

HUMAN SMUGGLING AND TRAFFICKING ECOSYSTEMS
– NORTH AFRICA AND THE SAHEL

2025 SERIES



**GLOBAL
INITIATIVE**
AGAINST TRANSNATIONAL
ORGANIZED CRIME

CHAD

MOVEMENT OF SUDANESE
REFUGEES DRIVES HIGH DEMAND
FOR HUMAN SMUGGLING

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INTRODUCTION

Chad's role as a departure and transit country for northbound migration to North Africa and Europe is often overlooked, particularly in comparison to neighbouring Niger and Sudan. However, the country's position at the crossroads of routes connecting central and eastern Africa to Libya and Niger makes it a significant transit corridor for regional migration, and its role as a bastion of relative stability in an increasingly volatile region has further increased its importance in recent years.

Since 2023, the conflict in Sudan and a major influx of refugees into Chad have further shaped these mobility dynamics, making the country a major destination and transit point for Sudanese refugee displacement in the region. At the same time, Chad is navigating a fractious and contested political transition. Political violence escalated in 2024 and remains an important source of tension and political instability. The combination of these complex internal and regional dynamics, and their impact on human smuggling dynamics, make Chad a key country to monitor.

A major component of human smuggling dynamics in Chad is internal movements to the country's northern goldfields. These mobility patterns have typically been shaped by internal factors, including political instability, rebel activity and gold mining.¹ This changed in 2023 with the outbreak of the conflict in Sudan and the massive influx of refugees and returnees into eastern Chad. Though northbound movements were temporarily hindered by this shift, which resulted in a relative decrease in demand for northbound travel from eastern Chad in the early months of the conflict, by the end of 2023 human smuggling had picked up again as many Sudanese began leaving refugee camps with the intention of travelling to northern Chad, Libya, Niger and Tunisia, often with the help of smugglers.²

In 2024, these movements escalated further and human smuggling between eastern and northern Chad saw significant growth, due in large part to increasing demand among Sudanese refugees for travel to northern Chad and Libya. However, the movement of Sudanese refugees through Chad also involved travel to Niger via N'Djamena or northern Chad.

Northbound movements in Chad were also driven by increasing demand for travel to the Kouri Bougoudi goldfield. The flow of prospective gold miners, which began after the goldfield reopened at the end of 2022, was also facilitated by decreased restrictions on northbound travel as risks of rebel incursions in northern Chad remained contained in 2024. This encouraged the activities of *passeurs*, who catered to increasing demand for northbound travel, particularly from eastern Chad.

Overall, Chad recorded progressively increasing movement levels in 2024 compared to previous years, presaging its emergence as an important space to watch for migrant and refugee movement, and associated protection risks.

This is the latest GI-TOC monitoring report on human smuggling in Chad. It builds on a series of annual reports – issued since 2019 – which track the evolution of human smuggling in Chad and the political, security and economic dynamics that influence it.

Methodology

The report is based on the GI-TOC's field monitoring system. During 2024 – 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. This data was used to formulate questions and inquiry areas for field research and validate field interviews conducted by researchers.

Care has been taken to triangulate the information. However, the issues detailed in this report are inherently opaque and the geographic areas covered often remote, volatile or difficult to access. Because of this, the report should be viewed as a snapshot that will feed into future reporting and analysis from the GI-TOC that is planned to capture the rapidly evolving dynamics in Chad and the broader region.



Sudanese refugees wait to be relocated to a camp in Tiné. Sudan's conflict dynamics have had major consequences for the humanitarian, economic and security situation in eastern Chad. © Lynsey Addario/Getty Images

Key points

- In 2024, the dynamics of human smuggling in Chad were shaped by a context of fragile stability, threatened by risks associated with the conflict in Sudan, as well as internal political tensions.
- While Chad's elections officially marked the end of its three-year transition to civilian rule, the process was marred by political violence, crackdowns on opposition figures and restrictions on civic freedoms, resulting in the consolidation of power by President Mahamat Idriss Déby and the ruling party.
- The political situation was also affected by the ongoing and escalating conflict in Sudan. Chad's stance towards the warring parties exacerbated communal and political tensions, triggering a major diplomatic crisis between the two countries.
- Conversely, northern Chad experienced a period of relative stability in 2024, with risks posed by rebel groups largely curtailed and gold mining booming in Kouri Bougoudi. This led to an easing of restrictions on northbound travel and drove a significant increase in movement among prospective workers seeking employment at the goldfields, particularly from eastern Chad.
- The deteriorating economic situation in eastern Chad due to the Sudan conflict was also a key factor pushing young Chadians to seek livelihood opportunities in the north and in Libya.
- The mass influx of Sudanese refugees to eastern Chad, the poor living conditions in refugee camps and the reduced likelihood of returning to Sudan also led to increased migration to northern Chad, Libya and Niger.



FRACTIONOUS STABILITY IN AN UNSTABLE REGION

Throughout 2024, the political and security situation in Chad remained fragile. After three years of military rule, 2024 saw the transitional process come to an end with presidential and parliamentary elections. However, like much of the rest of the transitional process, its final stages were marred by political violence, tensions and crackdowns on civic space.

The transition began in 2021 when President Mahamat Idriss Déby seized power and instated a transitional military council after the death of his father, President Idriss Déby Itno, who was killed during clashes with the Front pour l'Alternance et la Concorde au Tchad (Front for Change and Concord in Chad – FACT).³ Initially scheduled to last only 18 months, the transitional period was repeatedly extended.

After a contested constitutional referendum in December 2023, which enshrined the principle of a unitary state advocated by the transitional authorities, political violence escalated in early 2024.⁴ In February, the junta's main opponent, Yaya Dillo, was killed by security forces in a disputed incident at the headquarters of his political party, the Parti Socialiste Sans Frontières (Socialist Party Without Borders), shortly after Déby and Dillo had announced their candidacies in the May presidential elections.⁵ The government claimed the incident took place after Dillo refused to surrender to security forces and a shoot-out ensued. It accused him of having attacked the offices of the internal security agency the night before. Dillo's supporters have disputed these claims, alleging that the party headquarters was the subject of a targeted attack.

Following Dillo's death, 26 members of his family, including several minors, were arrested and detained at the high-security Koro Toro Prison on undisclosed charges.⁶ In December 2024, 23 of them were released.⁷ The arrests and the unclear circumstances of Dillo's death raised concerns that political violence could escalate further.⁸

Despite the flare-up of violence and repression in February, polling day (6 May) and the days leading up to it were relatively calm. However, opposition groups and civil society claimed to have received threats and suffered intimidation by government forces.⁹ Several human rights organizations also voiced concerns about human rights violations, the silencing of opposition voices and civil society, and the election's lack of credibility.¹⁰ The election therefore took place in a controversial and tense political context.

Ten candidates contested the election. Déby's main rival was Succès Masra, a former opposition leader and head of Les Transformateurs (The Transformers). Masra had temporarily fled the country after an outbreak of violence in October 2022 – during which Chadian security forces fired on protesters demanding a return to civilian rule – and subsequent arbitrary detentions and a crack-down on civil society and opposition.¹¹ He returned in November 2023 after an agreement with the Chadian authorities brokered by President Félix Tshisekedi of the Democratic Republic of the Congo – the Kinshasa Accord – and was appointed prime minister in January 2024.¹²

Déby won the election with 61% of the vote.¹³ Masra also claimed victory, accusing the presidential party of electoral fraud, and applied to the Constitutional Council to have the election annulled.¹⁴ His application was rejected, and Déby's victory was confirmed.¹⁵

The final step of the transition process involved parliamentary elections on 29 December. As with the May election, the political context remained tense, with more than 10 opposition parties boycotting the poll and accusing the ruling party – the Mouvement Patriotique du Salut (Patriotic Salvation Movement – MPS) – of electoral fraud. The MPS won the election, securing 124 of the 188 seats in the National Assembly,¹⁶ and won 43 out of 46 senatorial seats in the February 2025 elections, further consolidating control of Chadian institutions by the party and Déby.¹⁷

The end of the transitional period was also marked by the arrest of Masra in May 2025. He was accused of inciting violence linked to a wave of intercommunal violence that killed 42 people in the south-west of the country earlier that month. In August 2025, he was found guilty of 'dissemination of messages of a hateful and xenophobic nature' and 'complicity in murder' and sentenced to 20 years in prison. Masra, who pleaded not guilty, said he would appeal and his lawyers denounced the lack of evidence submitted to the court and what they described as an instrumentalization of justice.¹⁸ Human Rights Watch said the trial was a violation of the Kinshasa Accord, politically motivated and aimed at silencing opposition voices, citing concerns for Chad's democratic process and the judiciary's independence.¹⁹

The conclusion of the transitional period with the sentencing of Déby's main political opponent is a striking illustration of a highly contested, fractious and often violent political process resulting in continuity of the ruling elite rather than effective democratic transition. The consolidation of power in the hands of Déby and the MPS throughout 2024 and into 2025 happened amid repression of opposition and shrinking of civic space.

Sudan's conflict influences internal politics

Chad's internal politics also continue to be significantly affected by the war in Sudan. Since 2023, Chad's official stance of neutrality in the conflict has contrasted with several reports that it has allowed the United Arab Emirates (UAE) to use its territory to supply arms to the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) through Amdjarass in eastern Chad.²⁰ The UAE's use of the Amdjarass airbase is said to be part of a deal with the UAE involving substantial loans to Chadian authorities. In addition to media reports, allegations of UAE support to the RSF via Chad were also made by the Sudanese Armed Forces and were deemed credible by the UN panel of experts on Sudan.²¹ The UAE has consistently denied these allegations.²²

Chad's reported involvement in the Sudanese conflict has triggered major local and international tensions. Within Chad, the support allegedly provided to the RSF via Amdjarass has angered members of the Zaghawa community. The Zaghawa community, to which Déby's father belonged, is a key political and communal constituency in Chad and occupies a powerful role in the military. The community is also present in Darfur, where it was previously involved in the 2003–2020 conflict, which opposed non-Arab Darfuri rebels (including Zaghawa groups) and Khartoum-backed Arab militias such as the Janjaweed, from which the RSF originate.²³ Cross-border ties between these groups in Sudan and Chad also resulted in several years of proxy war between the two countries.²⁴ Since 2023, similar dynamics have resurfaced, with Chadian fighters joining opposing sides of the Sudanese conflict.

In 2024, this led to significant tensions in Chad. In February, the killing of Yaya Dillo – whose brother, Ousmane Dillo, had joined the ranks of Sudanese Armed Forces-aligned Zaghawa groups in Darfur several months earlier – triggered calls for vengeance among the Zaghawa and reportedly persuaded many Zaghawa fighters to travel to Sudan to join Ousmane Dillo.²⁵

These tensions triggered a diplomatic crisis between Chad and Sudan, which accused each other of arming and supporting rebels. The crisis escalated in November 2024 when Sudan lodged a complaint against Chad at the African Union over its alleged support of the RSF. Chad responded by accusing Sudan of supporting 'terrorist' groups aiming to destabilize Chad, referring to Ousmane Dillo's mobilization in El Fasher.²⁶ In March 2025, Lieutenant-General Yasir al-Atta, the Sudanese Armed Forces deputy commander, threatened 'retaliatory action' against Chad, claiming its airports were legitimate targets due to their role in supplying the RSF with Emirati arms.²⁷

While these threats have not yet materialized, they represent major destabilization risks for Chad, both from within the country and from Sudan.²⁸

Old partnerships give way to new accommodations

At the same time, Déby engaged in reshaping Chad's international relations. The most significant shift in 2024 was the curtailment of defence cooperation with the former colonial power, France. The longstanding partnership has been a key element of Chad's defence framework, resulting in several interventions by the French military over recent decades to protect Chad's government from internal and external threats, most recently in February 2019.²⁹ The cooperation also allowed France to base military forces and equipment in Chad, establishing crucial logistical hubs for its military strategy in the Sahel. Chad's role as a military hub for France became all the more important with the withdrawal, starting in 2022, of French troops from Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger. Some of the troops were relocated to Chad.³⁰

However, on 28 November 2024 Chad announced the end of its military cooperation agreement with France.³¹ The departure of the roughly 1 000 French troops in the country (and their equipment) began on 10 December and was completed on 30 January 2025 with the transfer of France's last military base in the Sahel to the Chadian army.³²

The reshaping of Chad's ties with France did not involve the same degree of diplomatic rupture and hostility as recorded with Sahelian states such as Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger. Unlike Chad, those countries had experienced major regime changes in coups since 2020, which catalyzed the breaks. In Chad, the 2021 seizure of power by Déby allowed for a high degree of political and diplomatic continuity, and Déby adopted many policy positions held by his father, one of France's strongest allies in the region.



Vote counting at a polling station in N'Djamena, May 2024. Chad's elections marked the end of its transition to civilian rule, but the process was marred by political and civil restrictions and violence.

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The deterioration of relations with France therefore surprised many observers and French diplomats. Several events may have contributed to the rupture, including the opening of a judicial investigation in France in July into alleged embezzlement by Chad's president, and the cancellation of several of Déby's visits to France in the summer of 2024.³³

However, a major source of tension erupted in the weeks leading up to Chad's decision to end defence cooperation with France. During a meeting with President Emmanuel Macron in Paris in October, Déby reportedly suggested Chad should remain neutral in the Sudan war and mentioned the UAE's role in the conflict – which involves support of the RSF, including the provision of arms via Chad. This was followed on 27 and 28 November by French foreign minister Jean-Noël Barrot's calls, during visits to N'Djamena and Adre, for Chadian neutrality.³⁴

These events reportedly raised tensions between the two countries, since Chad's delicate positioning towards the conflict was a major source of internal tensions and risks to stability.³⁵ Chad's decision to end defence cooperation with France was announced shortly after Barrot's departure from the country.

Chad's diversification of security partners also affected the US. In April 2024, Chadian officials questioned the legality of the Status of Forces Agreement that enabled US forces to operate in Chad. This resulted in the withdrawal of US forces stationed at a French military base in N'Djamena,³⁶ a month after US troops had been forced to withdraw from neighbouring Niger.³⁷ Though US officials initially claimed the issue was largely administrative and that the withdrawal was temporary, the US announcement that its troops would return to Chad in September 2024 was denied by Chadian authorities and has not happened.³⁸

Even as Chad has curtailed ties with the US and France, it has engaged in a rapprochement with Russia.³⁹ This shift marks the end of a period of tensions between Chadian and Russian actors which culminated in reports of Russian support to Chadian rebels in the Central African Republic and even an assassination attempt on Déby in February 2023, according to a leaked communication between the US and Chad.⁴⁰ The Wagner Group was also reported to have courted influential actors who may have sway within the government.⁴¹ However, since the August 2023 death of Yevgeny Prigozhin, the head of Wagner, Russian engagement in Chad has been reshaped.⁴² Déby met President Vladimir Putin in Moscow in January 2024 and Russian foreign minister Sergey Lavrov in N'Djamena in June 2024.⁴³ In early 2024, rumours also surfaced of the deployment of Russian troops to Chad.⁴⁴ According to two contacts in the region, Russian trainers may have arrived at the beginning of 2024 to train the newly formed Force d'Intervention Rapide (Rapid Intervention Force).⁴⁵ This military unit was reportedly created by the president as a counterweight to the powerful Direction Générale de Service de Sécurité des Institutions de l'État (General Directorate of the Security Service for State Institutions).⁴⁶ The new unit was first acknowledged publicly when it was deployed to the Lake Chad region in July.⁴⁷ However, the Force d'Intervention Rapide is also said to have been involved in the February raid on the Parti Socialiste Sans Frontières headquarters which claimed Yaya Dillo's life.⁴⁸

Russia was also involved in an unusual incident in May 2024 involving the liberation of Chadian soldiers held by Chadian rebels in southern Libya. Russian authorities announced they had freed 21 soldiers in a joint operation with Chad's military, and facilitated their transfer to Niamey.⁴⁹ However, Chadian authorities denied being involved in the operation and the Conseil de Commandement Militaire pour le Salut de la République (Military Command Council for the Salvation of the Republic), the group that had captured the soldiers in northern Chad in August 2023, said it had negotiated the release of the prisoners with Russian forces in Jufra, southern Libya, in exchange for military equipment.⁵⁰

We are tired of our traditional partners like France. We need new partners to be able to judge for ourselves: who is really best for Chad? France, Russia, China, Hungary or the United States? We are in the process of diversifying our alliances, encouraged by the highest authorities. We will live this experience for ourselves.

Interview with a member of the MPS, September 2024

The contours of Russia's involvement in Chad are unclear – and far less pronounced than its activities in neighbouring Libya, Sudan and the Central African Republic, and other countries in the Sahel region. It is likely that Chadian authorities are navigating a complex set of political and security considerations involved in diversifying international partnerships, while mitigating risks of internal and regional destabilization. The levels of political violence surrounding the transitional process and internal tensions triggered by the conflict in Sudan mean outright security and defence cooperation with Russia could involve significant risks. If Chad's rapprochement with Russia develops, it could also involve economic cooperation. Chad's lucrative extractive industry, in particular gold mining in the north, could be a target for Russian investment. The area's history of conflict and deep-rooted grievances around the control of gold mining, however, mean any attempts at Russian involvement in northern Chad would risk major outbreaks of violence.⁵¹ Such a move would also compromise relatively successful efforts by the Chadian authorities to defuse instability in the north and stabilize gold-mining areas.



Photo: GI-TOC

The north stabilizes, enabling higher levels of migration

Chad's northern regions have been highly unstable in recent years. Rebel groups based in southern Libya, such as the Conseil de Commandement Militaire pour le Salut de la République and FACT, have made repeated incursions since 2021. While none has posed an existential threat to the Chadian state, they have had major ramifications on power in the country, such as when Déby's father was killed in unclear circumstances while directing the response to a FACT attack. Less dramatically, several community armed groups and small rebel formations are active across the north, complicating the degree of control the state has been able to project in the region.

Political and security dynamics in the north, and the linked status of gold mining in the region, have typically been the main factors shaping human smuggling dynamics over the last decade.⁵² Instability has tended to impede movement, with the Chadian authorities imposing increased restrictions due to concerns that young Chadians travelling north could join rebel groups or engage in illicit gold mining in Kouri Bougoudi, which straddles the Libyan border.

In 2024, despite the persistence of smaller groups and pockets of instability, the risks posed by Chadian rebel groups were largely curtailed by three key developments: they faced a crackdown on their activity by the Libyan Arab Armed Forces in southern Libya; many of their fighters were redeployed to fight in Sudan; and many others surrendered to Chadian authorities by the end of 2023 and into 2024 as part of Chad's disarmament, demobilization and reintegration programme.⁵³

As a result, northern Chad enjoyed relative stability compared to previous years, with northbound travel seen as less of a threat to stability by the authorities. In turn, this meant *passeurs* transporting people to northern Chad faced fewer risks and could operate more freely, even as demand for passage north increased due to rising economic opportunities in the goldfields.

Gold mining in Kouri Bougoudi drives uptick in movement

One of the main factors driving human smuggling in Chad in 2024 was the continued boom in gold-mining activity in Kouri Bougoudi. The trend began with the reopening of the goldfield in October 2022 after an eight-month closure. Since then, it has been facilitated by the legalization of gold-mining activities and a significant formalization drive, attracting growing numbers of miners to the area.

At the end of 2023, the population of Kouri Bougoudi was estimated at 35 000–40 000, similar to its peak before the closure.⁵⁴ According to a Société Nationale d'Exploitation Minière et de Contrôle (National Society for the Exploitation and Control of Mining – SONEMIC) official, it grew rapidly in 2024 and reached about 50 000 by the beginning of 2025. Other contacts in the area said this figure could be higher, estimating as many as 80 000 people across Kouri Bougoudi's mining sites, some which are not overseen by SONEMIC.

The favourable conditions in northern Chad significantly shaped human smuggling dynamics, particularly from eastern Chad, by triggering a growing demand for northbound movement. The demand includes not only those working in mining operations but also the broader set of auxiliary economies that service gold sites and cater to gold miners, such as trading in food and basic commodities, accommodation, restaurants, telephone services and mechanical services.

The steady growth of activities in Kouri Bougoudi was also facilitated by an easing of checks and restrictions on access to the goldfield in 2024. In 2023, the formalization process implemented by SONEMIC required goldfield workers to register and obtain an access card. Initially, this requirement was enforced relatively robustly, and workers without the required documentation faced risks of expulsion or detention.⁵⁵ At the beginning of 2024, the enforcement of regulations appeared to ease. According to local contacts, individual workers no longer faced documentation checks, and the eased restrictions remained in place at the time of writing.

However, individual workers can no longer operate independently and must be employed by a registered business, mining company or cooperative; and a SONEMIC official explained that a new regulation introduced in September 2024 requires mining companies and gold site owners to register with SONEMIC and obtain permits. Reportedly, former illicit site owners must also apply for permits that allow them to employ people. This formalization allowed SONEMIC to regulate and retain oversight over gold mining by focusing on employers rather than individuals. However, it reduces opportunities for individual workers to engage in artisanal and small-scale mining independently and forces them to depend on employment by a company or a gold site owner.

Dependence on employment can in some contexts heighten risks and vulnerabilities to exploitative practices. This is because employees in gold mining – in which the economic model relies on cheap labour – often have little say in how much they are paid or their working conditions, since they are often in a position of financial vulnerability. Furthermore, the financial arrangements can sometimes mean employees are paid only if they find gold, meaning they can sometimes work for months without pay. Across the border in Niger, the dependence on employment by mining companies and gradual restriction of artisanal and individual operations resulting from a formalization drive has in some cases increased risks of labour trafficking and abuse.⁵⁶

Though no evidence of an increase in labour trafficking or exploitation in Kouri Bougoudi was found during data collection for this report, previous GI-TOC reporting has highlighted significant human trafficking linked to gold mining in Kouri Bougoudi.⁵⁷ In addition to dependence on employment, key vulnerability factors include the goldfield's remote geographic location and the tendency to travel on credit to the goldfields. Travelling on credit can result in indentured labour agreements whereby employers pay smugglers for their employees' travel, requiring the employee to work for free to reimburse these costs before earning a wage. Human trafficking dynamics are also – and perhaps more – highly prevalent in other gold-mining areas in northern Chad that lie beyond the control of Chadian authorities.

The presence of SONEMIC in Kouri Bougoudi nominally means workers can address complaints to local officials in the event of exploitation or abuse, although it is unclear whether appropriate mechanisms are in place to address these risks.

Overall, formalization in Kouri Bougoudi has resulted in an increase in economic activities, employment opportunities and security, which in turn has attracted increasing numbers of people to the goldfield. According to local contacts, the number of people travelling to the goldfield saw a steady increase in 2024, mostly involving arrivals from eastern Chad. Most arrivals were Chadians, followed by Sudanese, Nigeriens, Nigerians, Burkinabés, Mauritians and Egyptians. Foreign nationals, with the exception of Sudanese, mostly arrived from Libya.



HUMAN SMUGGLING CONTEXT IN CHAD

Routes in eastern Chad are the major corridors for northbound travel, including for migrants coming from other regions of the country. Though growing numbers of Sudanese refugees are using these routes (see following sections), Chadians form the largest group of people heading north. They are typically young men from the south and east of the country who are for the most part travelling in search of economic opportunities in goldfields or Libya. Very few Chadians travel further north in Libya to attempt a maritime journey to Europe.

Eastern Chad's role as a departure point for the north is due to several factors:

- Its largest city, Abeche, is connected to the capital, N'Djamena, by a main road and regular commercial bus services. This means migrants can reach eastern Chad easily from the south-west of the country. Eastern Chad can also be reached relatively easily from the south-east.
- The region's location at the border with Sudan makes it a key transit point for those arriving from Sudan.
- Northbound movement from eastern Chad is easier than travel from western Chad. Routes in the west are more challenging due to tighter controls on movements by the Chadian authorities.⁵⁸ From eastern Chad, movements have typically enjoyed more freedom and rely on longstanding trade and smuggling routes between Chad, Libya and Sudan.
- The region also has significant local demand for northbound travel, especially to the goldfields.

Due to the absence of public transport connecting eastern and northern Chad, and limited road infrastructure, these movements rely heavily on the services of *passeurs*, who offer several routes. Abeche, 130 kilometres from the Sudanese border, is a key departure point. Adre, at the Sudanese border 150 kilometres east of Abeche, is also a key departure point, though most people travelling from Adre and other localities east of Abeche transit via Abeche to move north. A third key departure point is Tiné, a border town 245 kilometres north-east of Abeche. Departures from Tiné do not transit Abeche. However, most routes from eastern Chad, including from Tiné, Adre and Abeche, converge in Kalait, 260 kilometres north of Abeche. From Kalait, they typically travel 300 kilometres north-west to Faya-Largeau, a major crossroads connecting northern Chad to the rest of the country. From Faya-Largeau, the main route to Kouri Bougoudi and Libya transits Yaou, Zouarké and Wour. Several minor smuggling routes also head due north to Libya.

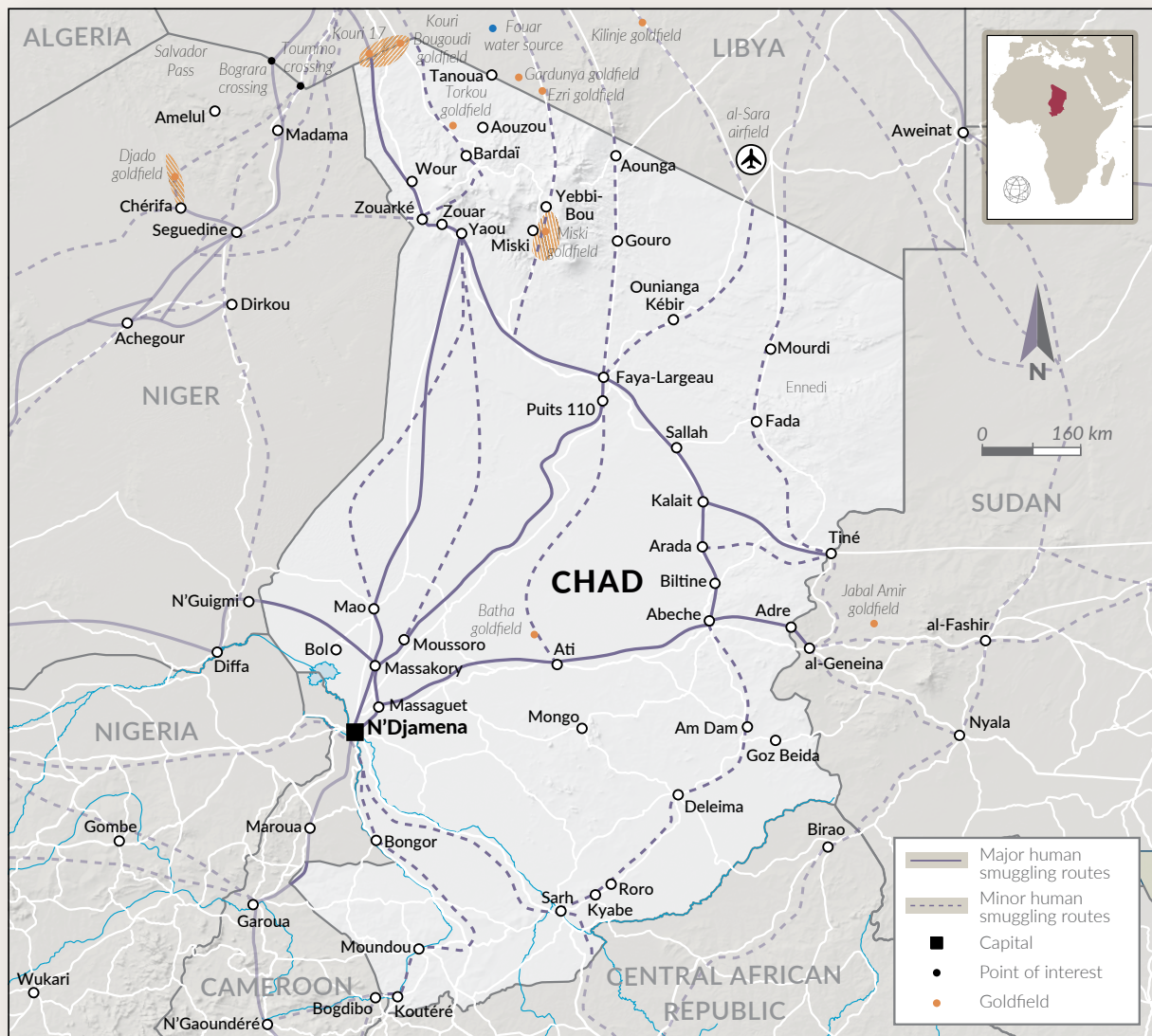


FIGURE 1 Chad, showing main human smuggling routes.

The number of departures from eastern Chad increased considerably in 2024. *Passeurs* in Abeche reported that between 40 and 70 vehicles departed each week towards northern Chad, transporting a total of 1000–1700 passengers. These figures were significantly higher than at the end of 2023, when between eight and 10 trucks reportedly departed each week, carrying 250–400 passengers.

In Tiné, the number of departures was lower due to the smaller size of the town and its less prominent role as a transit point. An estimated 28–35 vehicles per week departed the town in 2024, transporting 90–100 passengers.

In estimating the number of people travelling from eastern to northern Chad, transit points further downstream in northern Chad are also useful, since routes from eastern Chad, including Abeche and Tiné, typically converge there. In April 2025, a shopkeeper in Yaou, a key chokepoint in northern



At an informal transport station – known locally as *tacha* – in Faya-Largeau, vehicles prepare for departure to Kouri Bougoudi, February 2024. Photo: GI-TOC

Chad, estimated the number of people travelling through the town from eastern Chad at 360–500 a day, based on the 18–20 vehicles arriving daily. However, this total covers a range of profiles, including migrants travelling to Libya, foreign and Chadian gold miners and other workers travelling to the goldfields, as well as traders and other profiles travelling for personal or work-related purposes.

The impact of the Sudan conflict on the economic situation in eastern Chad has also resulted in increased demand for travel north among young Chadians. The price of basic commodities – many of which are imported from Sudan – has risen drastically due to the conflict’s disruption of supply chains.⁵⁹ The disruption of local economies has reduced employment opportunities, further exacerbating poor living conditions. The mass arrival of vulnerable populations has also placed intense pressure on already scarce resources such as water, land and basic services. Limited access to water and the establishment of refugee camps and informal settlements on agricultural land has triggered tensions among host communities, who rely heavily on agriculture.⁶⁰

According to local contacts in Abeche, these shifts have pushed many young people to leave eastern Chad in search of economic opportunities in gold mining in northern Chad or further afield.

Passeurs also reported that checks and restrictions on northbound travel from eastern Chad decreased in 2024. They said the decrease in restrictions on northbound routes began in 2023 and continued throughout 2024. *Passeurs* operating on these routes in 2024 reported that they have not faced restrictions since 2023 and operate mostly freely.

However, restrictions on northbound routes are subject to change. GI-TOC interviews with security actors suggest that while there are periods when restrictions are low, they can be enforced without warning in the event of a shift in security dynamics.

As a result, some *passeurs* still operate with relative caution, avoiding certain checkpoints if they can and if they believe they may be stopped or delayed by security checks. Some also avoid these checkpoints due to the cost of fees demanded by security forces or law enforcement. A police officer in Zouarké told the GI-TOC: 'Even though there is little enforcement, transporters sometimes use bypass routes to avoid controls.'

A *passeur* explained that he pays a small amount to security personnel at key checkpoints in exchange for information allowing him to avoid inspections. This is because in the event of a security check by the police or gendarmerie, they will require the payment of a bribe of about FCFA1 000 (€2.30) from each passenger, which can delay the journey, especially if some passengers cannot pay and he has to lend them the money. The main incentive to bypass checks is therefore to avoid delays and additional financial arrangements rather than risks of arrest or being turned back.

Movement of Sudanese refugees from eastern Chad surges

Sudanese refugees form another major group of people on the move in Chad. Though many aim first for refugee camps, a growing number are choosing to travel onwards to northern Chad, Libya or Niger. Sudanese refugees can spend several weeks, months or years in refugee camps in eastern Chad before deciding to travel, depending on the living conditions they face, their need to support their families and their capacity to fund a migration journey. The growing number of arrivals, which has exacerbated poor living conditions in eastern Chad, has driven an increase in the number of Sudanese refugees seeking onward travel.



By January 2025, over 950 000 Sudanese refugees had arrived in Chad, settling in makeshift refugee camps, like this one in Wadi Fira. Assistance frameworks are largely overwhelmed. © Joris Bolomey/AFP via Getty Images



Photo: GI-TOC

By January 2025, the number of arrivals totalled more than 950 000 since the beginning of the conflict.⁶¹ Before this, Chad already hosted about 410 000 Sudanese refugees who fled Sudan during the 2003 conflict.⁶² Most of those displaced arrived in the regions of Ouaddaï, Sila, Wadi Fira and Ennedi Est. These arrivals took place in spontaneous sites along the border, often involving makeshift shelters, from where many refugees were relocated towards formal refugee camps further inside the country.

Faced with this mass arrival of refugees, assistance frameworks in eastern Chad have been largely overwhelmed and have struggled to respond to the growing need for shelter, food, clean water and health care. The dire situation in refugee camps and spontaneous sites also resulted in a health crisis involving several outbreaks of infectious diseases and widespread malnutrition. There were more than 140 000 severely malnourished people by December 2024.⁶³

The situation in eastern Chad, including the arrival of refugees, poor conditions in refugee camps and the deterioration of the economic situation, has driven demand for northbound travel among Sudanese refugees and local Chadians.

The number of Sudanese leaving refugee camps in eastern Chad for onward travel increased steadily throughout 2024. This was due to the diminishing prospects of returning to Sudan as the conflict dragged on, and poor living conditions in the refugee camps.

Contacts in eastern Chad reported a steady increase in the number of Sudanese migrants travelling to the north of the country in 2024, although precise numbers are difficult to assess. From the camps, Sudanese refugees either travel north to the goldfields of northern Chad or further afield to Libya, or west to N'Djamena and then into Niger, often with the aim of reaching Tunisia or Algeria. Some also travel through northern Chad to Niger.

While some Sudanese travel to Libya or Tunisia to attempt the sea crossing to Europe, others – typically adult men – head for goldfields across the Sahel. Gold mining provides an opportunity for migrants to earn money to support their families, who may have remained in Chad, or to finance a journey to Europe. The number of Sudanese miners in Nigerien goldfields, as well as those in Algeria and Mali, has also reportedly increased, due mainly to the large Sudanese communities already in these areas.

The number of Sudanese arriving in Kouri Bougoudi saw a significant increase, with *passeurs* and local contacts noting a rise from 200–400 per month at the beginning of 2024 to 300–450 per month at the end of the year. In the first half of 2025, the estimate further increased to up to 600 per month.

Some use Kouri Bougoudi as a transit point where they can fund the next part of their journey through temporary work. Their transit time in Kouri Bougoudi can range from several weeks to several months, depending on their financial needs and their ability to find work. In 2024, an estimated 160 Sudanese travelled from Kouri Bougoudi north to Libya each month. Though some migrants stay in southern Libya to find employment, others continue north with the aim of attempting a maritime journey to Europe.

Migrants who remain in Kouri Bougoudi for longer periods are typically those with more successful economic ventures in which they employ others, such as a well-established gold-mining operation or a local business. Many restaurants in Kouri Bougoudi are run by Sudanese.

Routes to Niger see rising demand among Sudanese

In addition to northbound routes from eastern Chad, routes through the south-west of the country to Niger have also seen more movement by Sudanese refugees. This rise has taken place amid a broader increase in travel to Niger. The Daboua–N'Guigmi route is the main one used, offering a relatively straightforward connection between N'Djamena and the Diffa region of Niger. These movements are legal and typically subject to far less surveillance and restrictions than northbound movements through Chad.

Informal transport companies using Toyota Hilux pick-up trucks offer regular departures from transport stations known as *tacha*. These routes run from N'Djamena to N'Guigmi, a small town in Niger 40 kilometres from the Chadian border and 120 kilometres north-east of Diffa. Some migrants also depart from Massaguet and Bol (60 and 150 kilometres north of N'Djamena, respectively). However, these are mostly local Chadians. Most departures take place from N'Djamena.

From N'Guigmi, most passengers continue to Diffa, where commercial buses operate regular services to other Nigerien cities and departure hubs such as Tahoua and Agadez, for onward travel to Algeria and Libya. A small number of migrants use *passeurs* to take them directly from N'Guigmi to Libya on remote routes running parallel with the Chadian border.



The Daboua border post. The route between Daboua (Chad) and N'Guigmi (Niger) is one of the main options for Sudanese refugees seeking to reach Niger. *Photo: GI-TOC*

During 2024, the number of vehicles departing each week from N'Djamena to N'Guigmi increased gradually. At the end of 2023, an estimated 28–35 vehicles departed each week, transporting 420–560 people. This number increased to 35–50 vehicles transporting 525–800 passengers weekly by the beginning of 2025.

The increased use of the N'Guigmi route is probably due to several factors. Most recently, the section of road between Daboua, on the border, and N'Guigmi, which was previously a dirt track, was paved in 2024. This was part of a wider – and still ongoing at the time of writing – project to improve the road between Diffa and the Chadian border.

The work significantly enhanced the safety and speed of travel on this route. According to local *passeurs*, the journey between Daboua and N'Guigmi now takes one day, compared to one-and-a-half days before the road was paved. However, the rest of the road between N'Djamena and Daboua remains mostly unpaved, which has implications for safety.

On the Nigerien side, in addition to improved road safety, security has increased. Nigerien authorities now provide a daily military convoy to escort vehicles travelling between N'Guigmi and Diffa. This measure was introduced amid insecurity in the area linked to Boko Haram-affiliated groups. In January 2024, one of these groups carried out a major attack on a Nigerien military battalion stationed at N'Guigmi airport. The military responded with air strikes and the fighting left 12 Nigerien soldiers wounded and dozens of Boko Haram fighters dead.⁶⁴

Since then, several incidents involving Boko Haram or Islamic State West Africa Province have occurred in the Diffa region, including close to N'Guigmi. Though such events do not appear to pose an immediate threat to vehicles travelling from Chad to Niger, drivers welcomed the provision of the military convoy.

Of the 525–800 people reportedly travelling from N'Djamena to N'Guigmi each week in the first months of 2025, 70–105 were Sudanese refugees. According to *passeurs*, Sudanese currently account for two to three of every 15 passengers. This is a significant increase compared to 2023, when *passeurs* reported as few as 10 Sudanese passengers per week. The number increased progressively in 2024, reaching 35–50 per week by the end of the year and further increasing in 2025. A *passeur* operating on the route noted: 'By the end of 2024, there were five to seven Sudanese passengers travelling from N'Djamena to N'Guigmi every day. Before 2024, the number of Sudanese on this road was very limited.'

According to *passeurs*, most Sudanese travellers are young men aged between 18 and 30, mainly originating from Darfur. There are also small numbers of women and, to a lesser extent, children.

From N'Guigmi, most Sudanese refugees reportedly head to Agadez and Arlit by commercial bus. These towns are key transit hubs used by Sudanese to reach the goldfields in northern Niger, such as Djado and Tchibarakatene, and to a lesser extent Libya or Algeria. Some Sudanese refugees also aim to reach Agadez or Niamey, hoping to register as asylum seekers and apply for resettlement at the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) office there. A bus company employee in Diffa interviewed by the GI-TOC explained that Sudanese who arrive in the town from Chad usually buy bus tickets for onward travel in Niger via Zinder, with most heading to Agadez, Arlit and Niamey, and to a lesser extent Gao in Mali, noting that those who travel to Agadez and Arlit appear to be prospective gold miners.

The gradual increase in the number of Sudanese using the N'Guigmi route is in line with the broader trend of Sudanese departing refugee camps in eastern Chad and transiting towards neighbouring countries and Sahelian gold-mining areas. However, since the end of 2024 these movements also appear to have been facilitated by a loosening of restrictions specific to the Niger route.

In 2023, the small number of Sudanese using this route were subject to stringent checks by Nigerien authorities, involving far greater rigour than inspections of Chadians or other nationalities. Due to the saturation of the UNHCR facilities in Niger, many Sudanese were reportedly refused entry if they identified themselves as refugees at the border. Consequently, many reportedly resorted to claiming to be Chadians and avoided presenting their identity documents.

However, according to *passeurs*, since September 2024 these rules have reportedly been relaxed and Sudanese are now permitted to enter Niger under the same conditions as other foreign nationals. This mainly involves paying fees and bribes ranging from FCFA5 000 (€7.60) to FCFA15 000 (€23), depending on which, if any, travel documents are presented. Those travelling with a valid passport and an international vaccination card pay just FCFA2 000 (€3) for an entry stamp. A Nigerien police officer interviewed by the GI-TOC confirmed that they have been instructed to allow Sudanese refugees to enter the country.

This represents a significant improvement for Sudanese travelling to Niger, as the relaxation of restrictions at this key entry point provides a legal, relatively quick and secure route from eastern Chad. Most of the journey from Abeche to N'Djamena and from Diffa to other Nigerien towns can be completed by public transport, which is often inexpensive and safe. Compared to routes between eastern Chad and northern Chad or Libya, this is a far more appealing option for those aware of the travel conditions. This shift is probably a key factor driving the increased movement of Sudanese people through N'Guigmi.

Overall, the number of people on the move through Chad increased in 2024. This upward trend in human smuggling is closely linked to the increase in Sudanese refugees choosing to travel beyond eastern Chad, either north to the goldfields and Libya or west to Niger. It also involves growing numbers of Chadians seeking better living conditions, many of whom have been negatively affected by the deteriorating economic situation in the east of the country. Furthermore, the easing of restrictions on both these routes has facilitated travel, meaning *passeurs* can operate more easily and with fewer risks.



OUTLOOK

In 2024, Chad faced significant shifts in stability dynamics. Though political and diplomatic tensions linked to the conflict in Sudan remained high, the risk of rebel incursions and destabilization in northern Chad was largely contained. Internal political dynamics were also marked by the final stages of the transitional process, with highly contested presidential and parliamentary elections resulting in a consolidation of political power by Déby and the MPS. Much like its initial stages, the end of the transition process was marred by an escalation of political violence, as well as a further shrinking of civic space and repression of opposition. However, despite dire implications for human rights and civic freedoms in Chad, these political tensions did not have a major impact on human smuggling.

As in 2023, the main factors shaping human smuggling in Chad were the impact of the Sudan conflict and the situation in northern Chad. However, the way these factors affected human smuggling changed in 2024, resulting in significant shifts.

As the conflict in Sudan continued and the level of violence intensified, growing numbers of Sudanese refugees arrived in eastern Chad, where living conditions further deteriorated due to increasingly strained resources and overwhelmed assistance frameworks. While the number of Sudanese refugees leaving eastern Chad in 2023 was limited, beginning to rise only by the end of the year, these movements surged in 2024 as prospects for returning to Sudan further diminished and economic hardship drove young men to find employment in gold mining or attempt migration to other countries.

At the same time, booming mining activity in the Kouri Bougoudi goldfield and a relative period of stability in northern Chad further fed demand for northbound movements, particularly from eastern Chad. Combined with the easing of restrictions on routes towards the north, this led to a significant increase in human smuggling in eastern Chad.

In 2025, these dynamics broadly continued, with the number of people travelling from eastern Chad, including Sudanese refugees, continuing to grow. However, security shifts in Sudan and Libya also affected these movements. A crackdown on human smuggling and Chadian groups in southern Libya in the first half of 2025 resulted in increased risks and challenges on routes to Libya, while changes in territorial control by the RSF in areas of Sudan bordering Chad and Libya also hindered *passeurs*' activity. Finally, the escalation of violence in neighbouring Darfur, where the siege of El-Fasher intensified and attacks on internally displaced person camps resulted in further displacement, also affected movements into eastern Chad and demand for travel from eastern departure hubs.



Newly arrived refugees from Darfur in Sudan gather at a relocation camp near the border in Adre, Chad, in April 2024. © Dan Kitwood/Getty Images

Dynamics in Sudan are likely to strongly affect human smuggling in Chad for the remainder of 2025 and in 2026, and have major consequences for the worsening humanitarian, economic and security situation in eastern Chad. In particular, crime and communal tensions are rising in the Ouaddaï region because of the mass influx of refugees, the challenges in providing sufficient assistance to them and the subsequent strain on local resources. These tensions risk reigniting deep-rooted sources of conflict and ethnic tensions.⁶⁵ The escalation of violence in North Darfur has also triggered an unprecedented wave of arrivals in the Wadi Fira and Ennedi Est regions, north of Ouaddaï, further exacerbating the situation in towns such as Tiné.⁶⁶

Political and security dynamics in Chad could also have major medium-term implications for human smuggling in the region. Rising tensions between Chadian authorities and the Sudanese army could escalate further, with the risk of armed confrontation or destabilization attempts from Sudan. This could affect the situation at the Sudanese border, with potential implications for the freedom of movement of Sudanese refugees as well as Chadians.

These tensions could also further exacerbate dissension in Chad's ruling elite. Discontent over Chad's reported support to the RSF is increasing among the powerful Zaghawa community, who compose a significant and high-level contingent in the Chadian military. If tensions come to a head, Chadian authorities could crack down on movements in eastern or northern Chad to contain risks of armed mobilization, and further tighten repressive measures to suppress opposition.



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