

HUMAN SMUGGLING AND TRAFFICKING ECOSYSTEMS
– NORTH AFRICA AND THE SAHEL

2024 SERIES



**GLOBAL
INITIATIVE**
AGAINST TRANSNATIONAL
ORGANIZED CRIME

CHAD

HUMAN SMUGGLING PICKS UP
AMID PERSISTING INSTABILITY
AND THE SUDAN CONFLICT

Alice Fereday

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Alice Fereday is a senior analyst at the GI-TOC. She researches organized crime dynamics in the Sahel region, and the links between illicit economies, conflict and stability, with a focus on human smuggling and trafficking in Niger and Chad. Fereday also has several years' experience in armed conflict mediation in southern Libya and the broader Sahel region. She holds degrees from City University London, Université Panthéon-Sorbonne and Université Paris Dauphine.

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Please direct inquiries to:
The Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime
Avenue de France 23
Geneva, CH-1202
Switzerland
www.globalinitiative.net

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ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

CCMSR	Conseil de Commandement Militaire pour le Salut de la République (Military Command Council for the Salvation of the Republic)
DDR	Disarmament, demobilization and reintegration
FACT	Front pour l'Alternance et la Concorde au Tchad (Front for Change and Concord in Chad)
FNDJT	Front de la Nation pour la Démocratie et la Justice au Tchad (National Front for Democracy and Justice in Chad)
GI-TOC	Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime
LAAF	Libyan Arab Armed Forces
MADAT	Mouvement d'Action pour la Démocratie et l'Alternance au Tchad (Movement of Action for Democracy and Change in Chad)
PSF	Parti Socialiste sans Frontières (Socialist Party Without Borders)
RDC	Rassemblement pour la Démocratie et le Changement (Rally for Democracy and Change)
RSF	Rapid Support Forces (Sudan)
SAF	Sudanese Armed Forces
SONEMIC	Société Nationale d'Exploitation Minière et de Contrôle (National Society for the Exploitation and Control of Mining)
UFDD	Union des Forces pour la Démocratie et le Développement (Union of Forces for Democracy and Development)
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees



INTRODUCTION

Over the past four years, the human smuggling ecosystem in Chad has continued to evolve and change. The Chadian government, for its part, has increasingly sought to tighten controls on the northbound movement of migrants, perceiving the flow of people as contributing to instability, rebel activity and organized crime in the north as well as in southern Libya. Amid these heightened restrictions, there have also been intermittent but intense crackdowns, such as in the wake of rebel incursions and instability at Kouri Bougoudi, Chad's largest goldfield.

Movement north has remained robust, despite – and in some cases because of – conflict and instability, the COVID-19 pandemic and government enforcement. The changed security landscape, however, has driven smuggling networks to adopt increasingly clandestine approaches to movement and operations.

All of these dynamics remained salient in 2023. However, mobility in Chad was also substantially shaped by the outbreak of war in Sudan. The conflict led to a mass arrival of refugees in eastern Chad and, more broadly, posed significant risks to the stability of the country. The enormous influx of refugees into Chad further strained the limited assistance capacities in the Ouaddaï, Sila and Wadi Fira regions, triggering a large-scale humanitarian crisis in these areas, and negatively affecting the prices and availability of basic commodities. While most refugees remain in refugee camps in eastern Chad, some have begun to leave, intending to travel to northern Chad, Libya and Tunisia, often with the help of smugglers.

The conflict initially reduced the number of Sudanese travelling to northern Chad, but movements picked up towards the end of the year. Human smuggling from western Chad, while less affected by the conflict in Sudan, continues to be suppressed, although there has been some relaxation of law enforcement efforts.

Meanwhile, artisanal mining at the Kouri Bougoudi goldfield has flourished since its reopening in late 2022, with most operations now formalized. Efforts by the Société Nationale d'Exploitation Minière et de Contrôle (National Society for the Exploitation and Control of Mining – SONEMIC) to formalize and regulate activities caused tensions among gold miners, but security at the goldfield has reportedly improved.

Mid-2023 also saw renewed rebel incursions into northern Chad and clashes between rebel groups and the Chadian military. However, pressure on rebel groups from the Libyan Arab Armed Forces (LAAF) in Libya and the surrender of significant numbers of rebels in northern Chad have weakened key groups such as the Conseil de Commandement Militaire pour le Salut de la République (Military Command Council for the Salvation of the Republic – CCMRS) and the Front pour l'Alternance et la Concorde au Tchad (Front for Change and Concord in Chad – FACT). As a result, the risk of rebel incursions into Chad, while not permanently eliminated, appears to be largely contained for the time being.

Chad also entered the next phase of its transition process, preparing for the elections, which were held in May 2024. This was a crucial period for the transitional authorities to consolidate their power and credibility, given the high level of opposition to the largely controversial transition process. However, following a contested constitutional referendum in December 2023, which enshrined the principle of a unitary state pushed for by the transitional authorities, political violence escalated in early 2024. In February, following the announcement that presidential elections would be held on 6 May, a key opposition figure, Yaya Dillo Djérou, was killed by security forces amid clashes at the headquarters of his party, the Parti Socialiste sans Frontières (Socialist Party Without Borders – PSF).¹ The Chadian government claimed that its forces were in fact involved in a shootout at the PSF's headquarters, after an attack on government security forces the night before. This raised fears that there would be further violence and repression of opposition and civil society voices after the May elections. While the elections were in fact relatively peaceful, there are still ongoing concerns related to the contraction of civil society space and democratic process.

This is the latest Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC) monitoring report on human smuggling in Chad. It builds on the series of annual reports that has been issued by the GI-TOC since 2019, tracking the evolution of human smuggling in Chad, as well as the political, security and economic dynamics that influence it.²

Methodology

This brief is based on the GI-TOC's field monitoring system. During 2023 – the reporting period for this study – field researchers in the region collected data through semi-structured interviews with smugglers, migrants, community members, transporters, NGO personnel, international observers and others.

Open source data relevant to human smuggling and trafficking was systematically collected and analyzed on a weekly basis. This data was used to formulate questions and areas of inquiry for field research and to validate the field interviews collected by researchers.

Care has been taken to triangulate the information. However, the issues detailed are inherently opaque and the geographical areas covered are often remote, volatile or difficult to access. For this reason, the brief should be seen as a snapshot that will feed into future GI-TOC reporting and analysis to capture the rapidly evolving dynamics in Chad and the wider region.



DYNAMICS SHAPING THE MIGRATION CONTEXT IN CHAD

The most significant development affecting the dynamics of human smuggling in Chad in 2023 was the outbreak of war in Sudan. On 15 April 2023, clashes broke out in numerous locations across Sudan between two rival factions, the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF), led by General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, and the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF), led by Mohamed ‘Hemedti’ Hamdan Dagalo.³ Over the course of 2023, the fighting evolved into a large-scale conflict, triggering a major humanitarian crisis and driving more than 700 000 refugees into Chad.⁴ This enormous influx of people further strained the country’s limited assistance capacities, which were already accommodating a large number of Sudanese refugees.

Even before the war in Sudan, Chad faced serious socio-economic challenges. Over the past decade, the combination of falling oil prices, poor agropastoral production and deteriorating security along the country’s borders has severely affected the economy and the local population. In 2022, the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs declared that 5.5 million people – or one in three Chadians – were in need of urgent humanitarian assistance. By November 2023, this figure had soared to 7.6 million.⁵

The conflict is also relevant to Chad’s political and security dynamics. In addition to the countries’ shared 1 403-kilometre border, there are numerous cross-border communities, tangled political dynamics and a history of proxy warfare.⁶ This represents a complex set of risks for Chad, in a context where President Mahamat Idriss Déby’s hold on power is threatened by ongoing political challenges amid the contested transition process, persisting security threats from rebel groups in northern Chad and southern Libya, and a deteriorating humanitarian and economic situation.

The fighting in Sudan has also reportedly drawn in members of Chadian rebel groups from Libya. The war could therefore pose a significant spillover risk, as it involves actors with strong ties to Chadian communities and could threaten relations between the two countries (see the following sections).

In recent years, human smuggling activity in Chad has been heavily affected by the political and security developments that followed the FACT-led incursion in April 2021 and the subsequent death of the country’s long-time leader, former president Idriss Déby (father of the current president).⁷ These events led to a security crackdown in the Kanem region of western Chad, which is associated with FACT sympathizers, hampering movement on northbound routes from and through the region.

However, there was more freedom of movement on the northbound routes from eastern Chad, particularly from the main hub of Abeche.⁸ These dynamics persisted in 2022, with military operations targeting suspected FACT rebels and restricting northbound movement through northern Chad and the Kanem region. This significantly reduced human smuggling activities. Amid sustained government crackdowns in the north, some human smuggling was diverted to eastern Niger, with the ultimate destination being northern Chad or Libya. In 2022, demand for northbound journeys between May and October was further reduced by the temporary closure and evacuation of the Kouri Bougoudi goldfield.

Human smuggling to northern Chad remains closely linked to gold-mining activities, and its intensity is deeply intertwined with whether mining at key sites is prohibited or authorized by the Chadian authorities. The authorities have long responded to the multifaceted risks in northern Chad through securitization, including, in recent years, tight control over key routes and hubs, and a ban on travel to the north. This has further increased the demand among Chadians and foreigners for clandestine travel to the goldfields or further afield to Libya and, in some cases, Europe.

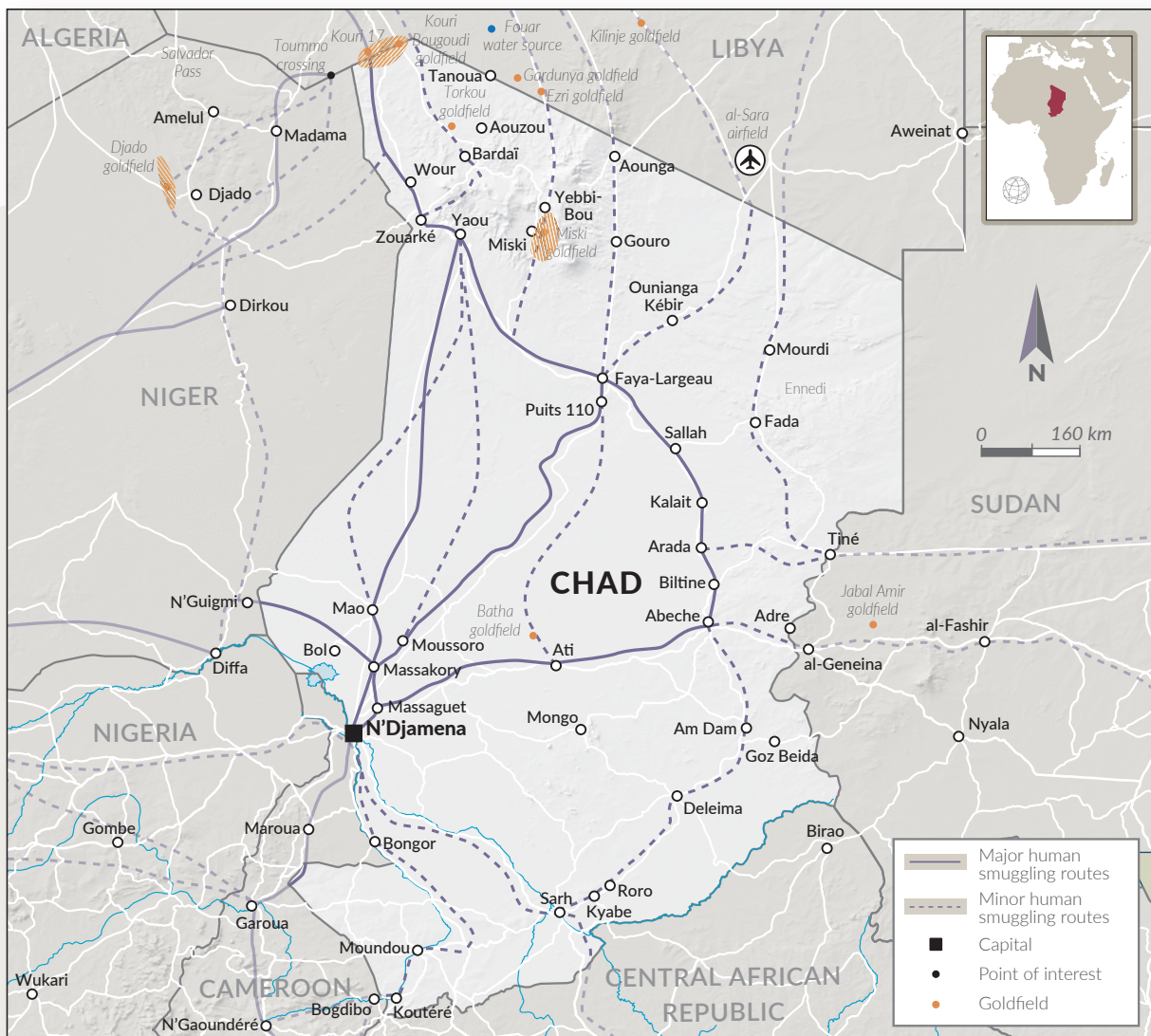


FIGURE 1 Main human smuggling routes through Chad.

Since the formal reopening of Kouri Bougoudi in October 2022, travel to the goldfield has been officially authorized, and departures from key hubs such as Abeche and Faya have increased. However, routes from and through the Kanem region remain tightly monitored, as government officials fear Chadians from the area may head to the northern goldfields to join rebel groups. Such concerns are not simply a matter of paranoia, as rebel incursions and attacks have continued in northern Chad, particularly in Kouri Bougoudi and Miski, despite the conclusion of Chad's national dialogue process.

In 2023, some of the dynamics affecting human smuggling persisted, such as renewed rebel incursions into northern Chad, but several developments also changed the political and security landscape. The first was the formal reopening of the Kouri Bougoudi goldfield in October 2022, which resulted in a significant shift. The permanent deployment of the Chadian military and the national mining agency, SONEMIC, to the goldfield considerably increased the presence and reach of the national authorities in an area that had previously been largely outside their purview. With gold mining officially authorized, efforts to formalize and regulate activities began in earnest. Although this led to tensions with local gold-mining communities, it also allowed the gradual return of more gold miners and fuelled renewed demand for northbound travel throughout 2023. Northbound travel, particularly from eastern Chad, appeared to benefit from lower levels of surveillance and security (see the following sections).



SUDAN CONFLICT THREATENS CHAD'S STABILITY

The conflict in Sudan poses significant new challenges for the Chadian government because of the complex and long-standing interconnections in the political and security dynamics of the two countries.

The resurgence of intercommunal violence in Sudan risks reigniting tensions in Chad, particularly between Arab and non-Arab communities.⁹ Several cross-border communities were previously drawn into the conflict in Darfur between 2003 and 2020, and the subsequent Chad–Sudan proxy war, which exacerbated pre-existing tensions and grievances.¹⁰ Bouts of intercommunal violence between Arab and non-Arab communities have also erupted, mainly in eastern Chad,¹¹ but also in Kouri Bougoudi. The cosmopolitan nature of the goldfield, which draws prospective miners from across Chad, Sudan, Niger and the wider Sahel region, means that disputes between different communities can trigger intercommunal violence. This was the case in May 2022, when large-scale fighting broke out following a disagreement between two gold miners, one of Arab origin and the other Tama, an ethnic group primarily from eastern Chad and western Sudan.¹²

Chadian fighters based in Libya, particularly those associated with FACT and the CCMSR, have reportedly been drawn into the hostilities in Sudan. In addition to the long-standing community ties and shared interests between Chadian rebel groups and the RSF, the unfolding chaos has offered Chadian groups significant opportunities for access to weapons, vehicles and equipment, as well as lucrative looting and trafficking activities.¹³

Since the outbreak of the war, Sudan has seen a resurgence of intercommunal violence, particularly in the Darfur region.¹⁴ In early November, the RSF was accused of killing 800 civilians in West Darfur, reportedly targeting the non-Arab Massalit community, and this is just a fraction of the total death toll over the course of the conflict so far.¹⁵

The involvement of Chadian rebel groups in the Sudanese conflict could increase their capacity and opportunities to launch renewed offensives in Chad in the long term. This raises the stakes for Chad's positioning considerably.

Chad has officially maintained a neutral stance and signalled its willingness to act as a mediator, but the country's position is complex.¹⁶ While the Chadian government would naturally want to avoid an RSF victory, given its recruitment from and ties with Chadian rebel groups, the UN Panel of Experts on Sudan reported that it had allowed the United Arab Emirates (UAE) to establish a military base in Amdjarass, just 50 kilometres from the Sudanese border in the Ennedi-Est region, to provide support to the paramilitary group in Sudan.¹⁷ The UAE has officially denied these allegations.

Amdjarass is a historical territory of the Zaghawa community in Chad and is considered to be a fiefdom of the Déby family. According to the UN Panel of Experts, the base reportedly includes a field hospital, officially for Sudanese refugees, but in fact treating RSF fighters wounded in Sudan, and an airbase providing logistical support.¹⁸ According to a report in the *New York Times*, the Chadian government is said to have conceded the use of the base to the UAE as part of a deal to provide Chad with military vehicles and a substantial loan.¹⁹ The situation has caused tension in the local Zaghawa community, which is firmly opposed to the granting of support to the RSF. This poses a risk for Déby, who could lose the support of a key political and communal constituency.

In the context of the rebel activity that continues to threaten Chad's northern and southern borders, and the long-running battle against Boko Haram in the south-western Lake Chad area, the outbreak of conflict in Sudan means Chadian authorities are facing threats from all sides. The Sudanese crisis poses a major additional threat to the country's fragile stability, and that of the wider Sahel region, which is now highly dependent on a positive outcome to the ongoing peace talks between rival factions in Sudan.



MASS ARRIVAL OF SUDANESE PUTS PRESSURE ON EASTERN CHAD

One of the immediate effects of the war in Sudan on Chad was the flow of refugees fleeing into the east of the country. Fighting in the capital of Khartoum and in the Darfur region has displaced over 750 000 people into Chad (as of 6 May 2024), including 165 422 Chadian refugees who had been living in Sudan before the outbreak of the conflict.²⁰ The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimates that the number could reach 910 000 by the end of 2024.²¹ Arrivals have occurred in distinct waves, linked to eruptions of violence in Nyala (South Darfur) and al-Geneina (West Darfur).

Initially, over 90% of those arriving in Chad from Sudan were women and children, as indicated by UNHCR data from May 2023.²² However, as the fighting continued and the level of violence escalated, the number of adult men leaving Sudan gradually increased. Most refugees enter Chad in the Ouaddaï, Sila, Wadi Fira and Ennedi-Est regions in the east of the country.

The town of Adre, 150 kilometres east of Abeche, the capital of Ouaddaï region, is one of the main points of entry for those fleeing Sudan. Most refugees and returnees reportedly cross the border on foot, on donkeys or horses, or by vehicle. Initially, contacts in eastern Chad reported that arrivals from Sudan did not use the services of *passeurs* or transporters.

There are no Sudanese using smugglers to come into the country because we control the whole border. The main means of transport for the Sudanese arriving are vehicles, but they also use carts and donkeys. The most popular border crossing points are Adre [Chad], al-Geneina [Sudan] and Tendelty [Sudan]. The new arrivals from Sudan are concentrated in the department of Assoungha, especially in Koufroun, Borota, Goungour and Dissa Berté. What concerns us most is the security aspect, the rest is not an issue. It is also impossible for any Sudanese refugees to turn to smugglers to reach other cities.

Interview with a security actor in Abeche, May 2023

However, towards the end of the year, interviews with Sudanese migrants indicated that some had in fact paid smugglers to transport them to Chad. A Sudanese refugee from al-Fashir said that he had used smugglers to leave Sudan in September:

It took five days to travel from al-Fashir to Chadian Tiné. [...] I crossed the border into Chad with smugglers, and into Niger the same way, with smugglers. [...] I travelled in [Toyota] Land Cruisers all the way. I relied on smugglers; there is no other way to get out or to travel, only through smugglers. I relied on a lot of smugglers. [...] People from a charity helped me with some money and my neighbours helped me get in touch with the smugglers.

Interview with a Sudanese refugee in Agadez, Niger, November 2023

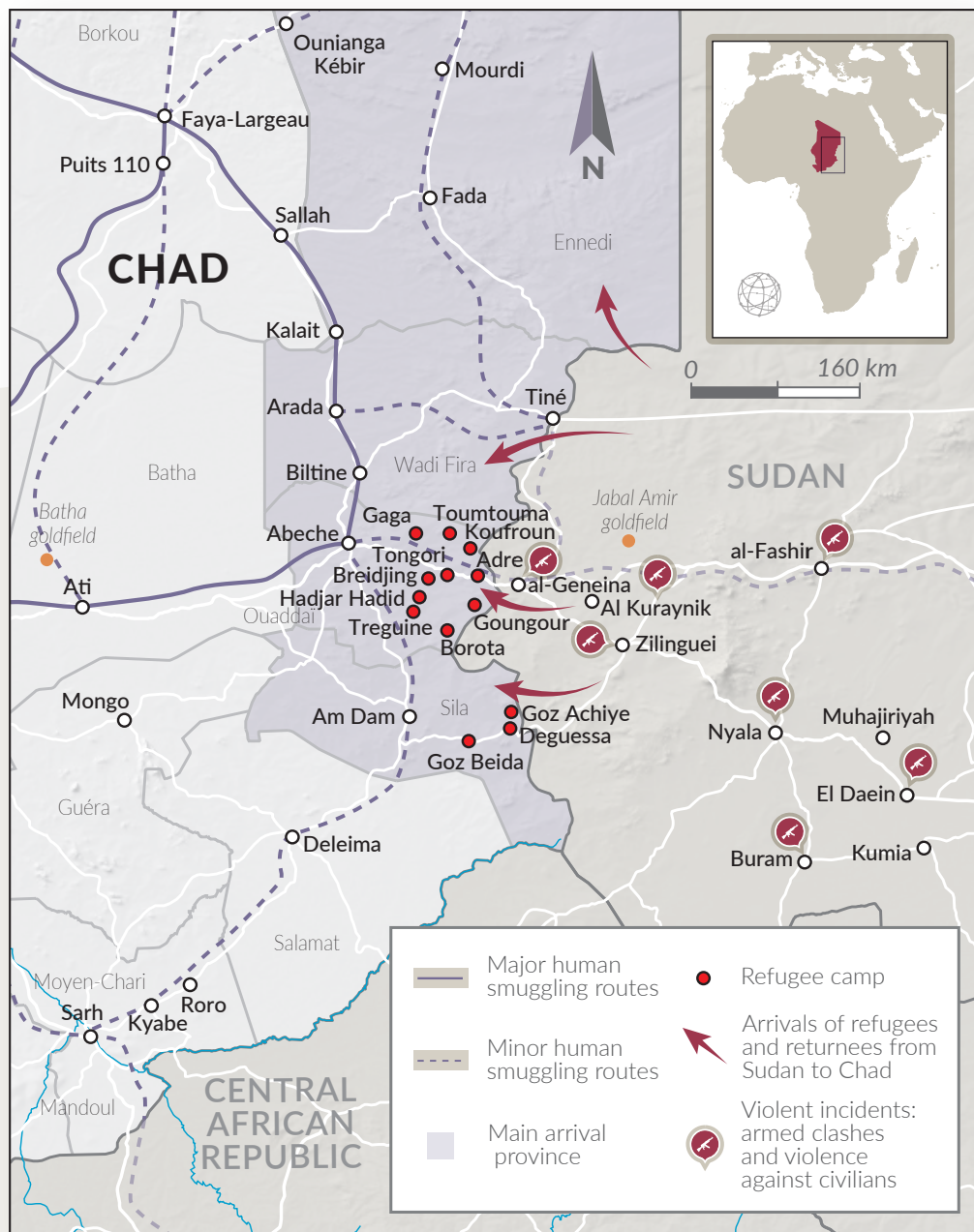


FIGURE 2 Arrivals in eastern Chad, April to December 2023.



A refugee camp in Adre, eastern Chad. Adre is one of the main points of entry for refugees fleeing Sudan. © Dan Kitwood via Getty Images

This is an indication that human smuggling networks may have developed to meet the demand for travel from Sudan to Chad in a context where movement has become increasingly difficult and dangerous. However, most people who fled to Chad appear to have used whatever means of transport were available to them.

The enormous influx of vulnerable refugees and returnees in eastern Chad has put an additional strain on limited assistance capacities, which were already hosting some 400 000 Sudanese refugees in 13 camps in the provinces of Ouaddaï, Sila and Wadi Fira before the war.²³ Overcrowding and inadequate living conditions in these camps have compelled some refugees to leave, although these numbers remain low.

Despite the deployment of large-scale humanitarian operations to provide assistance to newly arrived refugees, many are still living in makeshift shelters set up near the Sudanese border. Refugees reportedly lack water, food, health care and adequate shelter. Humanitarian organizations and UN agencies are struggling to meet their needs due to the sheer number of arrivals in a short period of time and the logistical challenges of assisting people at multiple arrival sites along the border. The humanitarian response plan is also suffering from severe underfunding.²⁴ In October 2023, the UN resident and humanitarian coordinator in Chad said that the humanitarian response plan had received only 25% of the US\$920 million requested, and the country director of the World Food Programme described the food insecurity situation in Chad as 'catastrophic'.²⁵

Finally, the conflict in Sudan has also led to a significant increase in the cost of basic commodities due to the disruption of supply chains and the closure of Chad's border with Sudan.²⁶ Eastern Chad was heavily dependent on imports from Sudan for many basic commodities, including staple foods. As a local contact in Abeche reported in December 2023: 'Just a week after the conflict in Sudan, followed by the border closure, [everything changed] from Adre to Abeche. Prices have changed, from fuel to food.'

According to local contacts in Abeche, the price of a 50-kilogram sack of sugar rose from FCFA30 000 (€46) before the border closure to FCFA48 500 (€74) in December 2023. The price of a 50-kilogram sack of flour rose from FCFA12 500 (€19) to FCFA25 000 (€38). These prices were slightly higher in the first few weeks after the border closure, but have reportedly stabilized as staple foods have been sourced from Libya. By May 2024, prices had reportedly decreased, but remained higher than before the outbreak of the conflict, at FCFA39 000 (€59) for 50 kilograms of sugar and FCFA14 000 (€21) for 50 kilograms of flour. Given the volatile nature of the conflict, prices could still fluctuate later in 2024. The rising cost of basic commodities could lead to tensions among host communities in eastern Chad and, if sustained, could drive some to leave in search of better livelihoods elsewhere in Chad or abroad.

Sudanese refugees begin to move beyond eastern Chad

Most of the Sudanese refugees who have arrived in Chad since April have remained in refugee camps or ad hoc shelters in the east of the country. Many of the refugees interviewed in Adre stated that they had no intention of travelling elsewhere in Chad or to neighbouring countries, despite the poor conditions in the camps. Some cited a lack of funds, while others hoped to return to Sudan because relatives had remained there.

For the moment, Chad is our destination, because we don't have the money to travel. We hope to see Sudan in peace again and to return home and live as before.

Interview with a Sudanese refugee in Arkoum camp, south of Adre, November 2023

However, other interviews with Sudanese refugees and *passeurs* in Chad and Tunisia have confirmed that a small number of people are in fact leaving the camps in eastern Chad. These tend to be adult men, as women and children are less likely to be able to travel safely on the clandestine routes through northern Chad to Libya or Niger. When interviewed, many Sudanese refugees in Tunisia attributed their decision to leave Chad to the perceived risk of being targeted by military groups. This could refer to general security concerns arising from the conflict or to fears of forced recruitment.

A local smuggler interviewed in Abeche in December 2023 confirmed that he had facilitated trips directly from refugee camps in eastern Chad to the goldfields in the north. He said departures took place from camps in Bregine, Treguine, Hadjar Hadid and Gaga, and that journeys could be organized directly to Kouri Bougoudi. This *passeur* said he had arranged two or three departures from these camps since August 2023, but did not give an estimate of the number of people he had transported. He charged FCFA175 000 (€267) to Kouri Bougoudi for those paying cash, and FCFA200 000 (€305) for those travelling on credit.

It is likely that other *passeurs* are operating in areas with a high concentration of refugees in eastern Chad. Although the number of travellers remains low, the route through northern Chad is one of the three main access points to Libya for those fleeing Sudan, and interviews with Sudanese refugees suggest this trend could increase.

For those who do leave the camps, the routes and means of transport vary. Some of the male Sudanese refugees who have travelled to northern Chad are likely to have become involved in gold-mining activities in Kouri Bougoudi, where Sudanese mining communities are well established. Others have crossed into Libya, usually with the assistance of Tebu smugglers, who transport them to Qatrun and then hand them over to other smugglers for movement north towards Tripolitania and Tunisia (see the country report on Tunisia and the forthcoming report on Libya in this series).²⁷

Some Sudanese refugees have also travelled to Niger. Three Sudanese refugees interviewed in Agadez in November 2023 reported having chosen that country in the hope of receiving better humanitarian assistance and to apply for asylum. All three left western Sudan between June and September and entered Chad through Tiné. They all used smugglers to make the journey. They travelled through Zouarké, in northern Chad, and entered Niger directly from northern Chad. Once in Niger, they were transported first to Chérifa, a market town in the Djado goldfield in northern Niger, and then to Agadez.

It is unclear how many smugglers were used to make this journey, but it is likely to have been at least three: one from Tiné to Zouarké, a second from Zouarké to Chérifa, and a third from Chérifa to Agadez. They probably passed through Chérifa because the routes between northern Chad and the northern Niger goldfields are well established and routinely used by gold miners, traders and smugglers. However, these routes are also dangerous, intersecting with zones frequented by heavily armed bandits. One interviewee noted that the car he had travelled in was attacked between Zouarké and Chérifa.

I faced many difficulties. We met looters, people with guns, who tried to stop us and take our things and our money. The driver didn't stop the car. They fired guns at us [and this] resulted in many injuries. I became very sick and nearly died. This happened from Zouarké to Chérifa.

Interview with a Sudanese refugee in Agadez, Niger, November 2023

A Sudanese refugee in Agadez interviewed in December 2023 stated that around 130 Sudanese had arrived in the city since the outbreak of the war, but said most of them had subsequently left for Libya in search of better access to assistance and asylum. Reportedly, upon reaching Agadez, the refugees had been informed of the challenges faced by asylum seekers, including poor living conditions, few livelihood opportunities and long delays in the processing of asylum applications and status determination, and had decided to leave. Of the estimated 130 people who had arrived in Agadez, only 20 to 30 are reported to remain. Those who left are believed to have travelled to Libya in order to reach Tunisia with the aim of making the journey to Europe.





HUMAN SMUGGLING IN EASTERN CHAD RESUMES AFTER INITIAL WAR-RELATED DISRUPTION

The Sudanese conflict has had a significant effect on broader human smuggling activities in eastern Chad, although the nature of the impact has varied over time and across routes. Human smuggling in Chad mainly involves movement from the southern and eastern parts of the country to the north, particularly to the gold-mining areas in the Tibesti mountains and to Libya. As a result, human smuggling is closely linked to and affected by the situation in northern Chad, where decades of political unrest, successive rebellions, intercommunal conflict, deeply entrenched illicit economies and transnational organized crime are key factors of instability. In 2023, these dynamics were also influenced by the outbreak of war in Sudan.

Regarding the routes from eastern Chad to the goldfields in the north, *passeurs* interviewed in May 2023 initially reported that the conflict had led to a marked decrease in the number of Sudanese passengers travelling to the Kouri Bougoudi goldfield. Before the war, Sudanese had made up a large proportion of passengers on the routes to northern Chad.

Several *passeurs* in Abeche noted that whereas they had been moving between 120 and 160 Sudanese from Abeche to Kouri Bougoudi every month before April 2023, they had not transported any since the outbreak of the conflict, because of the drop in the arrival of prospective Sudanese gold miners in the town. Although the war triggered mass movement into Chad, these were people fleeing violence rather than seeking work on the goldfields. In addition, in the first weeks of the war, most of those arriving in Chad were women and children, while adult men – who fit the profile of those seeking travel to the goldfields – only began to arrive later. This explains the initial decline in demand for travel to the goldfields among Sudanese in Abeche.

The most important starting point is Abeche. The number of departures per week from Abeche varies between three and four trucks carrying around 100 to 110 passengers. The number of people leaving Abeche has decreased since the beginning of the conflict in Sudan. [...] The conflict in Sudan has affected the activity of smugglers in Abeche, simply because there are no Sudanese job-seekers as there used to be.

Interview with a passeur operating between Abeche and Kouri Bougoudi, May 2023



A *tacha* (informal bus station) in Abeche, December 2023.

Photo: GI-TOC

Here in Abeche, we are sending at most two trucks per week. So it's not like it used to be. There has been no improvement since the beginning of the conflict in Sudan; it seems that we are almost at a standstill. Yes, prices have changed, because the conflict in Sudan has affected the activity of smugglers in Abeche. But passengers of Sudanese nationality no longer come, whereas before there were many who requested our services.

Interview with a second passeur operating between Abeche and Kouri Bougoudi, May 2023

Although some *passeurs* reported that the cost of travel had increased due to the reduction in Sudanese passengers, others reported that prices had remained the same. It is also likely that prices had increased due to fuel shortages, which have become increasingly problematic in Chad.²⁸

By the end of the year, movement to northern Chad appeared to have picked up, with *passeurs* reporting an increase in the number of weekly departures in November. In December, according to local contacts and *passeurs* in Abeche, between eight and 10 trucks were leaving Abeche for northern Chad each week, carrying between 250 and 400 passengers.

The transport of passengers from Abeche is reportedly tolerated by the Chadian authorities, and most *passeurs* indicated that they had been able to organize departures despite the fact that they are technically illegal. *Passeurs* reported that there were very few security checks on this route, and that they were able to avoid any problems by paying bribes.

There are no restrictions or controls on the road. The important thing is that the [*passeur*] has banknotes on hand to 'clean the road', as we call it [referring to bribery].

Interview with a passeur operating between Abeche and Kouri Bougoudi, December 2023

In eastern Chad, there are no worries about passenger transport. The proposed trips are mainly for the *manjams* [sites] of Kouri Bougoudi. The authorities are aware of this and do not prevent smugglers from operating between eastern and northern Chad.

Interview with a Chadian official in Abeche, November 2023

Departures from Abeche are well organized. Smuggling networks operate using *passeurs* and intermediaries called *comsendjis*, who recruit passengers, negotiate transit prices and put migrants in touch with *passeurs*. These *comsendjis* are the equivalent of Niger's *coxeurs*.

There are several *comsendjis* in Abeche. They usually come from the local community or from the same ethnic group as their passengers. For example, the *comsendjis* used by the Ouaddaïans [people from the Ouaddaï region] come from their community and are able to reassure them. The same goes for other migrant communities, who use *comsendjis* from their own community to travel to the *manjams* of Kouri Bougoudi or to Libya.

Interview with a member of a smuggling network in Abeche, November 2023

I work here in Abeche with drivers who transport passengers to Kouri Bougoudi. My main role is to reassure the members of my community that if they wish to travel, I have a good driver contact who will take them to their destination without any problems. I act as a guarantor. I negotiate the prices myself, I take the money myself, and then, at the time of departure, I give the [driver] an account of the number of passengers he has, with each passenger's money. Then I take my commission, which is about FCFA10 000 to FCFA15 000 [€15 to €22] per passenger. There are many other people who play the same role as I do with travellers from their home communities.

Interview with a comsendji in Abeche, November 2023

The price of the journey from Abeche to Kouri Bougoudi remained stable throughout 2023, ranging from FCFA100 000 (€152) to FCFA150 000 (€228), depending on the smuggling network. Most passengers were reportedly local, from Abeche or nearby areas in eastern Chad, and were generally heading north in search of work on the mines. However, *passeurs* indicated that the number of Sudanese gradually increased in the last quarter of 2023. It is difficult to assess the proportion of Sudanese and Chadian passengers, as many come from communities that stretch across the Chad–Sudan border, although one *passeur* in Abeche stated that 65% of his passengers in December 2023 were Sudanese.

Departures are also organized from Tiné, a border town 245 kilometres north-east of Abeche. Passengers here are mostly from local communities on both sides of the border (Tiné has a twin town on the Sudanese side).

Some Sudanese on the northern route are clearly refugees transiting to Libya and/or Tunisia. However, interviews with smugglers suggest that others are prospective gold miners who have crossed into Chad explicitly for economic reasons, rather than conflict-induced displacement.



HUMAN SMUGGLING ON CHAD'S WESTERN ROUTES REMAINS SUPPRESSED

Human smuggling between western Chad, including the Kanem region, and the north has been less affected by the outbreak of conflict in Sudan, as these routes do not typically rely on passengers from that country. However, due to the political and security crisis following the FACT incursion and the death of former president Idriss Déby, movement has been tightly controlled and restricted since 2021.²⁹ Most northbound travel from key departure points such as Mao in Kanem and Moussoro in the Bahr El Gazel region is clandestine, using remote bypass routes to avoid security checks. Securitization in Kanem is aimed at curbing the movement of people perceived by the Chadian authorities as likely to join rebel groups in northern Chad and southern Libya.

It is difficult to estimate the number of departures from the Kanem region due to the secretive nature of the smuggling operations. Based on information from local contacts, around two to three departures were organized to northern Chad and Libya each week in December. This gives an estimate of approximately 40 to 60 passengers per week, which represents a very limited number compared to the departures from Abeche.

In November 2023, interviews with *passeurs* and local contacts at departure points in western Chad indicated that checks had decreased and that routes from the Kanem region experienced fewer patrols in the last quarter of 2023 than in 2022.

Even if these departures concern Kouri Bougoudi, the people do not stay there long, and they still try to go to Libya and create violence against state institutions. So we have to limit departures from their communities of origin. There are instructions to follow, and we are doing what is necessary. But since the second phase of the transition, the instructions seem to us to be less demanding, and patrols are also very limited. This will certainly encourage the transport networks to become more involved in this activity, even if it is illegal.

Interview with a Chadian official, November 2023



Clandestine route used by *passeurs* operating between south-western Chad and northern Chad.

Photo: GI-TOC

In Mao, we still work in fear. We can encounter army patrols at any time, but we are careful and there have been no recent arrests. We make the journeys [step by step]; we never say we are going to Libya. The desert helps us when we are far from Mao city, and we have our own roads, which are not known.

Interview with a passeur in Mao, November 2023

Once vehicles reach intermediary hubs further north, such as Faya, the local security forces will reportedly allow them to travel on to northern Chad. A Chadian official in Zouarké, a key transit point in northern Chad, 920 kilometres north of N'Djamena and 300 kilometres south of the Libyan border, confirmed that although departures from Kanem are illegal, if vehicles arrive in northern Chad they are allowed to continue towards Kouri Bougoudi:

Including Abeche, Tiné and Kalait, we see four, six, sometimes seven vehicles a day bound for Kouri Bougoudi at our checkpoint at the moment. These vehicles arrive in groups of two to five. Some spend the night, others arrive during the day. The number of vehicles coming from Kanem, on the other hand, is estimated at between 18 and 25 per week. We work for the national police, we have instructions and we do not complicate the smugglers' journeys. If we inconvenience them, they will stop coming here for processing, so we are always happy to welcome them. We do the processing and we set the price of the passage according to the number of passengers per vehicle.

Interview with a Chadian official in Zouarké, May 2023

Despite the relaxation of security controls, departures from western Chad are still risky and remain clandestine. Some migrants and gold miners also continue to use routes through Niger to reach northern Chad or southern Libya.³⁰ These involve entering Niger through N'Guigmi and travelling north to the Libyan border, or in some cases re-entering Chad through Zouarké or Wour.



GOLD MINING BOOMS IN KOURI BOUGOUDI AMID FORMALIZATION DRIVE

After being halted for four months in 2022 due to intercommunal clashes, activities at Kouri Bougoudi gradually increased in 2023. According to local contacts, operations now appear to have returned to their pre-closure levels. Several contacts estimated the population of the goldfield at around 35 000 to 40 000 people in December, close to its peak before the closure.

The war in Sudan also temporarily affected the dynamics at Kouri Bougoudi. As a *passeur* operating between Abeche and the goldfield pointed out in May 2023: 'Gold mining has resumed in Kouri Bougoudi, but not as before. The situation has been affected by the conflict because the arrival of Sudanese gold miners has slowed down. There are currently fewer gold miners than before.' This disruption was a short-term phenomenon, however, and in November *passeurs* operating on the routes to Kouri Bougoudi reported that the number of people arriving at the goldfield had picked up.

However, gold mining is now taking place in an altogether different context. The reopening of the goldfield occurred under the auspices of SONEMIC, Chad's national mining company.³¹ SONEMIC established an office at Kouri 35, and officials are also present at the goldfield's other main sites, Kouri 4, Kouri 60 and Kouri 7, to facilitate registration processes and supervise activities.

All individuals operating on these sites are required to register with SONEMIC and obtain a yearly individual access card. This card costs FCFA25 000 (€38) for employees; FCFA100 000 (€152) for gold site owners and Chadian shopkeepers, traders and transport operators; and FCFA150 000 (€229) for foreign shopkeepers, traders and transport operators. Gold site ownership is restricted to Chadian nationals only.

In addition to yearly fees, monthly Chadian taxes are also levied on gold processing machinery. These taxes, paid by the owners of equipment such as mill crushers and grinders, range from 3 to 8 grams of gold per month, depending on the type of equipment.

At Kouri 35, Kouri 60, Kouri 7 and Kouri 4, anyone operating without authorization from SONEMIC risks expulsion and detention. However, gold miners working outside the four sites under SONEMIC's control, including elsewhere in Chad and at sites located in Libyan territory, continue to operate independently and clandestinely.



An individual access card for Kouri Bougoudi.

Photo: GI-TOC



SONEMIC constructs roads in Kouri Bougoudi, November 2023.

Photo: Alwihda Info on Twitter/X

The presence of SONEMIC and its efforts to formalize and regulate gold-mining activities have had both positive and negative effects. SONEMIC arrived at Kouri Bougoudi when it officially reopened in October 2022, with a military unit of around 200 soldiers and 30 vehicles. This body, known as the Brigade minière spéciale (special mining brigade), is based at Kouri 35 and conducts regular patrols at the other four main sites. Its aim is to enforce SONEMIC's decisions and monitor security at the sites. This is in addition to the presence of the Chadian army at Kouri 35 and Kouri 60, whose focus is on general security rather than gold-mining regulation. The presence of SONEMIC alongside the Chadian military has reportedly improved security and conflict prevention by regulating access to the gold sites and relations between gold miners, and applying security measures such as a ban on weapons. SONEMIC has also developed roads to facilitate access to key sites and improve the safety of movement within the goldfield.³²

However, the efforts to regulate gold-mining activities have caused tensions. Some miners reportedly feel that SONEMIC's regulations and taxes are applied arbitrarily and accuse the body of changing the rules without notice. The implementation of gold processing regulations, including restrictions on the use of chemicals, is also seen by some miners as detrimental to their activities. Furthermore, some communities have accused SONEMIC of favouring miners from the Zaghawa ethnic group (which is associated with the ruling elite and President Déby's family) and of tolerating violations by them while strictly enforcing the rules for others.³³

In 2023, these tensions were exacerbated by efforts to reorganize transport, commerce and gold-mining infrastructure. In October, SONEMIC decided to relocate the central market at Kouri 35, the largest market serving the goldfield and the main logistical hub, to Kouri 4.³⁴ The action was reportedly intended to separate the market and its commercial activities from the gold extraction sites and to facilitate the taxation of both commercial and gold-mining activities. The move also involved the informal transport stations known as *tachas*, which were moved to Kouri 7. To enforce the measure, SONEMIC reportedly blocked access to water and food supplies in Kouri 35 until the shopkeepers and transport operators left. Some local contacts reportedly believe the way in which the reorganization was carried out was unfair.



A recently opened restaurant in Kouri Bougoudi. The formalization of gold mining has boosted auxiliary economies servicing the gold mining community.

Photo: GI-TOC

In November 2023, SONEMIC decided to move all the *tachas* from Kouri 35. Each community has its own station. For example, the Gorans have their own station, as do the Ouaddaïans. But when SONEMIC decided to evict everyone from their stations, and all the occupants left, the Zaghawas did not, and this was tolerated by the military force of SONEMIC. Most of the military are from the Zaghawa community and they favour gold miners from their own community. SONEMIC officials are also all from this community. All the non-Zaghawa gold miners are victims of the mismanagement of the site and believe that Kouri 35 is being held hostage by a single clan. So I can say that tensions could reappear at any time.

Interview with a local business owner in Kouri Bougoudi, December 2023

Overall, trust in SONEMIC is low among non-Zaghawa people, particularly the Arab and Goran communities, who have a history of conflict with the Zaghawa. The formalization process also appears to be unclear to many gold miners, who reportedly have difficulty obtaining clear information and guidelines on procedures and regulations. In addition, no provisions have been put in place to improve working conditions for miners or to reduce the risk of labour trafficking, which remains prevalent among vulnerable populations who travel to Kouri Bougoudi on credit.³⁵

While the formalization of mining and increased state presence at Kouri Bougoudi is a positive step towards regularizing and improving the safety of gold mining in the region, the rules need to be accessible and realistic in order to be successfully adopted by gold miners.

Government involvement and control over gold mining in the Tibesti, meanwhile, remain a deep-rooted source of friction. This was demonstrated in January 2023, when clashes broke out between the Chadian military and the Miski self-defence committee.³⁶ Although these tensions were exacerbated by broader political dynamics and the involvement of a new rebel group, the Mouvement d'Action pour la Démocratie et l'Alternance au Tchad (Movement of Action for Democracy and Change in Chad – MADAT), gold mining in the Tibesti lies at the heart of long-standing grievances and conflicts between local people and the Chadian authorities. This is because communities fear that Chadian government involvement and control over gold mining will lead to the creation of state-owned mining companies, or companies in which the government's allies have a stake. This would potentially cause the monopolization of gold-mining areas without a fair redistribution of resources, to the detriment of local livelihoods. Such concerns are one of the factors that led to the 2018 conflict in Miski between local self-defence militias and the Chadian military.³⁷ The management of gold-mining resources and the regulation of activities in Kouri Bougoudi should therefore be both transparent and conflict sensitive, in order to reduce the risk of further grievances and violence.

Militarization of Kouri Bougoudi places goldfield at the heart of Chadian political and security dynamics

In addition to SONEMIC's increased presence at Kouri Bougoudi since its reopening, the Chadian army has established a permanent presence at Kouri 35 and Kouri 60, and conducts regular patrols of other sites in the area. This is a significant shift in the security dynamics of the goldfield, which until 2022 was largely beyond the reach of national authorities and the military.³⁸

This development has brought some benefits to the miners, as the militarization of Kouri Bougoudi has reportedly contributed to improved security by reducing the risk of banditry and intercommunal violence. Illicit activities and organized crime have also reportedly decreased.³⁹

According to several *passeurs* and traders operating at Kouri Bougoudi, the Chadian military has carried out several arrests and expulsion operations. The precise reasons for the expulsions were not always clear. In one case, however, 47 people, including at least 18 minors, were reportedly arrested and expelled from a gold site near Kouri 7, as gold mining there is reportedly reserved for mining companies. The group, all from the Arab Mahamid community, had reportedly arrived at the site in September, and had not yet started mining. After their arrest, which took place around 25 September 2023, they were transferred to Klessoum prison, near N'Djamena, and charged with illegal gold mining. While these operations may have contributed to the formalization of Kouri Bougoudi, they have also exacerbated tensions with gold miners and local constituencies.

The militarization of the goldfield has also increased the risk of rebel incursions, with Libya-based rebel groups typically targeting Chadian army positions in northern Chad and the Kouri Bougoudi area. In August, a series of significant exchanges took place between the CCMSR and the Chadian army in several locations, including Kouri Bougoudi.⁴⁰ On 8 August, the CCMSR launched an incursion into Chadian territory, attacking Chadian positions in Wour, Kourzo (90 kilometres south of Kouri 35, close to the Nigerien border) and Kouri 35. This was followed by further violent clashes between the CCMSR and the Chadian military on 9 and 10 August. The CCMSR then reportedly withdrew, before ambushing Chadian military units that had pursued them into Libyan territory.⁴¹ The CCMSR claimed to have killed several Chadian soldiers and captured 23, and posted pictures of the hostages on social media.⁴²

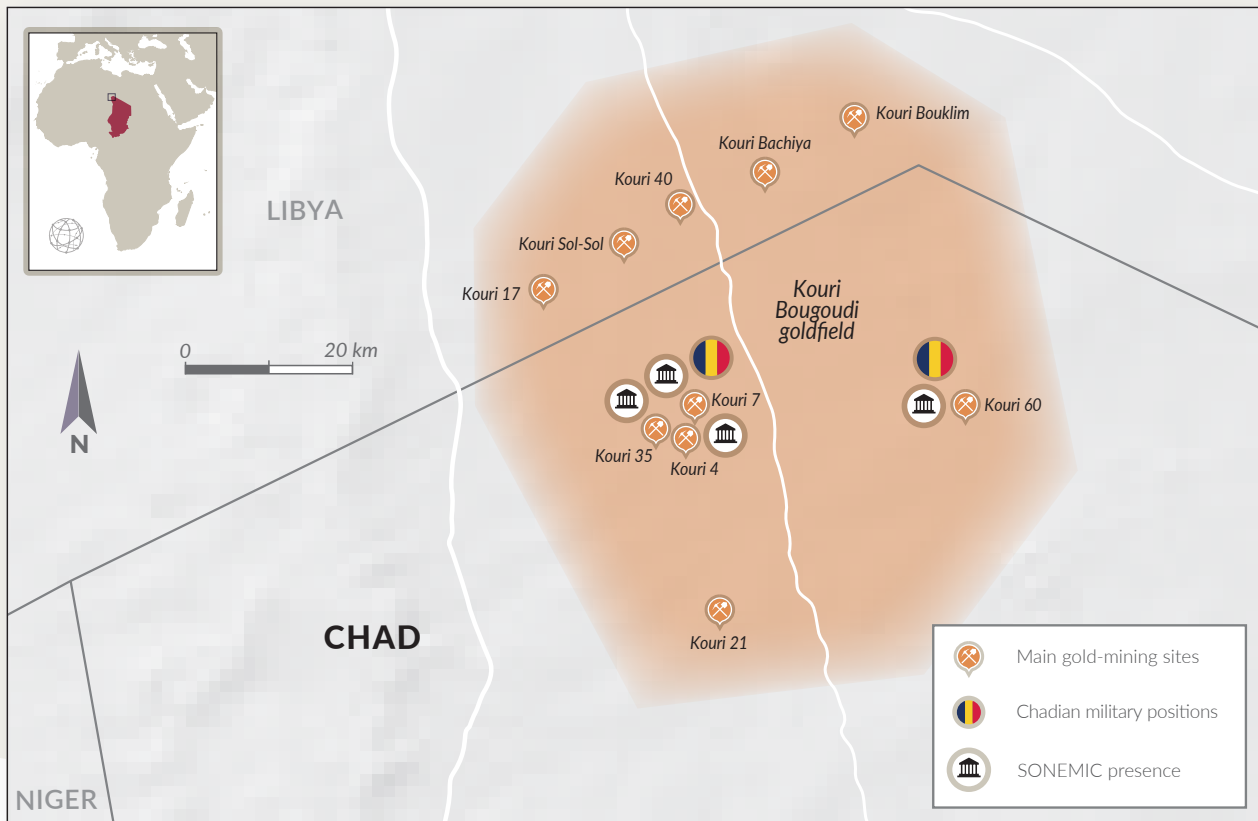


FIGURE 3 Chad's largest goldfield, Kouri Bougoudi, straddles the border with Libya.

The Chadian army, for its part, claimed to have pushed the CCMSR rebels back into Libya. On 20 August, President Déby, who was on a scheduled visit to Kouri Bougoudi to oversee formalization efforts, issued a message to the Chadian rebels: 'I am alive and well, and I want to send this message to the rebels: you have two options. If you want peace, the door is wide open. It is not closed. But if you want the opposite, if you want war, I'm here in Kouri and I'm waiting for you.'⁴³ Déby also warned that the military was prepared to pursue the rebels into Libyan territory to halt their activities.

At around the same time, reports emerged that the Chadian military had carried out air strikes on FACT positions in southern Libya.⁴⁴ The president's message had caused unease in that country, and the LAAF southern operations room issued a statement confirming the air strikes but denying that the Chadian military had entered Libyan territory.⁴⁵

Spokespersons for the CCMSR and FACT responded by saying that they remained ready to resume attacks on Chad. Both groups also reaffirmed their criticism of the national dialogue and transition process led by Déby since he came to power in 2021, and reiterated that they were not signatories of the peace accord signed in Doha, Qatar, in 2022.⁴⁶

However, in the aftermath of these developments, both the CCMSR and FACT faced significant challenges in remaining active in southern Libya due to a crackdown by the LAAF on Chadian rebel groups in August and September. Following the departure of some fighters from both groups to Sudan and the reported surrender of around 100 FACT fighters in Chad, the remaining FACT and CCMSR forces in Libya have reportedly ceded to LAAF pressure and – at least for the time being – ceased incursions and destabilization attempts in Chad.

A third and much smaller group, the Front de la Nation pour la Démocratie et la Justice au Tchad (National Front for Democracy and Justice in Chad – FNDJT), is also no longer active, with most of its remaining 300 or so members having surrendered in Wour in July 2023 following a series of clashes with the Chadian army in June.⁴⁷ The FNDJT's co-founder and former chief of staff Allatchi Koukoulé arrived in Kouri 35 on 1 December alongside Chadian army officials and former FNDJT members now integrated into the Chadian forces. A ceremony was held in Mao in December to mark the return of the former rebels to Chad.⁴⁸

This signals that, despite the apparent shortcomings of the transition process in Chad, the disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) programme, officially launched on 16 October 2023 as part of the implementation of the 2022 peace agreement, appears to be producing results.⁴⁹

On 29 November, 130–150 former rebels who had surrendered at Kouri 35 and Kouri 60, including some from FACT, reportedly arrived in N'Djamena to begin military training at a centre in Linya, south of the town, to begin their integration into Chad's formal military.

The ex-combatants from FACT and the RDC [Rassemblement pour la Démocratie et le Changement – Rally for Democracy and Change] are undergoing military training at the Linya centre. We currently have about 700 former rebel fighters at the military training centre who successfully laid down their arms in 2023 and who will soon join our ranks.

Interview with a Chadian official, December 2023

On 2 January 2024, a further 900 former rebels, this time from the Union des Forces pour la Démocratie et le Développement (Union of Forces for Democracy and Development – UFDD), returned to N'Djamena as part of the DDR process.⁵⁰

As a result of the reduced activity of rebel groups in Libya, the significant number of surrenders and the integration of combatants into the Chadian army, rebel incursions into Chad appear to have been largely contained for the time being. The risk has not been permanently eliminated, as some FACT and CCMSR fighters remain in Libya and the cross-border area, while others may use the conflict in Sudan as an opportunity to regroup and build their capacity and resources. However, the threat posed by Chadian rebels to the national authorities appears to be minimal in the short to medium term.

This is particularly important for the Chadian authorities as they move forward with the transition process, the stalling of which led to rising political tensions in 2022. Although initially intended to be temporary, Déby's presidency, which he assumed after the death of his father, was extended for a further two years in October 2022. News of the term extension, and of the possibility that Déby could stand for election at its conclusion, sparked protests across the country, resulting in the deaths of over 50 demonstrators.⁵¹

Following the conclusion of the national dialogue and the signing of the Doha peace accord in 2022, the next stage of the process was a constitutional referendum, a key step before the 2024 elections and a critical juncture in Chad's transition to civilian rule. The campaign began officially on 25 November 2023. In the context of ongoing political fragmentation and long-standing friction over the repression of opposition groups, the referendum was crucial to ensure the credibility of the transition process and for the Chadian authorities to consolidate power. But it also triggered political tensions. The national dialogue recommendations called for a referendum on the form of state to be adopted in the new constitution before it was drafted. However, the referendum did not allow for such a choice, instead enshrining the principle of a unitary state. Opposition groups claimed that this form of government



had failed to develop Chad properly. As a result, before polling day on 17 December, some opposition platforms called for a vote against the constitution and for a federalist system, while others called for a boycott of the vote.⁵² In addition, the process did not allow for dialogue and debate on other key constitutional issues, such as freedom of expression and political inclusion. There was also criticism of the lack of transparency in the voter registration process, and the pressure that opponents of the new constitution faced during the campaign.

Not surprisingly, the new constitution, backed by the government, was voted in on 24 December.⁵³ However, the opaque management of the referendum, reminiscent of the national dialogue process that preceded it, did not bode well for free and fair elections. In February 2024, political tensions came to a head with the death of the junta's main opponent, Yaya Dillo, in what appears to have been an attack by security forces on the headquarters of his political party, the PSF.⁵⁴ The attack came after both Déby and Yaya Dillo had announced their candidacy. The Chadian government claims security forces were in fact involved in a shoot-out at the party headquarters, after Yaya Dillo refused to surrender to security forces. He was accused of having attacked the offices of the internal security agency the night before. In the aftermath of the incident, 26 members of Dillo's family, including several minors, were arrested and detained at the high security prison of Koro Toro.⁵⁵ In May, 14 were acquitted and 10 sentenced to 10 years.⁵⁶ The circumstances of Dillo's death raised concerns that political violence could further escalate, with Human Rights Watch warning that 'the circumstances of Yaya Dillo's killing are unclear, but his violent death highlights the dangers facing opposition politicians in Chad, particularly as elections approach'.⁵⁷

In fact, days running up to the election and polling day were relatively calm, with no major outbreaks of violence. However, opposition groups and civil society reported having received threats and suffered intimidation by government forces.⁵⁸ The general context of the polling day was therefore tense, with several human rights organizations voicing concerns over human rights violations, the silencing of opposition voices and civil society, and the lack of credibility of the elections.⁵⁹

Among nine other candidates, Déby's main opponent in the elections was Succès Masra, a former opposition leader and head of Les Transformateurs (The Transformers). Although Masra has a strong base of support, he lost some credibility as a genuine opposition figure when he accepted the role of prime minister in January. Results were announced on 9 May, with Déby winning an unsurprising 61,03% of the vote.⁶⁰ Hours before the official announcement, Masra claimed to have won the vote, based on a parallel ballot count, accused the presidential party of electoral fraud, and called for his supporters to protest peacefully.⁶¹ He also lodged a bid with the Constitutional Council to annul the results.⁶² However, by 16 May, the Constitutional Council had rejected Masra's bid and confirmed Déby's victory.⁶³ Déby's victory was a highly predictable conclusion to the three-year transition process.



CONCLUSION

The conflict in Sudan was a major factor shaping the dynamics of mobility and human smuggling in Chad in 2023, and has continued to play a significant role in 2024 so far. As the fighting continues, and experts warn of an impending famine,⁶⁴ the flow of Sudanese refugees and Chadian returnees into Chad will increase the number of people in need of humanitarian assistance, further straining already stretched assistance capacities. The movement of Sudanese refugees from camps in eastern Chad to Libya, Niger or Tunisia is also likely to grow, if the prospect of return to Sudan remains bleak and conditions in Chad remain poor. This could bolster the demand for smuggling services through Chad, particularly on the northern routes.

In addition, the formalization and reorganization of gold-mining activities at Kouri Bougoudi could also trigger an increase in the northward migration of prospective gold miners. Preliminary research suggests that security checks and restrictions on movement north have eased somewhat in early 2024, most noticeably on routes from Kanem, reportedly as a result of ongoing efforts to regularize and promote gold mining in the region. These routes had been under strict control since 2021, forcing migrants to resort to smugglers using bypass routes to travel north. With demand likely to continue to rise as gold mining booms, any relaxation of security measures will lead to increased movement.

Apart from these gold-mining dynamics, northbound movements should also benefit from the reduced risk of rebel incursions following the weakening of key Libya-based rebel groups. If the DDR process develops in a credible and sustainable manner, the risk of clashes and conflict, which have plagued northern Chad for decades, could be significantly reduced. However, it is unclear whether the efforts to demobilize and reintegrate former rebels – often a key challenge for DDR processes – will be durable in the medium to long term. Beyond the highly mediatized ceremonies marking the return of former rebels, the Chadian government will need to ensure that long-term avenues for employment, whether military or civilian, are provided. Notably, the Chadian authorities have yet to secure funding for the process, and have approached several potential donors, including the EU, in recent months.

However, Déby has sought to leverage Chad's position as an island of relative stability in the region in its relations with international partners. The president's visit to Moscow in January 2024 sent a clear signal to Chad's key partners – France and the US – that the country could seek new partnerships should existing ones fail to sustain its needs.⁶⁵

In April, Chadian officials sent a letter to the US defence attaché threatening to cancel the Status of Forces Agreement, and reportedly requested that the US withdraw its military personnel from a French airbase in N'Djamena. This raised concerns that Chad may follow in the footsteps of neighbouring Niger and revoke its military partnerships with the US. However, US officials claimed that the issue was largely administrative, stating that the Chadian authorities had questioned the legality of the Status of Forces Agreement but had communicated that they wished to continue the partnership once the elections were over. The US subsequently withdrew 60 of its approximately 100 personnel from Chad, noting that the relocation was temporary and that security cooperation would resume after the May elections.⁶⁶ It remains unclear whether and how Chad's military partnership with the US will resume.

So far, no such moves have threatened the French military presence in Chad. These troops, numbering around 3 000, have become increasingly important to French security interests in the region, as the European country has been forced gradually to withdraw from the Sahel following successive coups in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger.⁶⁷ However, faced with a combination of escalating regional security risks and the threat of internal unrest, Chad may well seek a strategic rapprochement with Russia.

These geopolitical dynamics, and Chad's perceived capacity to leverage them to its advantage, could reduce international pressure on Déby to honour his commitments to democracy. The lack of credibility during the 2022 dialogue process, the violent repression of the October 2022 protests, the brutal killing of Yaya Dillo in February and the continued muzzling of dissident voices are clear indicators that the transition process was largely superficial and fell severely short of its purported democratic goals. International condemnation has remained relatively muted, however, in a context where stability in Chad – for which political continuity is seen as a key condition – is a top priority for regional stability. But Chad's ruling elite also faces threats from within. The transition took place in a climate of internal fragmentation, and Déby faces growing discontent from sections of the Zaghawa community, to which his father belonged and which represents a powerful group within the military. The escalation of these tensions – which could be further fuelled by fighting in Sudan between the RSF and pro-government Zaghawa groups – could seriously threaten Déby's position and raise risks of another military takeover. The situation in Chad should therefore continue to be closely monitored in 2024.



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