically in some areas.

Some fuel traders in northern Benin are already planning to benefit from the scheme: ‘We’re going to buy one of the mini stations when they become available. Because our work is of public utility, we are essential to the people – without us no one would move – so we must adapt and continue the work for the people.’¹⁸

The way the scheme is designed to generate jobs is pivotal; the fuel-smuggling economy provides employment to around 40 000 people in Benin, often in areas where alternatives are scarce.¹⁹ The head of Materi’s fuel retailers’ association, echoing concerns across the sector, noted that the government messaging has been that *kpayo*, the informal fuel trade, ‘is going to disappear and that they’re going to help us find other jobs. But who’s going to find work for all these people?’²⁰

In northern Benin, the security implications of pushing individuals out of the informal fuel trade without viable alternatives are significant. In the words of one wholesaler: ‘Our young people with no education and no work, those looking for easy money, what do they do? Where do they go? The brave ones go off to Nigeria to work in the fields, the others join the Islamists.’²¹

Individuals involved in illicit economies are often vulnerable to engagement with non-state armed groups, either as suppliers, or ultimately through recruitment. In northern Benin, individuals poaching in the WAP complex, and those involved in the fuel trade, have been targeted by JNIM.²²

Looking ahead

The success of stabilization interventions is determined as much by timing, as by the shape of the intervention. Entry points for intervention, and for disrupting the links between illicit economies and instability, can open for only short windows of time. We are currently seeing in northern Benin an unprecedented combination of factors that creates a significant window of opportunity, but also a serious risk.

If appropriate action is taken – as the Benin government appears to be giving some indications of doing – success can be achieved, both in terms of enhancing formal employment and state revenues. However, if alternatives are not available, and informal fuel traders see profits slump, they may become more reliant on higher prices offered by non-state armed groups who face more obstacles in accessing formal supply chains, or simply engage in other, more harmful, illicit activities.

In order to drive towards more desirable outcomes, the government should concentrate the mini fuel stations in the north of the country, where the fuel trade is most intimately linked with security dynamics, and accelerate implementation. This is a key moment to enhance access to formal fuel and ensure those in the informal trade have alternative sources of employment.

As one fuel wholesaler noted: ‘People need us and will always need us, because in many places we’re the only ones who supply them with the petrol they need to get around. So, for as long as each commune, each village does not have a petrol station, we will still be there.’²³

Commune	Price per litre (FCFA)	
	2022	2023
Materi	450	800
Toucountouna	400	750
Tanguieta	400	750

FIGURE 3 Price of illicit fuel in Atacora department, Benin.

Source: Interviews with informal fuel sellers in the relevant locations, 2023

Notes

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Understanding the motives for kidnapping in north Benin is a crucial initial response to the security crisis.

In October 2023, suspected Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM) militants attempted to kidnap three fishermen in Porga, a village in Benin on the edge of Pendjari National Park, on the border with Burkina Faso. Two were killed, while one was able to escape.¹ As violent extremist organizations (VEOs) have extended their reach into the coastal states of West Africa, kidnapping in northern Benin has surged since 2022, with 2023 incidents up to October constituting a twofold increase on the total for 2022.

VEOs, most prominently JNIM, have used kidnapping to infiltrate communities in northern Benin and forcibly recruit into their ranks. While extremely hard to quantify, kidnappings for forced recruitment are reportedly common, in particular of individuals engaged in traditional economic activities such as fishing, hunting and herding in and around the national parks in Atacora and Alibori – often in spaces where such activities contravene state regulations.²

These types of kidnappings are, however, just one component of the recent surge since 2022 of kidnapping incidents carried out by JNIM and the Islamic State Sahel Province (IS Sahel) in northern Benin. These armed actors also engage in kidnapping across communities in the north for various other reasons, including intelligence gathering, intimidation and punishment. Although far from the most common typology employed, kidnap for ransom by VEOs has also been reported in certain locations in northern Benin.

Analysis of the intersection between conflict and illicit economies often tends to centre on the latter's role as either a source of financing or operational resourcing. But kidnapping is one of several illicit activities that should also be viewed through the lens of non-state armed group governance strategies. Crucially, however, these three lenses can overlap – with kidnappings used, to some extent, for all three purposes by JNIM in northern Benin. Accurately assessing the different relationships between illicit economies and non-state armed groups is crucial in shaping appropriate responses.

Kidnapping incidents have surged since 2022

Over the past decade, what started off as an insurgency in northern Mali has developed into a large-scale, regional security crisis also affecting Niger and Burkina Faso, now the epicentre of the violence. A constellation of rebel groups, communal militias, self-defence groups and crucially, VEOs are involved in the conflict. And while the Sahel region remains most affected by insecurity, JNIM and IS Sahel have since 2021 been able to use southern Burkina Faso as a springboard for expansion into the littoral states of West Africa.³

Since May 2019, the first known instance of VEO activity in Benin, incidents involving suspected VEOs have multiplied exponentially.⁴ From five in 2021, that number increased to 113 in 2022 before increasing further to 160 VEO-related incidents in Atacora and Alibori in the first ten months of 2023. Notably, almost a quarter of these (22.6%) were kidnappings (see Figure 1).

Until the end of 2021, kidnappings in northern Benin were rare. However, in 2022 there were 23 separate incidents of kidnapping across Atacora and Alibori. In the first 10 months of 2023, that figure more than doubled to 55. According to data from the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project, almost 80% of the 78 reported kidnapping incidents in northern Benin between 2022 and 2023 can be attributed to suspected VEOs.

The overwhelming majority of kidnappings tend to cluster either close to the Benin–Togo–Burkina Faso tri-border area in Atacora or along the border with Niger in Alibori (see Figure 2). While there have been several reported kidnappings carried out by armed groups thought to be unconnected to VEOs in the two departments, these are geographically concentrated further away from the northern borders, predominantly in Alibori's Segbana commune. Most non-VEO kidnapping incidents typically occur further south, however, in the Borgou department.

Forced recruitment

Forced recruitment is one way in which these armed actors have sought to extend their areas of influence,

and to grow their ranks – human capital is a key operational resource for non-state armed groups. Kidnapping as a means of recruitment has been taking place since the earliest days of VEO infiltration into northern Benin.

While some victims return to their communities following their abduction, others do not. According to community leaders in Matéri and Tanguieta, two communes in Atacora heavily affected by violent extremism, a significant proportion of individuals abducted who return to the communes continue to work with VEOs in some form or another, whether as full time operators, or service providers.⁵ To the extent that abducted individuals return to their villages, they are widely perceived by their communities to be acting as intelligence-gatherers or providers of basic supplies (such as food and fuel) to VEOs.⁶

Community members in Atacora reported the recruitment of women into JNIM’s ranks, primarily as informants or to provide food to the militants.⁷ While it is difficult to substantiate widespread allegations

regarding the collaboration of certain community members with VEOs, often following abductions, it is a prevalent perception among the communities in northern Benin.

Profiling the targets of kidnapping incidents that appear to be for the purposes of forced recruitment provides important insights into the vulnerabilities of certain communities to violence at the hands of VEOs. Often, those kidnapped are individuals who engage in economic activities such as fishing, hunting or animal herding, in many cases within the protected areas of the W-Arly-Pendjari (WAP) parks complex.⁸ In March 2023, for example, suspected VEOs kidnapped two poachers in Park W.⁹ More recently, in October, three fishermen were targeted in an attempted kidnapping by suspected JNIM affiliates, resulting in the death of two of them (the third managed to escape).¹⁰ Some community members believe that some of the abductions were to prevent the individuals reporting the VEO presence to authorities.¹¹

Ongoing research by the Global Initiative Against Transnational Crime has underscored the particularly

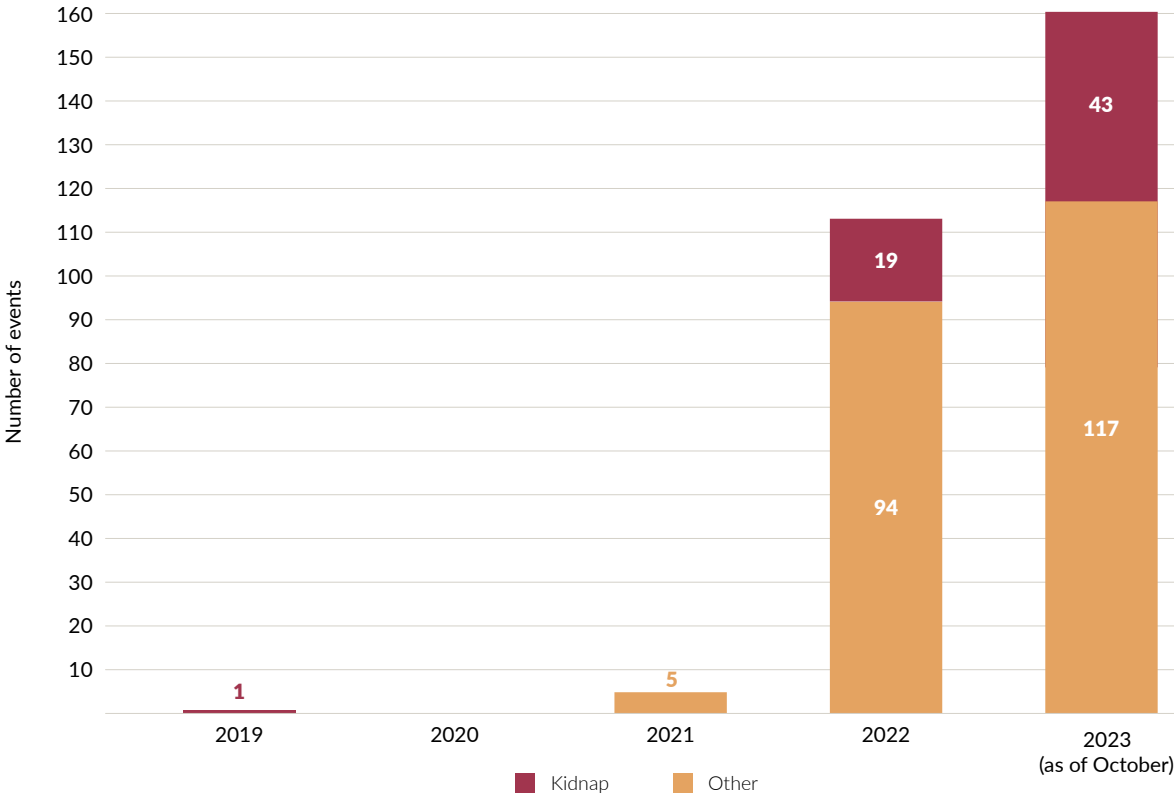


FIGURE 1 Kidnappings as a proportion of VEO-related incidents in northern Benin.

Note: Includes political violence, as well as strategic developments such as looting, property destruction, movement of forces and other events.

Source: ACLED and other sources

pivotal role played by national parks as spaces for assessing the intersection between illicit economies and conflict dynamics, not least regarding kidnapping. National parks across the Sahel, Nigeria, and the northern areas of Benin and Côte d'Ivoire have operated as safe havens for VEOs, and have often been used to hide kidnapping victims, sometimes before releasing them.¹²

National parks are also important areas in VEO expansion because they are often spaces where there is a disjunct between state regulation and community perceptions of legitimacy. The enforcement of regulatory frameworks that criminalize resource extraction from these protected areas – simultaneously rendering many

traditional practices illegal – has given rise to community grievances across West Africa and globally.

In the WAP complex, although hunting, herding and fishing in the park are considered legitimate by many local communities, these activities run counter to state regulations protecting the area.¹³ Such criminalization has repeatedly been found to breed resentment towards the state. Those engaged in such illicit activity can therefore also represent ideal recruits.¹⁴

Kidnapping for financing lingers

In Burkina Faso, kidnapping for financial reasons – namely kidnap for ransom – is typically only a secondary

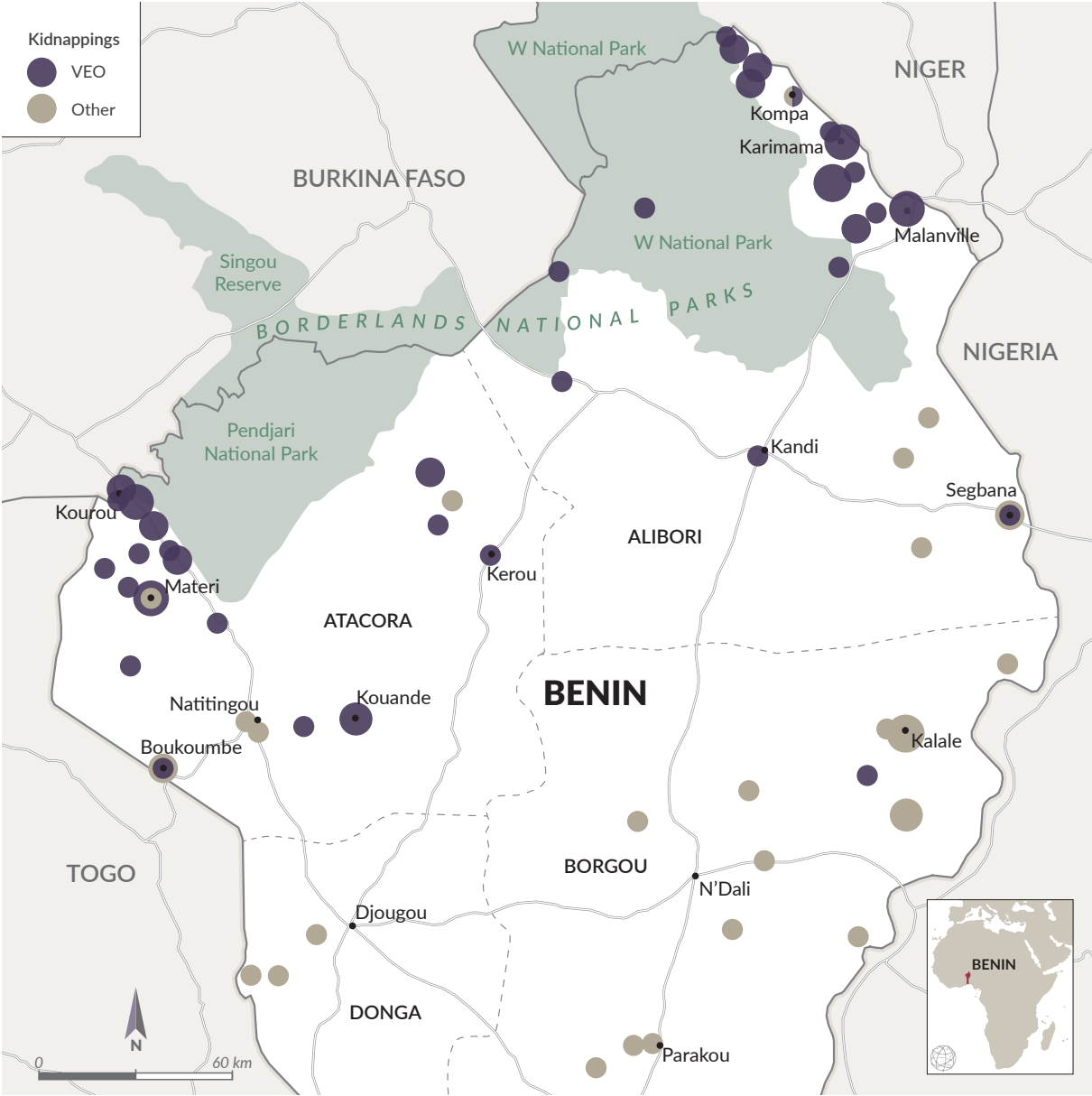


FIGURE 2 Kidnappings by VEOs are concentrated along Benin’s northern borders.

Source: ACLED and other sources

motivation behind kidnapping by JNIM.¹⁵ Similar dynamics can be observed in northern Benin. Of the 78 recorded kidnappings in 2022 and the first 10 months of 2023 suspected to have been perpetrated by VEOs in Atacora and Alibori, only four reportedly involved a ransom request. This number is likely to be an undercount – ransom payments often go unreported. Further, it is unclear the extent to which JNIM permit other armed actors to operate in their areas of influence and/or control, so incidents in which a ransom is mentioned could still have been conducted by the VEO even if the actor responsible cannot be confirmed.¹⁶ Nevertheless, even accounting for all other instances of kidnapping involving a ransom in these regions, of which only nine have been registered since the beginning of 2022, these figures remain a small – but noteworthy – proportion.

In September 2022, suspected JNIM operatives kidnapped an elderly Fulani man in Tanguieta, Atacora, demanding a ransom of 10 million CFA Francs (FCFA), equivalent to over €15 000. There were two further similar incidents in the summer of 2023 in which JNIM elements are reported to have abducted members of the Fulani community in Cobly and Materi, demanding a ransom of FCFA 6 million and FCFA 5 million respectively. Finally, in October 2023, a ransom of FCFA 15 million was demanded by JNIM militants after they kidnapped another Fulani person in Materi.¹⁷

Notably, in each case set out above, the victim was a pastoralist. These kidnappings were clearly well prepared: they targeted individuals that were known to be wealthy, they were most likely spied on for several days prior to the abductions, and the ransom negotiations took place directly between the victims' families and the perpetrators.¹⁸

VEOs are not the only – or perhaps even the primary – actors behind kidnapping for ransom in northern Benin, however. Since 2016, Benin has been experiencing waves of kidnap for ransom, a phenomenon originating in Nigeria but that has spread throughout northern Benin, as well as northern Togo and Ghana.¹⁹ Here too, pastoralists are among the primary targets, often wealthy families that own or trade cattle.

Until recently, kidnap for ransom was predominantly an intra-Fulani phenomenon targeting, as mentioned, herders. But since the implantation of VEOs in Benin from 2021 onwards a wider range of profiles have been targeted in instances of kidnap for ransom, including a

local official,²⁰ a school director²¹ and a businessperson.²² This triggered concerns among government officials about potential links to VEOs.

There are multiple signs that some of the kidnappings for ransom in northern Benin have been conducted by Nigerian actors: victims have been taken back into Nigeria, a Nigerian telephone number provided for ransom negotiations, and ransoms demanded in Naira.²³ The relationship between VEOs – operating both in Benin and Nigeria – and the Nigerian criminal bandits believed to be behind these kidnappings is not always clear.

Some analysts believe such kidnapping in Benin's Alibori and Borgou departments may be financing violent extremism in Nigeria, and there are several indications of a bigger overlap of areas of operation between violent extremists and criminal actors in Benin and Nigeria than is generally thought. This includes the recorded presence of VEOs in Nigeria's Kanji National Park Forest in Nigeria as well as in the Forêt de Trois Rivières between Alibori and the Borgou.²⁴ This, in turn, could suggest some degree of interaction between the different armed actor types.

Kidnap for ransom: a flexible source of income

Despite the relatively limited use of kidnap for ransom by VEOs in northern Benin, there are many documented instances across West Africa and the Sahel in which non-state armed groups have enhanced reliance on illicit economies as other sources of financing have dwindled. Kidnapping, which does not require considerable levels of expertise or local knowledge is often well positioned as an alternative to other financial flows.

Examples include the case of Chadian rebel groups when Sudan cut off their financing,²⁵ Ambazonian separatists as diaspora support began to dry up,²⁶ and even as far as the Philippines, where the Abu Sayyaf terrorist group (currently known as the Islamic State – East Asia Province, although now de facto defunct) turned to kidnap for ransom as a means of financing once their primary source of funding – al-Qaeda – was cut off.²⁷

Non-state armed groups can move flexibly between different illicit and licit economies for financing purposes. In north-west Nigeria, for example, cattle stocks depleted over time and buyers were more reluctant to purchase stolen cattle; as a result, bandits increasingly turned to kidnapping for ransom to replace the dwindling cattle rustling revenue stream.²⁸

Different drivers require different responses

The kidnapping phenomenon in northern Benin, as across the region more broadly, is extremely complex. Incomplete information, overlapping drivers of behaviour and a constellation of distinct but increasingly intertwining non-state actors renders tracking and understanding kidnapping dynamics incredibly complicated, thus also making mitigation more difficult.

There is no single strategic logic behind the use of kidnapping. While it is sometimes used as a source of financing – as is most commonly analyzed – it is often perpetrated for more strategic purposes by JNIM, including for recruitment, as well as for punishment and intimidation.²⁹ These differing purposes render different typologies of profile vulnerable to attack. Tracking overlaying motivations, and ensuring a more nuanced understanding of the kidnapping market, is a central step in shaping responses and protection structures.

Notes

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