



**GLOBAL
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AGAINST TRANSNATIONAL
ORGANIZED CRIME

MALICIOUS MARKETS

Mapping the violent criminal ecosystem
in the Central African Republic

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Nathalia Dukhan leads the Central Africa Observatory at the GI-TOC. For more than 15 years, she has investigated the economic and financial drivers of mass violence and the role of organized crime in protracted conflicts. Her research traces how illicit economies – penetrated by complex criminal networks in sectors such as gold, timber, ivory, oil, diamonds and strategic minerals – connect to global markets, sustaining violence and instability. Recent work includes examining Russia's Wagner Group's control over gold resources and the involvement of European criminal actors in fuelling armed conflict. Her investigations have informed international sanctions and policy responses.

Ruben de Koning is a senior expert at the GI-TOC's Central Africa Observatory. He has more than 15 years' experience investigating conflict financing, illicit arms flows and organized crime across Central and West Africa for multilateral organizations and investigative NGOs. His current work focuses on the air and maritime logistics networks that sustain armed groups, mercenary networks and state-embedded criminal actors in the Central African region. In addition to informing international sanctions, his sectoral analyses have shaped due diligence in mineral supply chains and diamond certification policies.

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Executive summary

Over the past five years, the Central African Republic (CAR) has become a hub in which high-ranking political and military figures, co-opted criminal actors and transnational organized crime groups have aligned to extract profits by consolidating control over key criminal markets. In early 2021, the Central African Armed Forces (FACA), operating alongside Russia's Wagner Group, launched a nationwide military campaign. While framed as a stabilization effort in a country marked by protracted armed conflict, these operations rapidly shifted beyond counterinsurgency into a broader process of territorial, political and economic consolidation. Rather than dismantling the underlying systems of violence, the operations reconfigured them.

Pro-government forces – often operating under Wagner's operational command and supported by local proxy militias – targeted suspected combatants and civilians accused of affiliation with opposition forces. The resulting wave of violence included acts that could amount to war crimes and crimes against humanity. The military campaign was accompanied by an extensive crackdown on political opponents, independent media and segments of civil society perceived as critical of the government or aligned with Western interests, contributing to a sharp contraction of civic and political space.

The offensive also targeted the economic infrastructures sustaining rebel groups. Supply chains, trafficking corridors and informal taxation systems were disrupted, weakening the financial autonomy of rival armed groups long embedded in regional and transnational illicit markets. Yet consolidation did not bring transparency or formalization. Instead, control over key sectors became concentrated in networks aligned with the presidency, with state institutions increasingly acting as instruments for the reorganization and capture of illicit markets.

Today, instruments of war – arms, fuel and tramadol (an analgesic used by combatants for its stimulant and endurance effects) – enter the CAR from neighbouring countries, whether through licit or illicit channels, but their origins lie in global supply hubs. These commodities traverse complex transnational networks and logistics hubs that link international suppliers with local conflict actors. While criminal markets are increasingly organized in hierarchical and coercive systems – with the presidency and the ever-enduring Wagner Group at the centre – non-state armed groups continue to exploit smuggling routes, diverting flows to maintain territorial influence, control key resources and generate profits.

At the same time, markets for laundering gold, diamonds, timber, wildlife, cattle and illicit finance link conflict zones to global economies. Resources extracted under state-aligned control, and to a lesser extent by rebel groups, are traded and trafficked through regional and international hubs, where their origins are concealed and their revenues recycled. Transnational networks finance, transport and commercialize these commodities, while control over strategic sites and trade routes drives intense violence. These sectors are both sources of revenue and arenas of geopolitical contestation, where coercion enforces access, maintains monopolies and sustains criminalized governance structures.

A system of criminalized governance has emerged in which coercion, regulation and extraction are fused into a single apparatus. Access to resources and revenue streams is mediated by political alignment, and loyalty is rewarded with participation in illicit economies. Violence functions as a tool of market control, used to secure territory, discipline competitors and regulate access. Revenue flows – largely bypassing the public treasury – have reached unprecedented levels, coinciding with growing transnational organized crime and the increasing instrumentalization of state institutions. Foreign security and commercial partners – including Wagner-linked Russian networks, as well as actors connected to Rwanda, China and the United Arab Emirates – operate within and reinforce these transnational criminal ecosystems.

This report offers an in-depth study of the criminal markets most directly linked to armed violence and organized crime in the CAR. In particular, it focuses on the intersecting illicit markets that channel strategic goods inwards and commodities outwards, providing the operational means and financial incentives for conflict. These economies have undergone significant transformations over the past five years, and the report thus considers the current state of these markets, how they have shifted and what those changes signify, illustrating how the markets operate and how the actors who shape them are intertwined.

Methodology

In recent years, the space for independent research and civil society in the CAR has contracted significantly, and public information has become increasingly restricted. For this reason, the report draws on fieldwork conducted from 2022 to early 2025, including a series of in-person and remote interviews with actors in the illicit economies, government officials, diplomats, state and non-state armed actors, members of civil society and topical experts. Where possible, information provided during key informant interviews was triangulated with documentary evidence and direct observation.

The authors used open-source intelligence techniques to deepen the analyses of markets, actors and trade routes, and to map the scale of the CAR's illicit economies and trade flows. The authors analyzed public and private data on trade flows and mining permits and used satellite imagery to confirm movements and activity. They monitored print and digital media, including social media channels frequently used by illicit actors. This was supplemented by a literature review that included United Nations (UN) Panel of Expert reports on the CAR, the GI-TOC's body of research on organized crime in the region and other reporting from international organizations and accredited journals.

The GI-TOC sought comment from certain individuals and entities named in this report, including Sigma Gold Ltd, International Holding Company, Wabem Ndede and Forest Consulting Company, as well as from the spokesperson for the presidency. No replies or comments were received from these individuals or entities, but any comment received will be published on the GI-TOC website.

Key findings

The findings of the study illustrate a pattern of convergence between criminal economies and political authority in sustaining instability. Security functions have been outsourced to transnational criminal actors, criminal armed group elements have been embedded in government structures, and vital supply chains and financial flows have been captured.

- Through the illegal transfer of military cargo aircraft – used to transport arms and mercenaries – the CAR has functioned as a key logistics hub for Wagner Group operations across the continent, a role that persists to support Russian Africa Corps deployment in West Africa.
- Wagner’s increased use of aerial bombardment in the CAR, combined with the deployment of roadside explosives by armed groups, is driving up civilian casualties.
- A government-backed fuel import and distribution monopoly sets exorbitant prices, generating between US\$17.5 million and US\$30 million a year in illicit and unjustified profits while devastating the economy.
- Wagner launders a portion of its illegally mined gold – its principal war revenue, worth at least US\$180 million annually – through UAE-linked exporters. Most shipments are likely to be illegally transported abroad using CAR-registered military cargo aircraft.
- Tramadol, the war drug par excellence, fuels heightened aggression and brutality, with high demand tripling its price. Senior security officials have allegedly captured this lucrative transnational market in recent years.
- Following international sanctions against Wagner’s Bois Rouge/Wood International Group, new front companies continued timber exports for some time. Extraction activities now appear to have been abandoned, however.
- A new peace agreement signed between the government and Fulani-based armed groups in April 2025 is reinforcing extortion, looting and the organized sale of cattle, overseen by armed-group leaders integrated into government structures.
- President Faustin-Archange Touadéra’s continued pursuit of crypto ventures, intended to generate additional revenue in the context of international isolation, creates opportunities for money laundering and illicit enrichment.



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