

OBSERVATORY OF ILLICIT ECONOMIES IN WEST AFRICA



RISK BULLETIN

SUMMARY HIGHLIGHTS

1. Chad's largest goldfield, Kouri Bougoudi, is central to regional stabilization efforts.

The Kouri Bougoudi goldfield sits at the heart of a volatile cross-border region with Libya that is largely beyond the reach of national authorities. Although the area has long been home to opposition and criminal groups, the goldfield has emerged as one of the region's key sites of illicit activity, including the smuggling and trafficking of weapons, narcotics, fuel, food staples and migrants, in addition to gold. As Chad enters a new era of political uncertainty after the death of long-time president Idriss Déby, any attempts at regional stabilization efforts will have to take into account these criminal economies and the interests of the local community in the gold sector.

2. As a non-state armed group tightens its grip over resources in western CAR, violence looks likely to escalate.

In CAR, the rebel group referred to as 'Retour, réclamation et réhabilitation', or '3R', has evolved from a self-defence militia formed to protect ethnic Fulani herders into a predatory criminal organization with significant criminal interests. While taxation of the livestock trade is central to 3R's financing, the group's more recent shift into taxation of artisanal gold mining marks diversification of its revenue streams. It may also indicate a growing focus on drawing revenue from illicit markets, in line with the reported priorities of 'General Bobbo', who assumed leadership of the rebel group in March 2021.

3. Rise in cyanide-based processing techniques changes criminal dynamics in gold mines in Burkina Faso and Mali.

Growing adoption of cyanide processing techniques is changing artisanal and small-scale gold mining (ASGM) in Burkina Faso and Mali. Burkina Faso has emerged as a key hub of cyanide smuggling, with vendors and brokers facilitating sales throughout the country, as well as in Mali. The costly introduction of cyanide into gold processing, which enables more effective gold extraction, has shifted power dynamics in the sector, disrupting local economies and social hierarchies, and creating social divisions, which jihadist groups in the region have exploited in similar contexts.

4. Burkina Faso's Sud-Ouest region risks becoming new zone of insecurity.

In Burkina Faso, the violence that has resulted in over 2 000 deaths and over 1.4 million internally displaced persons since 2015 has been centred in the north and east of the country. But new pockets of instability are emerging in other regions, including the previously stable Sud-Ouest.¹ Situated at the tri-border area with Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana, where jihadist groups have made inroads in recent years, Sud-Ouest is one of the most prolific ASGM zones in the country. Amid conflicts between local communities and miners coming to the region in search of gold, authorities have expressed concern that ASGM sites could become flashpoints of violence.



ABOUT THIS ISSUE

Artisanal and small-scale gold mining plays a pivotal role in stability dynamics across West Africa. It has become an increasingly important source of income for conflict actors in the region, particularly since the COVID-19 pandemic diminished incomes from a range of other economies, including smuggling of cigarettes and migrants.² In contrast, income to Sahelian armed groups from artisanal gold mining and smuggling bucked the trend, reportedly increasing throughout 2020.³ While the easing of border restrictions has enabled a resurgence in commodity smuggling, the importance of revenue from the gold economy for conflict actors across the region has not diminished.

However, the relationship between ASGM and instability is multifaceted – the sector also provides a livelihood for many communities where alternatives are scarce, and this can have a stabilizing effect in volatile regions.

Recognizing the complex and central role of the gold economy in shaping stability across the region, this issue of the Risk Bulletin of Illicit Economies in West Africa examines relationships between ASGM, criminal economies and security in the Central African Republic, northern Chad, Mali and Burkina Faso.

1. Chad's largest goldfield, Kouri Bougoudi, is central to regional stabilization efforts.

In April 2021, rebels calling themselves the Front pour l'alternance et la concorde au Tchad (FACT) entered Chad through its northern border with Libya and carried out the most serious rebel incursion into the country since 2008. The ensuing political turmoil, including the death of the then president, Idriss Déby, not only raised questions about the future of Chad's political system, but also highlighted the extent to which northern Chad remains a key part of the volatile regional security dynamics that will shape the country's future.

The Kouri Bougoudi goldfield, straddling Chad's northern border with Libya, is an area with a concentration of illicit markets and armed criminal actors, which have contributed to regional instability.⁴ The area experiences regular outbreaks of violence due to deep-rooted sources of tensions between local actors, political grievances and competition over resources.⁵

At the same time, gold mining in Kouri Bougoudi also provides essential livelihoods and economic opportunities for local populations in an otherwise marginal and impoverished region. In a context where northern Chad and its cross-border areas with Niger and Libya face

further destabilization following the return of rebel and mercenary groups from Libya in the wake of the October 2020 peace accords,⁶ artisanal gold mining has the potential to offer alternatives to criminal activity and armed mobilization. The formation of a new transitional government in Chad, following the death of Déby in April 2021, could provide an opportunity to renew stabilization efforts in the Tibesti region by adopting sustainable efforts to regulate gold mining and moving away from purely securitized approaches to managing the area.

Lying at the heart of several overlapping regional criminal economies, Kouri Bougoudi not only represents a potential powder keg for the region, but also highlights the extent to which effective efforts to stabilize northern Chad will not only have to account for complex criminal interests, but also address long-standing grievances and expectations of local communities. Engagement that fails to account for these dynamics only risks creating new pockets of instability both at the national level and throughout the subregion.



View of Kouri 17, one of the main gold sites. Photo: GI-TOC

ILLICIT MARKETS THRIVE IN KOURI BOUGOUDI

The discovery of gold deposits in northern Chad in 2012 triggered a rush of Chadian and foreign prospectors.⁷ Kouri Bougoudi is the largest goldfield in northern Chad, with mining sites straddling the Libyan border. Now covering an area of approximately 300 km², the goldfield at its peak hosted 40 000 gold miners, migrants and others.⁸ Kouri Bougoudi is also a major regional hub for polycriminal armed groups involved in the smuggling of fuel and food staples, drug trafficking, arms trafficking and armed banditry.⁹

Artisanal gold mining is officially prohibited in Chad, but its lucrative nature and weaknesses in imposing the government ban in Kouri Bougoudi have made the goldfield a magnet for miners and traders from across the region. Traders buy extracted gold from miners and site 'owners' before selling it through various channels. Most gold from Kouri Bougoudi is either transported south to N'Djamena before being exported, or it is sold in Libya. Gold is also used as currency on the goldfield and can change hands in commercial transactions for the purchase of essential supplies, including food, water and equipment,¹⁰ or illicit commodities (it has been reported that gold is used to procure drugs and weapons).¹¹

Kouri Bougoudi is also a transit point for human smuggling, with migrants travelling to northern Chad in search of economic opportunities before continuing their journey to Libya or Europe. The discovery of gold in the Tibesti region increased Chad's popularity among migrants both as a destination and transit country. The area has a particular pull for poor migrants aiming to make some money on their journey north. Chad's role as a migrant transit country accelerated after 2016, when anti-smuggling campaigns launched in Niger and Sudan meant some of the northbound flows were displaced through the country.¹²

However, lack of regulation or law enforcement in goldfields such as Kouri Bougoudi puts migrants at risk of human trafficking, particularly those who travel on credit

to work the goldfields.¹³ Many migrant smugglers have taken on the role of mine recruiters across the country, offering prospective miners the option to travel on credit. The smugglers are then paid by the gold site owners, who employ the miners in a form of indentured labour, under which the miners must first repay their costs of recruitment before they start earning a wage. The debts owed by migrants for the smuggling are usually around FCFA 300 000 (about €460).¹⁴ Such labour agreements often turn into exploitation as workers change hands between gold site owners.¹⁵ One young man from Kyabé, in southern Chad, explained how his experience in gold mining in early 2021 had turned sour:

I travelled on credit and had to work for a long time to pay off my debt. The working conditions are very difficult, and our bosses have no mercy. They confiscate all the gold we find, saying it is to pay off our transport, or our food and water, or equipment. In the end, we have nothing left, and sometimes we changed bosses without our consent. The repayment of travel debts can go up to double or triple the [initial] amount. There is no freedom for gold miners and attempts to escape expose them to the anger and reprisals of the bosses.

Organized crime actors operating at the goldfield have also invested in drug trafficking,¹⁶ fuelled in part by demand from a growing local consumption market.¹⁷ Drugs most commonly consumed there are cannabis and Tramadol,¹⁸ their consumption primarily palliative as most users seek to prevent or counter the effects of the gruelling working conditions.¹⁹

According to a truck-driver operating between Abéché and Kouri Bougoudi: 'All [kinds of] drugs are consumed here. Drugs are used on a daily basis and at high frequency, for different reasons. In my opinion, drugs mobilize and motivate people [to work] in the mines. Drugs are visible everywhere and there are many consumers.'²⁰

Kouri Bougoudi also lies at the heart of regional arms trafficking operations, fuelled in part by the proliferation of small arms that followed the collapse of the Qaddafi regime in Libya in 2011.²¹ Weapons and ammunition from Libya are brought there along clandestine routes through southern Libya via Um Alaraneb, Gatrun, Domozo and Emi Madama. At the goldfield, arms traffickers run operations from locations such as Hour Madanine, a notorious marketplace for drugs and arms trafficking.²² The weapons supply local, regional and international markets, including Chad's neighbouring countries, notably Sudan and Niger.²³

Demand for weapons among criminal networks and the gold mining community has also developed at the goldfield itself in response to rising insecurity and criminality, in the process exacerbating the pre-existing conditions of insecurity and violence,²⁴ with disputes often resolved using armed force and coercion. According to one contact, murder has become a daily occurrence in some of the most dangerous areas of the goldfield, such as Hour Madanine.²⁵

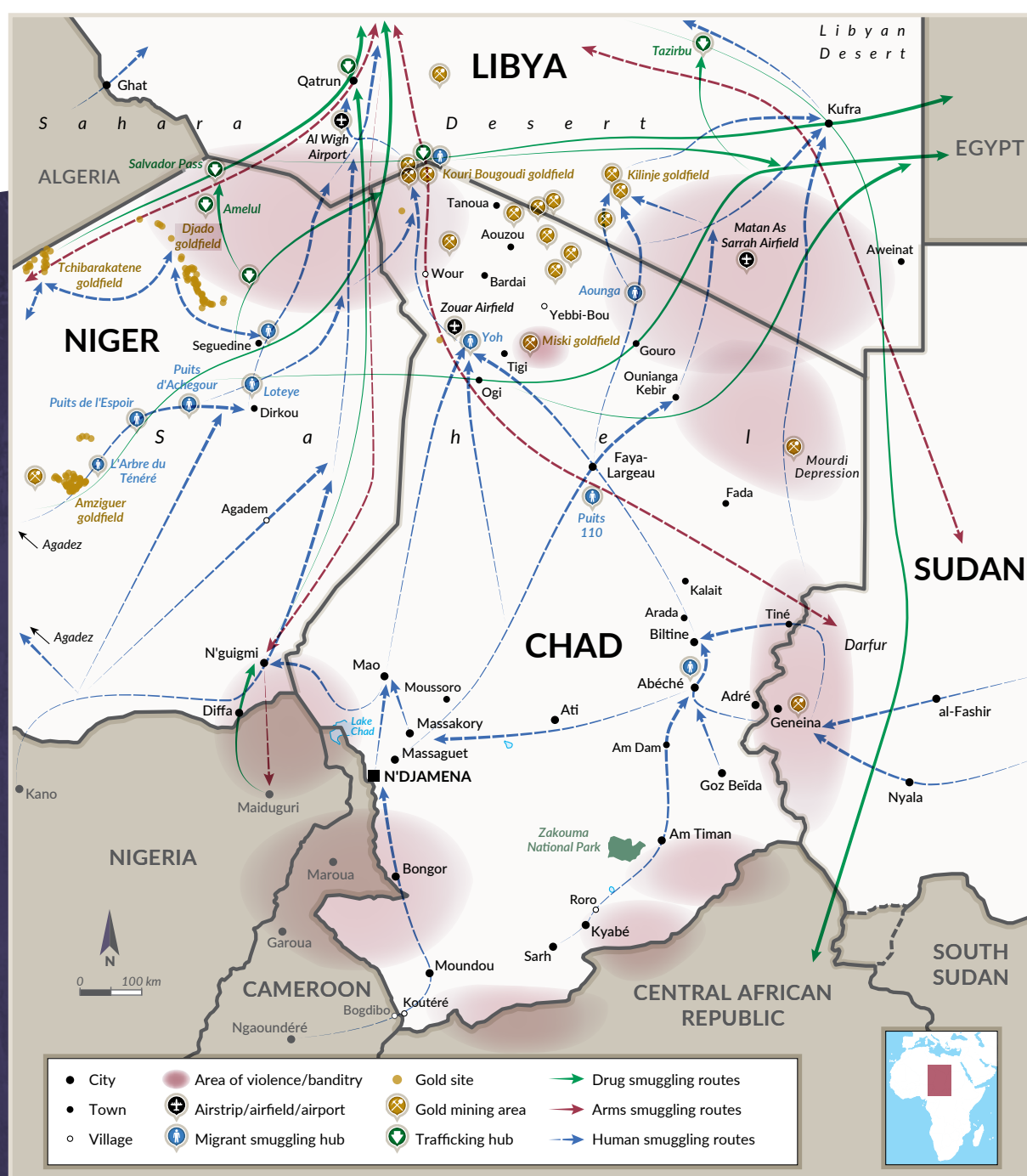
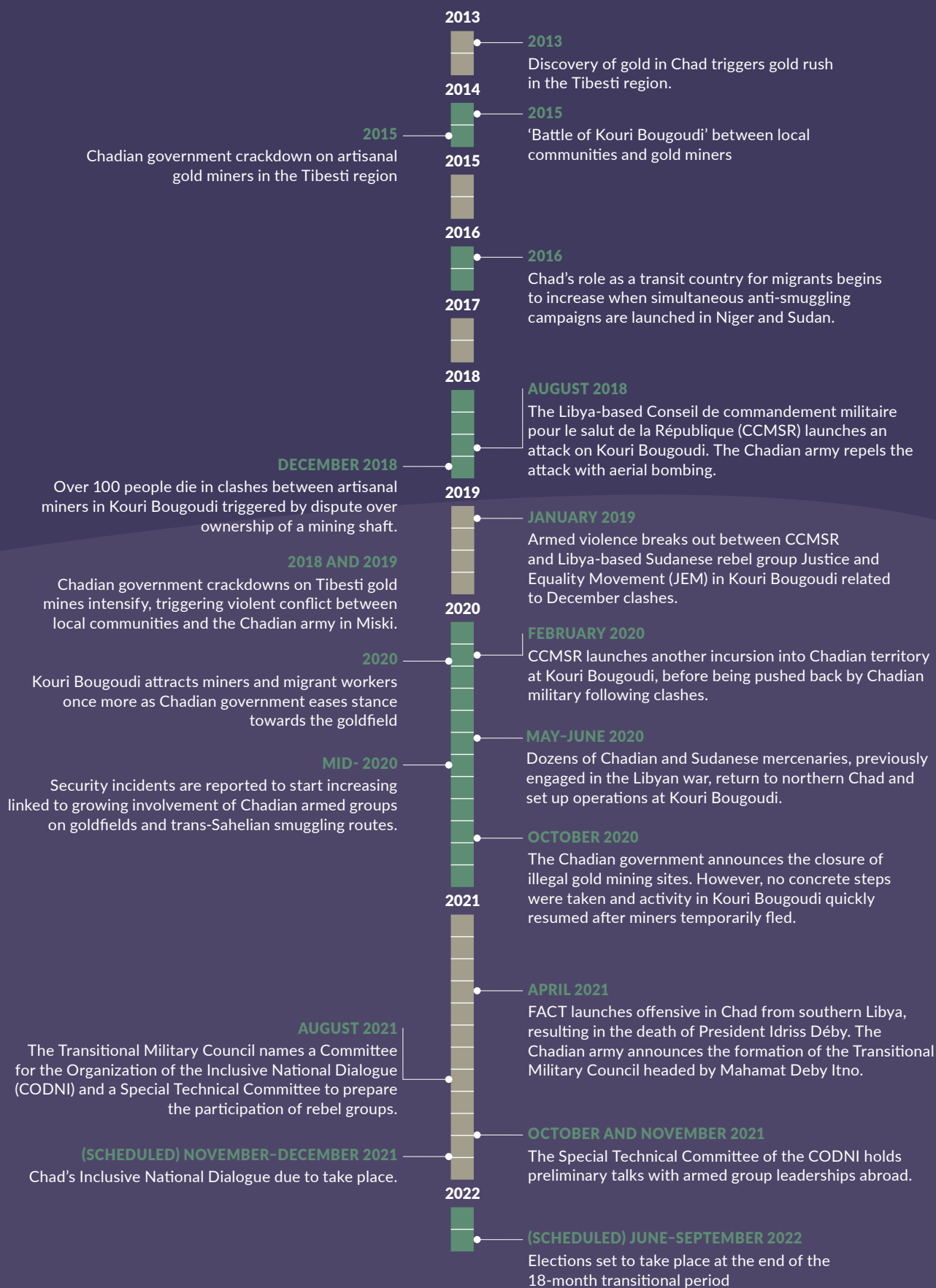


FIGURE 1 Gold mining areas in Chad, together with regional smuggling and trafficking routes.

TIMELINE OF KEY EVENTS IN KOURI BOUGOUDI





Kouri 17 market, a key exchange point supplying Kouri Bougoudi goldfield with food staples, water, goods and equipment from Libya.
Photo: GI-TOC

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR STABILIZATION IN KOURI BOUGOUDI

This convergence of illicit activities in Kouri Bougoudi is strongly linked to instability and conflict dynamics both locally and regionally.

In the gold mining communities, unregulated and illicit activities have fuelled competition over resources and intercommunal conflict, as well as tensions between local actors and national authorities.²⁶ The community in Kouri Bougoudi is composed mainly of local Chadian and Libyan Tebu, but also communities from eastern and southern Chad and Darfur, including Zaghawa and Arab ethnic groups.²⁷ Mass arrivals of prospectors from other regions following the discovery of gold at Kouri Bougoudi have led to outbreaks of intercommunal violence, triggered

by competition over mining operations, but often rooted in long-standing hostilities between ethnic groups.²⁸ The gold rush, and the response of national authorities, also exacerbated tensions between communities and the Chadian authorities.²⁹ The Chadian military, for example, has been accused of colluding with certain gold prospectors in Kouri Bougoudi with whom they share ethnic affinities.³⁰

Here, the gold mining communities have developed their own conflict management mechanisms to mitigate tensions and reduce violence. Each community, for example, has representatives who play a central role in regulating relations in the absence of any formal

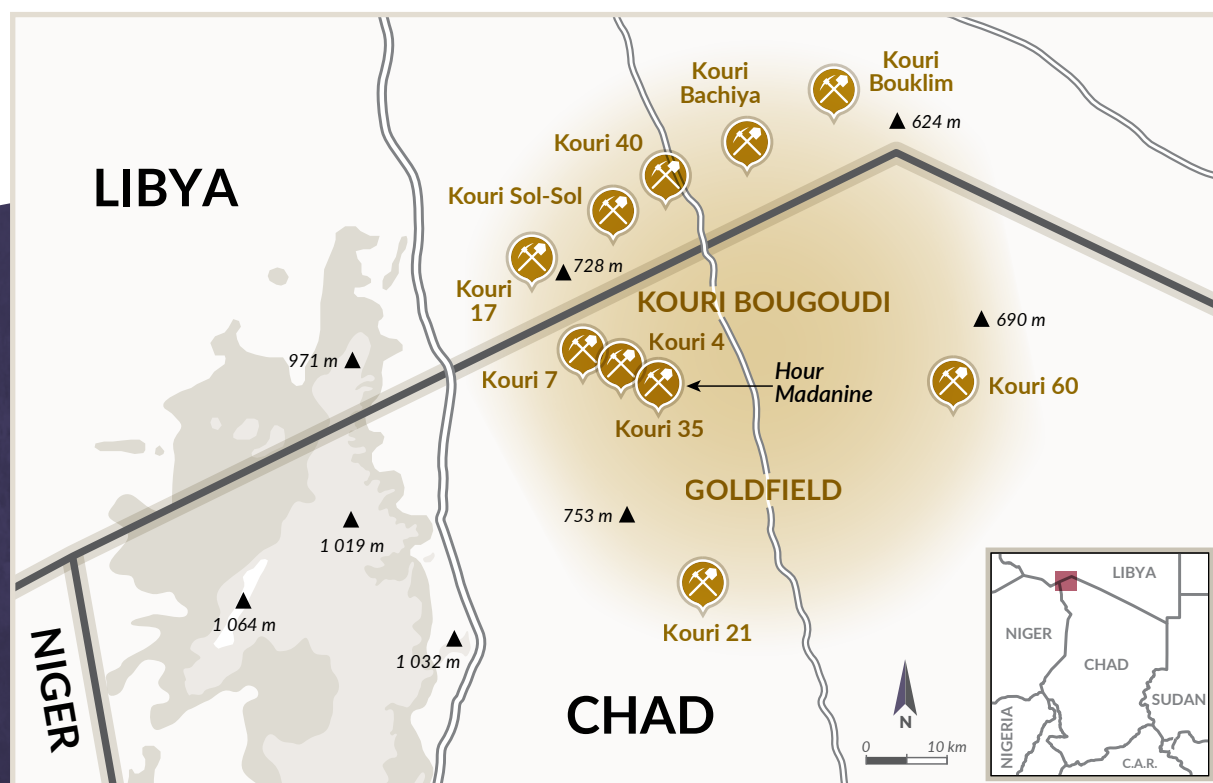


FIGURE 2 Main gold sites in the Kouri Bougoudi goldfield, northern Chad.

authority or law enforcement on the part of the state. These representatives act as mediators in the event of disputes between gold miners, and can even authorize or coordinate retaliation or de-escalation in the event of inter-community disputes. Although these mechanisms remain weak and violent clashes still happen, they represent a potential starting point for designing more formal, sustainable, locally owned regulatory frameworks that draw on the experience and authority of community leaders.

Gold mining also provides livelihoods for youths from Chad, Libya and Sudan in a context where formal economic opportunities are scarce. This includes not only direct employment in gold mining, but also opportunities for jobs in the ancillary economies that develop around and are sustained by gold mines. A prosperous market supplying food, water, equipment and other necessities to the gold mining community has boosted economies locally and in other cities, such as Abéché.³¹ Sustaining such economic conditions is therefore an important factor in stabilizing the area, providing opportunities for those who may otherwise join armed opposition groups or turn to banditry for an income.

Here, the policy approach N'Djamena adopts towards artisanal gold mining will be crucial in the success of regional stabilization efforts. Revenue from gold mining in Kouri Bougoudi has flowed to Libya-based Chadian rebels who share community and political ties with groups involved in the goldfield. Seeking to reduce the capacity of the rebel groups to draw revenues – and recruits – from the goldfield, the Chadian government has made successive attempts in the past to stop artisanal gold mining activity. It has obstructed travel to the goldfields, forcibly expelled gold miners, destroyed equipment, closed borders and obstructed water supplies.³² The crackdowns on Kouri Bougoudi intensified in 2018 and 2019,³³ and in October 2020 the Chadian government announced the closure of illegal gold mining sites across the country and the intent to evacuate all miners.³⁴ However, no concrete steps were taken to implement these measures, and activity in Kouri Bougoudi quickly resumed after miners had temporarily fled.³⁵

The government's crackdowns on gold mining have not only been unsuccessful, but counterproductive. They have also intensified the regional dynamics of instability³⁶ by depriving local communities of essential livelihoods, fuelling tensions between local populations and national authorities, and reinforcing perceptions that the region's lack of infrastructure, poor access to services and weak representation within national structures is the result of neglect by national authorities.³⁷ This has fuelled recruitment by armed groups.³⁸ The government's over-reliance on security-based approaches to stabilizing the region has spawned mutual distrust, as local

communities see these tactics as a bid by the government to gain control over a lucrative extraction industry.³⁹

Promisingly, however, there are some indications that Chad's Comité Militaire de Transition (Military Transitional Council), formed in the wake of Déby's death, may adopt a slightly different approach. The Council has focused on restricting access to northern Chad's goldfields by enforcing strict controls over human smuggling routes to northern Chad, rather than attempting further moves to evict gold miners from the goldfields.

Furthermore, in parallel to the Council's efforts to build a national dialogue process through consultations with the leaderships of opposition groups,⁴⁰ the government has made discreet overtures with northern Chad stakeholders. Former president Goukouni Weddeye, now head of a technical committee in charge of preparing the participation of rebel groups in the national dialogue, for example, visited Miski in October 2021 to discuss the situation with local leaders.⁴¹ Despite contradictory reports on the outcomes of the mission, the visit can be interpreted as a positive step in appeasing tensions and improving relations between national and local authorities.

Designing sustainable and fair policies to regulate gold mining, ones that are founded on dialogue and consultation with local communities, could reduce local conflicts and address deep-rooted grievances, which contribute to local and regional insecurity. Combined with a credible and inclusive disarmament, demobilization and reintegration programme, the regularization of gold mining would help prevent recruitment of people into armed groups and provide legal alternative livelihoods for many young Chadians, who may otherwise turn to organized crime for sustenance.⁴²

Failure to account for and integrate these economic, political and social realities, including those in the criminal space, into Chad's approach to illicit gold mining risks further alienating local communities, and means armed groups and criminal networks would capitalize on local grievances and lack of state presence and legitimacy in the region. Heightened risks of further incursions by Chadian rebel groups, whose position in Libya has been threatened by political developments, and rising insecurity in the cross-border regions of Chad, Niger and Libya constitute imminent threats to stability in Chad and the greater Sahel region.

Kouri Bougoudi's position at the heart of these dynamics should therefore be taken into account by national authorities, neighbouring states and international partners in stabilization efforts.

2. As a non-state armed group tightens its grip over resources in western CAR, violence looks likely to escalate.

Following the death of the former leader of the 3R rebel group, Bi Sidi Souleymane, in March 2021, a certain 'General Bobbo', reportedly the brother of the head of the Chadian domestic secret service,⁴³ assumed leadership over a new iteration of the CAR armed group. The group, which has its roots in the ethnic conflict that ensued after the 2013 coup in CAR,⁴⁴ was formed in 2015 to protect Muslim Fulani pastoralists from Anti-balaka reprisal attacks. Under the leadership of General Bobbo, experts believe the group has now become more intent on various forms of illicit income generation, enforced by violent means, than pursuing ideological goals.⁴⁵

Still at the heart of 3R's criminal-economic enterprise is the lucrative livestock trade, which revolves around controlling large stretches of territory used for transhumance and taxing the cattle sector. However, more recently the group has begun to exploit the country's gold resources mainly through taxation systems. As a result, diversifying revenue streams.⁴⁶

Since July 2020, 3R is also alleged to have started using improvised explosive devices (IEDs).⁴⁷ Numerous violent incidents have been recorded since early 2021 (see Figure 4), wreaking havoc among the group's adversaries, including Russian mercenaries, and harassing the civilian population,⁴⁸ who continue to find themselves as victims in a complex context where state forces, foreign mercenaries, and criminal rebel networks vie for control over CAR's resources.

3R is militarily active across large swathes of the border with neighbouring Cameroon,⁴⁹ territory it defends fiercely, carrying out attacks on the Central African Armed Forces (known by their French acronym, FACA) and the army's Russian allies. Russia began expanding its influence in 2017 after receiving requests for aid from FACA and a private Russian military company, the Wagner Group, that reportedly has ties to the Russian government, is currently operating in the CAR.⁵⁰ The Russian government denies being linked to the Wagner Group.⁵¹



Hausa Fulani pastoralists at a cattle market. © Luis Tato/AFP via Getty Images

THE EVOLUTION OF A VIOLENT GROUP

The livestock economy, the core business of Fulani pastoralists, has long been one of 3R's key sources of revenue. Transhumance corridors used by herders are numerous in the Central African Republic, and armed groups are engaged in a turf war to control taxation of this

lucrative trade. Before the 2013 crisis in CAR, the livestock sector accounted for 15% of the country's economy.⁵² Today, however, it plays a major role in the illicit financing of armed groups, including 3R, either through taxation or ownership of and trade in cattle.⁵³

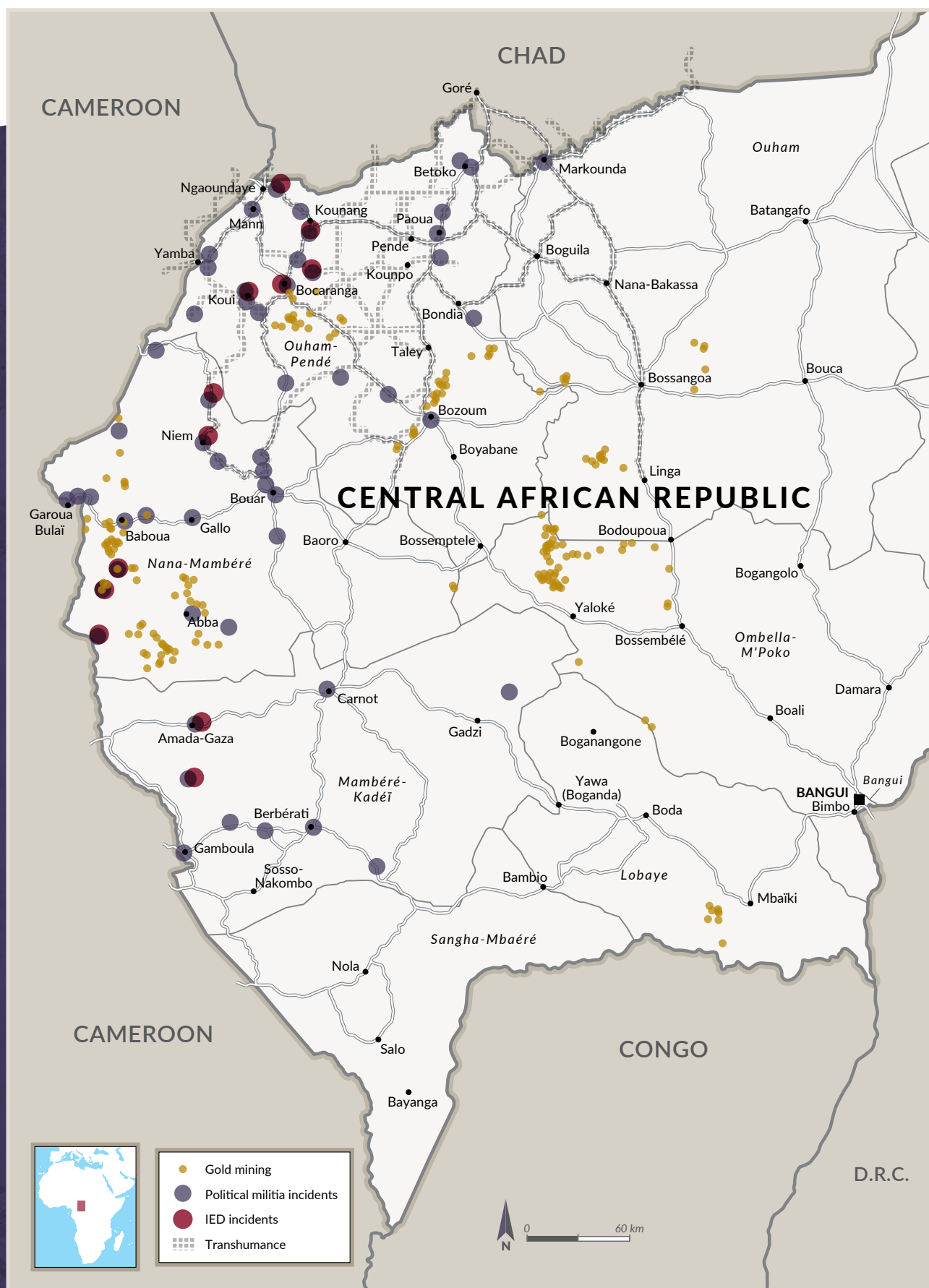


FIGURE 3 Violent incidents since January 2021, gold mining sites and transhumance corridors, western CAR.

SOURCE: ACLED

The group levies a percentage at each stage of the value chain: taxes are levied on pastoralists from Cameroon and Chad, as well as CAR nationals, to allow their herds seasonal pasture in the group's territory for three months; taxes are also imposed on livestock sales, transport, trucks and market stalls, and other arbitrary items.⁵⁴

In its December 2018 report, the group of experts of the United Nations sanctions committee in CAR said that '[...] the influence of armed groups on the livestock economy is such that legal and illegal activities are now completely intertwined. All actors in the supply chain, whether herders, traders, transporters or government agents, have no choice but to cooperate with and contribute to the financing of armed groups – at least indirectly.'⁵⁵

Although the CAR has long been known for its diamond deposits, the gold sector has significantly grown in importance in recent years, especially in the west of the country where a large number of goldfields are located. This is territory where 3R is active, and the gold mining sector has become another major source of revenue for the group.⁵⁶

Gold extracted by artisanal mining in western CAR is predominantly smuggled over the border to Cameroon, largely via the border town of Garoua Boulāi. From there, gold is typically smuggled to Yaoundé or Douala for export, mainly destined for Dubai. There are also reports of gold being smuggled to a lesser extent overland to Nigeria and the wider subregion.⁵⁷

According to UN experts, 3R does not have the same level of expertise in the mineral resource markets as other non-state armed groups, such as the Union for Peace in CAR (UPC).⁵⁸ Thus, their activity is reportedly limited to collecting payments from miners and for the provision of security at mine sites, rather than engaging directly in gold mining or trading.⁵⁹ However, reports that Nigerian networks were buying gold from the late 3R leader in Bossangoa, a north-western town near territory held by 3R, could suggest that 3R are beginning to play a role as intermediaries in the gold supply chain.⁶⁰

The presence of 3R in the western prefectures of Ouham-Pendé and Nana-Manbéré, and recent expansion into Manbéré-Kadéï has a negative impact on the ability of local communities to generate a livelihood from the gold sector, which they depend on. Insecurity and taxation limit local communities' ability to access mine sites and move around in the area, and have the effect of reducing mine workers' income. Reportedly, miners have fled from several mine sites since January 2021.⁶¹ This disruption to local populations has been significantly heightened since the start of 2021 by the group's increasing deployment of IEDs, which have killed both armed combatants and civilians. According to one BBC report, around a thousand people were forcibly displaced from their village in the Nana-Mambéré region, which borders Cameroon, after a device exploded there in May 2021.⁶²

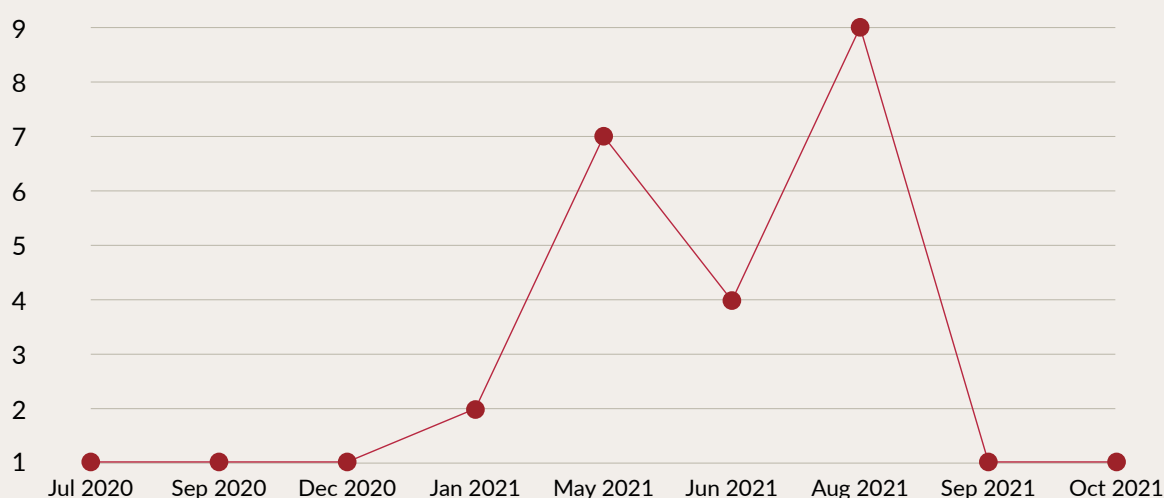


FIGURE 4 Incidents of violence in CAR, July 2020–October 2021.

SOURCE: ACLED

There are strong indications that Russian actors may also be making a play for the CAR minerals sector.⁶³ Russia has made clear moves to become more involved in and grow the country's diamond trade,⁶⁴ while concerns abound over Russian interests influencing proposed mineral legislation,⁶⁵ and over the granting of controversial mining rights to

Russian companies.⁶⁶ The presence of Russian actors in the country raises further questions about their interests in the country's mineral resources, including gold. It also has the potential of directly influencing interactions between 3R and state forces and their Russian allies as groups compete for control of gold resources in western CAR.



Armed 3R fighters stand guard for their leader. © Reuters

A WELL-OILED MACHINE

3R has a more defined command structure than other rebel groups in the country. According to international experts that have been monitoring 3R, the group's command has been careful not to let leaders stay too long in the same position in order to prevent individuals from becoming powerful 'barons'. Furthermore, according to international observers, some of the weapons used by 3R are numbered and registered, which indicates higher levels of organization than normally seen among armed groups in the region.⁶⁷

3R's access to substantial revenue sources from their criminal activities is reflected in the group's equipment: their pickup vehicles are in good condition and its fighting force well armed, with an arsenal that includes Kalashnikovs, rocket launchers, grenades and heavy machine guns – this according to security actors working in the country.⁶⁸ Other armed groups are said to be envious of their clothing and the treatment that 3R gives its fighters.⁶⁹

CHANGES IN LEADERSHIP AND REGIONAL ALLIES

Now at the helm of 3R is General Sembé Bobbo, who recently succeeded Bi Sidi Souleymane. Souleymane had been placed under sanctions by the US Treasury Department and the UN Sanctions Committee in 2020, having been accused of leading an armed group that had 'killed, tortured, raped and displaced thousands of people since 2015'.⁷⁰ Souleymane died in March 2021 from a combat injury he sustained in November 2020.⁷¹ According to security experts in international organizations, internal struggles for the takeover eventually led to Bobbo succeeding him.⁷²

Bobbo is reported to be the brother of a former Chadian Fulani warlord, Baba Laddé,⁷³ whose crimes in CAR at the head of a Chadian Fulani rebel group earned him an eight-year prison sentence in Chad. In October 2021, Baba Laddé was appointed director of Chadian domestic intelligence by Mahamat Déby, son of the late president

(and currently de facto president of Chad, as chairman of the Transitional Military Council).⁷⁴

It is not clear how close the brothers are or if their relationship will impact on the strategy or actions of 3R going forward. The change in leadership, however, may strengthen informal ties to CAR's neighbours, particularly Chad, strengthening the group's existing regional connections.

Alliances with actors in Cameroon and Chad also play a key role in the group's funding strategies.⁷⁵ Various high-ranking members of the Chadian military, who own and invest in livestock, are said to have commercial ties to elements within 3R. The group also reportedly sources some of its weapons in Chad from officers in N'Djamena.⁷⁶ Meanwhile, according to UN experts, Chad, tolerates 3R as long as the group does not harbour Chadian dissidents.

PROSPECTS FOR THE FUTURE

Competition over rents between armed groups has led to violence as they battle for control of territory, diamonds and gold in CAR.⁷⁷ The CAR military and their Russian allies have managed to repulse armed non-state actors from most of the country's main towns, but the rebel groups continue to conduct guerrilla warfare from the bush and from Chad. Meanwhile, incidents of violence and conflict continue to occur across the country. The upcoming dry season, which runs broadly from December to April and is more favourable to offensives by armed groups, may see 3R gain ground.

To date, peace negotiations between the Coalition of Patriots for Change, an umbrella group of non-state armed actors that includes 3R, and the government in Bangui have made little progress, and violence is expected to continue. In north-west and western CAR, it is foreseeable

that efforts by criminal groups to generate income streams by taxing informal economies and predation will continue to drive insecurity. With 3R under a new leader, who is reportedly more profit-motivated than ideologically driven,⁷⁸ and the presence of Russian forces in the area, possibly eyeing its resource wealth, conflict is likely to continue and worsen as the various rent-seeking actors seek to control and profit from territory and minerals. The increasing use of IEDs by 3R only exacerbates these risks. As such, moving forward, illicit revenues from the cattle and gold sectors will need to be a component of peace talks if there is to be any hope for progress.



A young man processes artisanally mined gold. © Pascal Parrot via Getty Images

3. Rise in cyanide-based processing techniques changes criminal dynamics in gold mines in Burkina Faso and Mali.

Propelled by the discovery of a Saharan gold vein in 2012, there has been a rapid proliferation of artisanal and small-scale gold mining (ASGM) in Burkina Faso and Mali. This has been underpinned by growing illicit markets in cyanide, a chemical that is widely used in the gold-extraction process.⁷⁹ Besides the detrimental environmental and health impacts caused by its use,⁸⁰ this illicit trade in cyanide is also affecting security dynamics in West Africa.

On the one hand, the chemical is trafficked along well-established transnational smuggling routes, reinforcing existing patterns of criminality and corruption. On the other, although cyanide processing increases the profitability of ASGM (cyanide processing recovers a greater amount of gold from ore than mercury processing), it requires greater investment, favouring wealthier actors in ASGM supply chains, thus depriving vulnerable communities of income opportunities.⁸¹ This greater level

of financial investment tends to be the preserve of more powerful actors, including foreign nationals and political elites, and can enhance the influence of criminal networks in ASGM supply chains.⁸²

Many ASGM sites in Burkina Faso and Mali are in areas where there is limited state presence and where non-state armed groups are active.⁸³ A number of sites are under the control of such groups, including ones affiliated with Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM) a jihadist coalition reportedly linked to al-Qaeda.⁸⁴ In other sites, armed groups tax ASGM proceeds, run protection rackets and control access to the sites.⁸⁵ In areas not controlled by armed groups, criminal networks that facilitate the trafficking of cyanide play a key role in perpetuating social tensions that have the potential to create the conditions for further insecurity in an already volatile region.⁸⁶

BURKINA FASO, A KEY HUB FOR CYANIDE TRAFFICKING

Since around the middle of the last decade, shortly after the adoption of cyanide-based processing techniques at ASGM sites in the country,⁸⁷ Burkina Faso emerged as a major hub for cyanide trafficking in West Africa.⁸⁸ Networks trafficking cyanide into Burkina Faso follow routes established for the smuggling of consumer goods from Benin, Togo, Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire.⁸⁹ As a landlocked nation, Burkina Faso relies heavily on products imported from these coastal states. Price discrepancies between goods in Burkina Faso and its coastal neighbours, combined with non-competitive domestic monopolies over certain products, such as fuel and cigarettes, create the conditions for thriving contraband economies.

This constitutes an enormous political economy, much of which is tolerated by government authorities. 'You can't target the [smugglers] because it will destroy local economies,' explained a government deputy from a town that is a key trafficking hub near the Burkina Faso–Togo border. 'The local border authorities and gendarmerie are part of the system,' he said.⁹⁰

Small-time traffickers and traders based in border communities who moved items such as car batteries and tyres across the border in the 1990s gradually diversified their portfolios. 'Since the early 2000s, traffickers operating along these routes have evolved,' explained a local researcher. 'They are now [major traders] who have contacts on both sides of the border and have got involved in other things,' he said. 'Now it is mercury, cyanide, [motorbikes], drugs ... anything.'⁹¹

Fuel smuggling, particularly from Benin and Togo (with the fuel often sourced from Nigeria), is among the most organized and lucrative of these illicit markets, and provided the infrastructure on which cyanide trafficking networks operate.⁹² Networks involved in fuel smuggling were able to easily incorporate cyanide because the modalities used to traffic the chemical across the border are nearly identical to how they smuggle fuel.⁹³ Large trucks transport drums of fuel and cyanide from Togo and Benin to the border with Burkina Faso, where they either cross the border with the complicity of customs authorities or park near the border. In either case, the

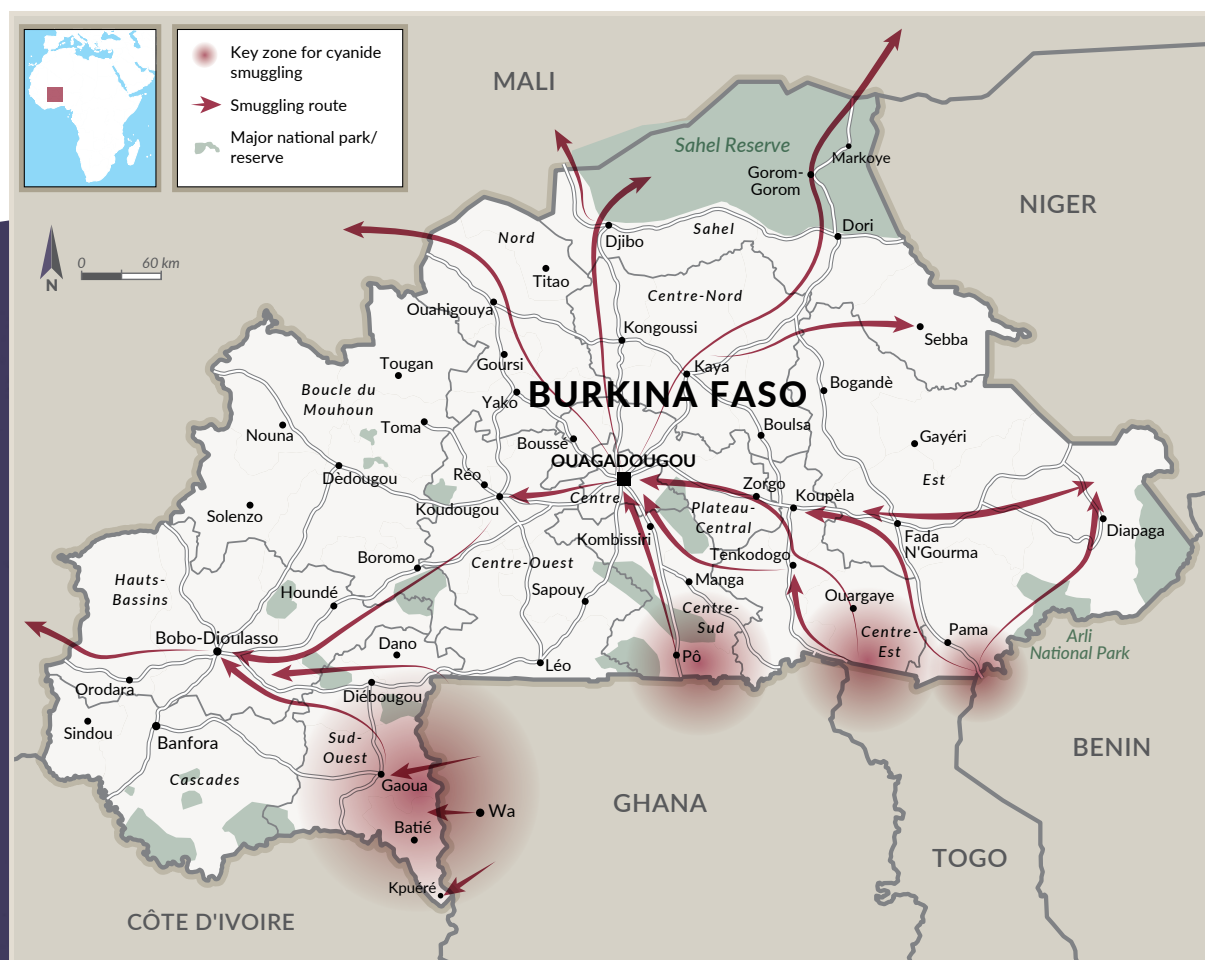


FIGURE 5 Main routes of cyanide smuggling into and within Burkina Faso.



An artisanal gold mining site in Sadiola, Mali. © Amadou Keita/Afrikimages Agency/Universal Images Group via Getty Images

drums are offloaded at night, and fuel and chemicals are then transferred into smaller containers and transported by smugglers using motorbikes.⁹⁴

In cases where the trucks do not cross into Burkina Faso, smugglers cross the border using a network of paths and dirt roads that allow them to evade formal border crossings. In addition to collaborating with local authorities, smugglers have developed a system of lookouts and informants that ensure they can cross the border without being apprehended.⁹⁵ In some cases, complicit Burkinabe authorities will mark the vehicle as ‘broken down’, seemingly knowing full well that, although the truck did not cross the border, the merchandise inside did.⁹⁶

Cyanide is also trafficked into Burkina Faso along established trafficking corridors from northern Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire.⁹⁷ According to a Burkinabe law enforcement official, the networks based in north-eastern Ghana that traffic cyanide into Burkina Faso are also involved in trafficking explosive materials, and may have access to them via industrial mining sites.⁹⁸ Most cyanide smuggled

into Burkina Faso is reportedly taken to the capital, Ouagadougou, although some is sent to the south-west of the country via Kpouéré and Gaoua, and thence directly to distributors operating there.

Ouagadougou serves as the key hub for cyanide smuggled into Burkina Faso, where it is often kept in warehouses and private residences. Once in Ouagadougou, vendors sell and transport the chemical to a number of locations throughout the country as well as to Mali.⁹⁹ The cities of Koudougou and Bobo-Dioulasso are also major hubs (see the map).¹⁰⁰ A source who had previously been involved in transporting fuel and cyanide added that there are also smaller depots throughout the country closer to mining areas.¹⁰¹

Black market prices for cyanide in Burkina Faso vary according to location and availability. Gold miners interviewed provided estimates in the range of FCFA 175 000–FCFA 250 000 (€267–€381) for 25 to 30 kilograms of cyanide, with most reporting prices at the higher end of this range.¹⁰² Most cyanide trafficked into Burkina Faso is in powder form.¹⁰³

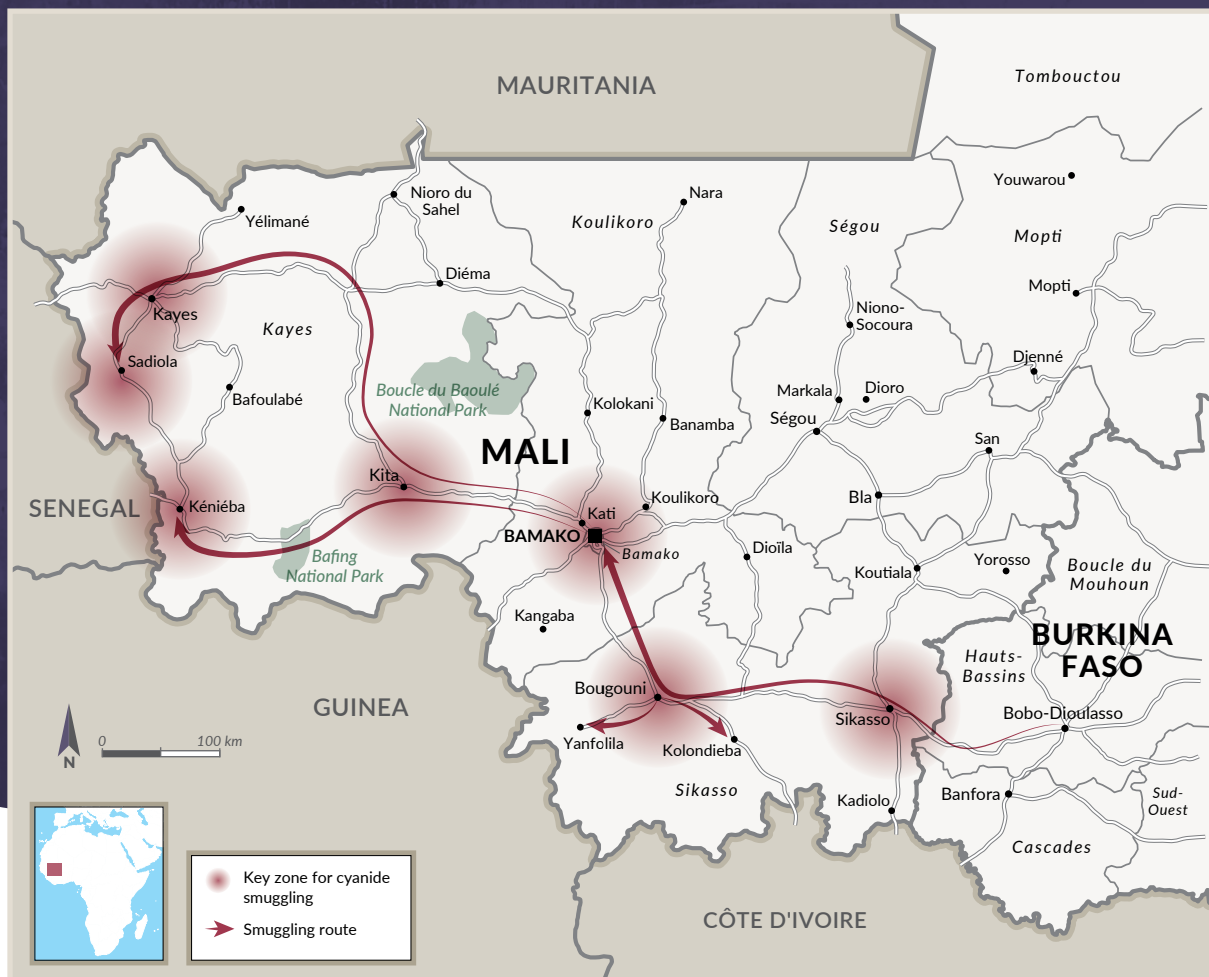


FIGURE 6 Main routes of cyanide smuggling from Burkina Faso to Mali.

CROSSING INTO MALI

Cyanide is smuggled to Mali from Burkina Faso along routes that link Bobo-Dioulasso with Sikasso, in south-eastern Mali. Once in Sikasso, it is then smuggled west to Bougouni, a key transit point with direct links to the capital, Bamako, as well as to ASGM sites throughout Sikasso region.¹⁰⁴ Once in Bamako, cyanide is transported to a number of ASGM sites in the Kayes region, notably to the cities of Kayes, Sadiola and Kenieba.¹⁰⁵ Organized networks of vendors, many of whom are Burkinabe nationals, are based in the area and facilitate the transport and sale of cyanide as well as explosive materials sourced throughout West Africa.¹⁰⁶ The scale of the cyanide market in the Kayes region is significant: one researcher specializing in ASGM dynamics in the area indicated that the trade in mercury and cyanide as among the biggest illicit markets there.¹⁰⁷

Cyanide is also smuggled directly into the Gao region in northern Mali from north-eastern Burkina Faso, along contraband routes that pass through the Sahel Reserve

via Gorom-Gorom and Markoye.¹⁰⁸ The chemical is then transported to mining sites throughout the Gao and Kidal regions and, to a lesser extent, Timbuktu.¹⁰⁹ Unlike in the southern regions of the country, the cyanide market in northern Mali is not heavily influenced by Burkinabe networks; instead, actors from Niger and Chad and, to a lesser extent, Sudan, are heavily involved.¹¹⁰

A less common entry point for cyanide into Mali is the Mopti region, which borders some of the key ASGM areas in the Nord and Sahel regions of Burkina Faso. These routes and itineraries are less defined, and likely the result of individual actors purchasing smaller quantities from gold mining sites in the Nord region for onward movement and sale in the Timbuktu region.¹¹¹

The smuggling of cyanide to northern Mali points to growing use of cyanide processing in the region. As noted above, the process requires a degree of investment that investors are typically reluctant to commit to in cases

where conditions are unstable and destruction or theft of equipment is common. Stakeholders, including a number of community leaders from northern Mali, claimed that agreements between elements within the Coordination

des Mouvements de l'Azawad and JNIM had resulted in a degree of stability in parts of Kidal and Gao regions, including around ASGM sites, which the armed groups protect and tax.¹¹²

THE REACH OF ARMED GROUPS

As cyanide-based gold extraction becomes more prevalent throughout Burkina Faso and Mali, it is important to consider how it might impact both countries' ASGM sectors and security. The gold sites, creating demand fed by networks that smuggle cyanide and mercury, are providing livelihoods while also increasing competition for resources. Jihadist groups may seek to control these new sites or benefit from sentiments of insecurity and disenfranchisement, which could result from the social upheaval that comes with rapid paradigm shifts in local economies.

The environmental and health risks associated with cyanide are multiplied when it is used on ore that has already been processed with mercury. Contamination from mercury and cyanide used in ASGM can damage agricultural livelihoods, exacerbating tensions within communities and even sparking conflict, as has already been reported in the Kayes region.¹¹³

Concerns over these risks may lead to government closures of certain sites and there have already been bans on the use of cyanide.¹¹⁴ These types of prohibitionist policies may provide opportunities for jihadist groups, who may push the state out of certain areas and win over local populations by allowing them to mine areas that were previously off limits, as they have already done in parts of northern and eastern Burkina Faso.¹¹⁵ In other contexts, jihadist groups have restricted workers' access to mines so as to limit the number of outsiders arriving in the area, ensuring that only locals can profit from the activity.¹¹⁶

Better monitoring and regulation of cyanide throughout the region is therefore needed not only to mitigate the negative impact that threatens the health and livelihoods of entire communities, but also because the use of cyanide has the potential to upend social arrangements, supply chains and financial dynamics in regions already beset by challenges to stability and human security. Prohibition-based approaches should be carefully considered and, if adopted, partnered with awareness-raising campaigns around the harms of cyanide use, as the Malian government did in 2019.¹¹⁷

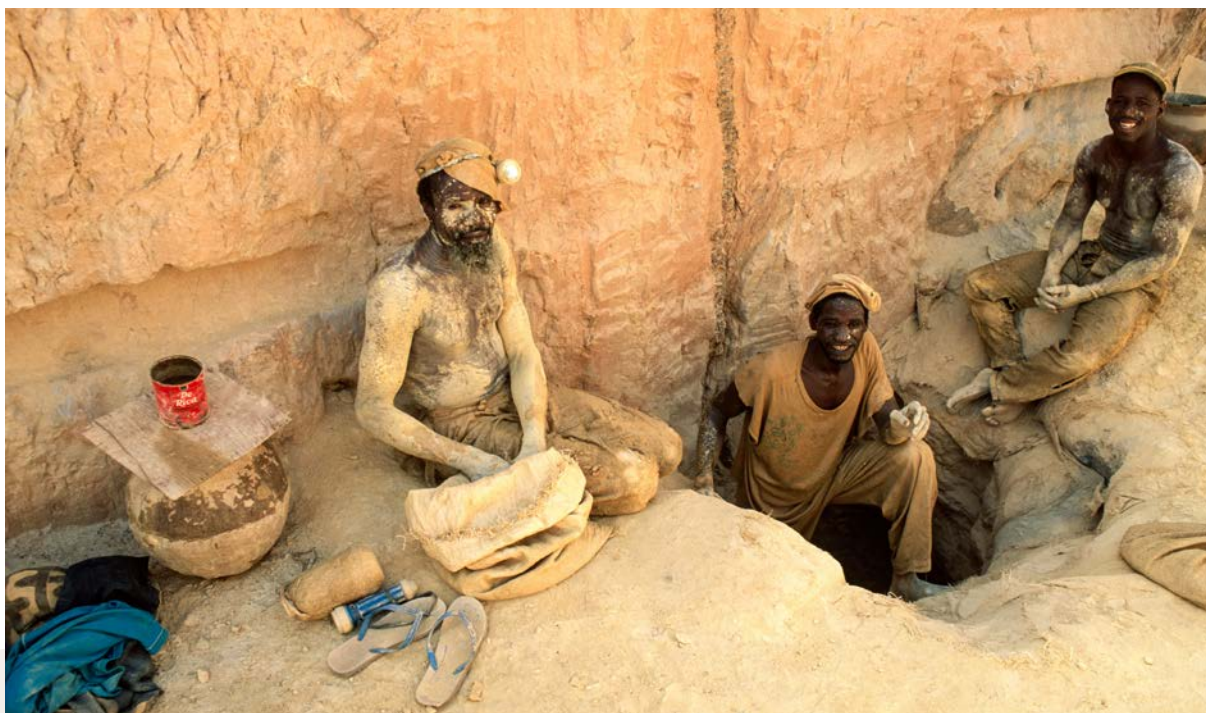
A gold mine shaft in Mali. © Amadou Keita/Afrikimages Agency/Universal Images Group via Getty Images



4. Burkina Faso's Sud-Ouest region risks becoming new zone of insecurity.

Burkina Faso's Sud-Ouest region, which borders Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana, is home to well-established cross-border smuggling and contraband economies, including of inputs needed for mining production (such as chemicals, explosives, and fuel).¹¹⁸ In recent years, there has been a marked increase in armed criminality and intercommunal violence in the region driven by several factors, including economic hardship, food insecurity and competition over land and water resources.¹¹⁹

Interviews carried out by the GI-TOC with a range of actors in Burkina Faso, Mali, Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana indicate that these new drivers of insecurity pose a serious risk to stability in Sud-Ouest, as well as neighbouring parts of Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana.¹²⁰ Jihadist groups are increasingly operating in Sud-Ouest, although they have not yet been reported to have become involved in the lucrative gold mining sector in Sud-Ouest.¹²¹



Artisanal gold mine workers in Essakane, Burkina Faso. © Alamy

A GOLD-FUELLED ECONOMY

Burkina Faso has experienced a rapid transition from a country largely dependent on agriculture to one that now heavily relies on the mining industry. An estimated 14% of Burkina Faso's GDP and 75% of exports comes from mining, with gold constituting 93% of these exports.¹²² Gold mining is a major source of livelihood for an estimated 700 000 people in the informal sector (13 times more than those who have formal employment), with 2 million more people engaged in support services in the mining sector.¹²³

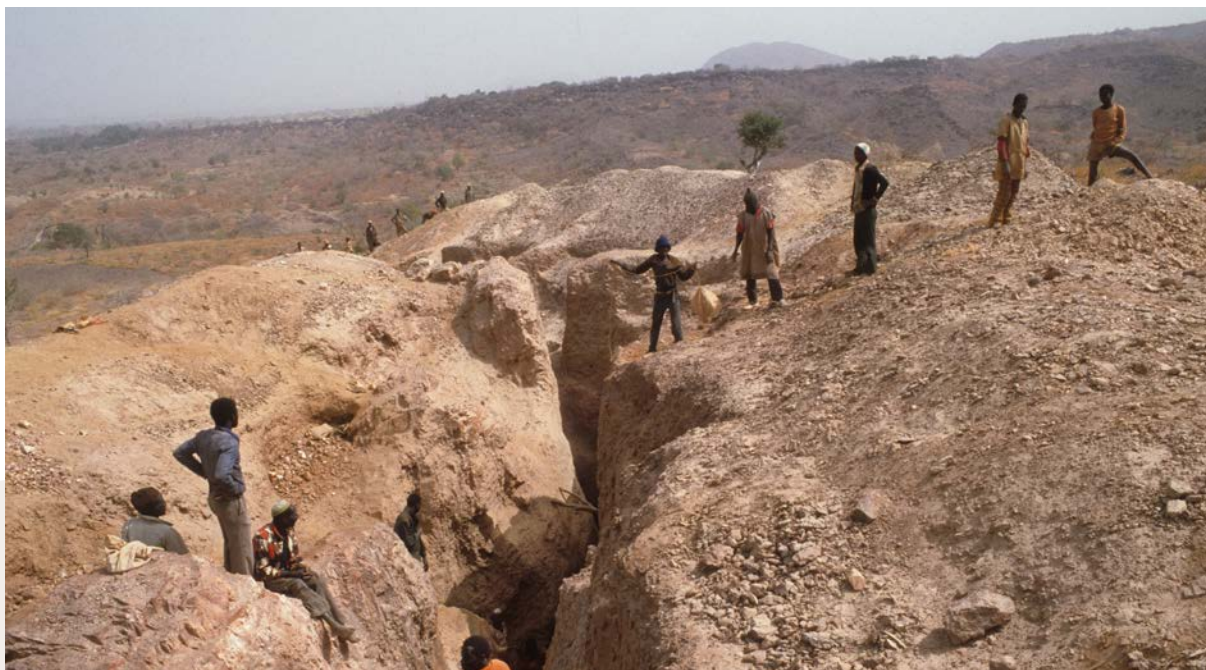
The Sud-Ouest region was one of the first gold mining areas of Burkina Faso, dating back to well before the colonial era,¹²⁴ and plays a major role in the country's gold production. A 2017 investigation by Burkina Faso's National Institute of Statistics and Demography reported that the region was responsible for half of the 9.5 tonnes of gold produced at artisanal sites throughout

the country, employing 46 086 people across 61 sites in 2016.¹²⁵ Interviews carried out with local researchers and government officials suggested that there are at least 70 artisanal sites in the region as of September 2021.¹²⁶

By far the most ASGM activity in Burkina Faso is informal, including in the Sud-Ouest region, with only limited opportunities for miners to become formalized and to achieve more than a subsistence level of livelihood.¹²⁷ The artisanal mining sector plays a complicated role in Burkina Faso, providing employment and economic activities beyond agriculture, while at the same time contributing to negative environmental and social impacts. A May 2017 study, for example, found that areas with gold extraction sites have better average living standards than their counterparts, but can also see increases in inequality and child labour.¹²⁸

ASGM in Sud-Ouest has had significant social and environmental impacts, has spurred technological change in both local mining and farming techniques, and provided economic and political opportunities for local actors, often within the context of existing formal and informal institutions and power relations.¹²⁹ The vast majority of those living in the area rely on subsistence farming.

But agricultural activities only occur during the wet season, which is only from May to mid-October. Also, climate change, primarily decreases in rainfall, is making conditions harsher and agriculture increasingly difficult, which makes alternative economic opportunities in the gold sector all the more appealing.¹³⁰



Gold mining in Yatenga Province, Burkina Faso. © Universal Images Group via Getty Images

GOLD INTERSECTS WITH REGIONAL CONTRABAND ECONOMIES

There are robust cross-border smuggling routes and networks in the region. Licit goods such as fuel, motorbikes, electronics and food consumables are smuggled from Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire into south-eastern Burkina Faso for both domestic markets as well as for onward transport to Mali.¹³¹ Narcotics, such as cannabis flower grown in Ghana and to a lesser extent northern Côte d'Ivoire, are also trafficked along these routes.¹³² Black market and counterfeit pharmaceutical products shipped into coastal West African states are also smuggled into Burkina Faso along well-established smuggling itineraries, targeting both domestic markets as well as for onward transport to Mali.¹³³

Artisanal gold mining (ASGM) in the border areas of the Sud-Ouest region intersects with several of these smuggling economies. During the political crisis in 2010–2011, for example, rebel groups in northern Côte d'Ivoire established a smuggling network linking north-east Ghana to the Sud-Ouest region of Burkina Faso via north-west Côte d'Ivoire.

The intersection of gold mining with criminal networks is perhaps most clear in the smuggling economies that have emerged around the material used for gold mining. The presence of gold in Sud-Ouest Burkina Faso, for example, as well as a proliferation of artisanal mines in the Kayes and Sikasso regions of Mali, has led to an increase in mercury and cyanide trafficking from Ghana into Sud-Ouest, as explored elsewhere in this Risk Bulletin. While mercury was once the most widely used product at the last step of the production chain, in recent years cyanide has become the preferred alternative for extracting gold from residual 'mud' and soil in gold-mining areas.¹³⁴ Cyanide sourced in either Côte d'Ivoire or Ghana enters the Sud-Ouest region via routes linking Bouna to Doropo in Côte d'Ivoire, from where it is smuggled across to Kampti and on to the city of Gaoua, which serves as a major hub and consolidation point for the warehousing and sale of gold-related products smuggled into Sud-Ouest.¹³⁵ In addition, the import of cyanide-processing technology in northern Ghana is reported to be dominated by Burkinabè, with individuals using cyanide referred to as 'Burkina Burkina'.¹³⁶



FIGURE 7 Key smuggling routes into the Sud-Ouest region, Burkina Faso.

In the north of Ghana, fertilizer subsidised by the Ghanaian government is resold in Ghana and Burkina Faso and reportedly used in the artisanal mines as improvised explosives. A ban on the use of explosives within the ASGM sector in Burkina Faso leaves artisanal miners with very few legal resources when faced with opening up or expanding a pit for hard rock mining, driving demand for illicit explosives.¹³⁷

There are also reports of gold buyers from Burkina Faso and Côte d'Ivoire buying gold in Upper West Ghana and smuggling it out to their respective countries, as well as Burkinabè coming to Ghana and mining illegally.

A POTENTIAL HOTSPOT IN NEED OF NUANCED APPROACHES

In northern and eastern Burkina Faso, jihadist groups have become directly involved in the gold mining sector, controlling access to some mining areas and collecting percentages of gold revenues.¹⁴² Gold mining areas have also been zones of intercommunal conflict involving government-backed self-defence militias and jihadist groups.¹⁴³

The wealth generated by gold mining and gold's easy transportability can make communities around mines less secure, as well as lure armed actors seeking to engage in mining, banditry or protection economies.¹³⁸ Weapons are trafficked into southern Burkina Faso, serving a market that includes criminal groups, local 'self-defence' groups and miners themselves.¹³⁹ Weapons in Sud-Ouest region are primarily sourced from Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire as well as domestically.¹⁴⁰ Gold mining sites in Sud-Ouest are also consumer markets for black market and counterfeit pharmaceuticals trafficked from Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana, particularly painkillers – including opioids and non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs – as well as malaria medications.¹⁴¹

Yet in the Sud-Ouest region, there are no clear or currently defined direct relationships between mineral extraction and jihadist groups.

The Sud-Ouest and neighbouring Cascades regions have, however, seen an increase in violent extremism, intercommunal violence and armed criminality since late 2018.¹⁴⁴ In both regions, jihadist groups have carried out



A market in Gaoua, Sud-Ouest region. Photo: Alamy

multiple attacks on military and civilian targets in 2021, with local officials warning that they are at risk of being overrun.¹⁴⁵ Government sources in Burkina Faso told the GI-TOC that Katibat Macina and Ansarul Islam have sleeper cells in the region, which operate across the borders with Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana.¹⁴⁶

Jihadist groups have made particularly significant inroads on the Ivorian side of the border, inserting themselves within local criminal economies, particularly in the areas near Comoé National Park (see the map), and carrying out attacks on government forces.¹⁴⁷ While the park is host to a wide range of flora and fauna, it is also known to possess significant gold reserves. A local NGO explained that the park is also host to many youths from the surrounding areas who are searching for gold, and that buses of artisanal miners were arriving from Burkina Faso to work on these sites.¹⁴⁸

Similar dynamics may be at work on the Ghanaian side of the border, with security threats reported in the north of the country. For example, on 15 June, police forces in the Upper East region were placed on high alert following intelligence of a planned terror attack in the Bolgatanga region, which was highly publicised on social media.¹⁴⁹

Given these local and regional dynamics, the Sud-Ouest region of Burkina Faso is an area that warrants serious attention for local, national and international stabilization efforts. Local government officials are already sounding the alarm amid deadly clashes between local communities and miners coming to Sud-Ouest in search of gold.¹⁵⁰

At the same time, policymakers should be careful not to prematurely impose 'conflict mineral' narratives, which assume a 'natural' link between violence, insecurity and ASGM,¹⁵¹ and often lead to interventions that fail to reduce conflict or meet the needs of local populations.¹⁵² Instead, policymakers should seek to improve local security and act now to put in place conflict de-escalation and resolution mechanisms in order to make communities more resilient to violent extremism.

Notes

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- 32 Travel to northern Chad's goldfields is prohibited, with military units deployed at transit points for human smuggling routes, such as Mao, Moussoro and Faya-Largeau. The military presence increased significantly after the FACT incursion in April and contributed to a decline in human smuggling operations to northern Chad in recent months; see https://www.alwihdainfo.com/Tchad-des-orpailleurs-clandestins-presentes-a-Abeche_a103844.html.
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