

REPORT



**GLOBAL
INITIATIVE**
AGAINST TRANSNATIONAL
ORGANIZED CRIME

MALICIOUS MARKETS

Mapping the violent criminal ecosystem
in the Central African Republic

Nathalia Dukhan | Ruben De Koning

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Acronyms and abbreviations

3R	Return, Reclamation, Rehabilitation (Retour, Réclamation, Réhabilitation)
AAKG	Azandé Ani Kpi Gbé
ACLED	Armed Conflict Location & Event Data
AML/CFT	Anti-money laundering and countering the financing of terrorism
CAR	Central African Republic
CPC	Coalition of Patriots for Change (Coalition des patriotes pour le changement)
DDR	Disarmament, demobilization and reintegration
DRC	Democratic Republic of Congo
EITI	Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative
FACA	Central African Armed Forces (Forces armées centrafricaines)
FCC	Forest Consulting Company
FPRC	Popular Front for the Rebirth of the Central African Republic (Front Populaire pour la Renaissance de la Centrafrique)
ICC	International Criminal Court
IED	Improvised explosive device
IMF	International Monetary Fund
Manpad	Man-portable air-defence system
MINUSCA	UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic
MLCJ	Movement of Central African Liberators for Justice
MPC	Central African Republic Patriotic Movement (Mouvement Patriotique pour la Centrafrique)
RPG	Rocket-propelled grenade
RPRC	Patriotic Rally for the Renewal of the Central African Republic (Rassemblement Patriotique pour le Renouveau de la Centrafrique)
RSF	Rapid Support Forces
SAF	Sudan Armed Forces
UAE	United Arab Emirates
UPC	Union for Peace in the Central African Republic (Unité pour la Paix en Centrafrique)
WIG	Wood International Group



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.¹
- 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.²
- 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.



The actors

In recent years, the Central African Republic (CAR) – long labelled a failed or phantom state – has emerged as a central stage for geopolitical rivalries. As new powers have entered the country – primarily Russia, Rwanda, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and, increasingly, Turkey – traditional partners and economic operators have been gradually sidelined from political, economic and military influence. Amid these shifting alliances, the country’s long-standing system of exploitation and violence – inherited from the colonial period and perpetuated through post-independence – has not disappeared. Instead, it has sharpened and coalesced. Local elites, together with foreign security partners, co-opted armed groups and economic operators, have used coercion and organized crime to consolidate power, control resources and advance their financial interests, turning the CAR into a node for powerful transnational criminal networks.

For nearly a decade after the northern-based Séléka rebellion started in 2012, control over the CAR’s key economic sectors remained highly fragmented and deeply penetrated by violent organized crime networks. A multiplicity of armed groups embedded in regional power networks dominated illicit markets in gold, diamonds, cattle, fuel, arms, wildlife, drugs and illegal taxation – and controlled more than 80% of the territory.³ These groups formed the first layer of broader criminal ecosystems, extending their influence beyond local territories through political, military and economic intermediaries operating across the region.⁴ From there, trafficking routes extended outwards, linking conflict-driven extraction in the CAR to transnational supply chains and global financial circuits. As a result, localized violence became embedded within a wider architecture of illicit economies, integrating regional systems of predation into the global underground economy.

The state – weak, under-resourced and largely absent beyond Bangui – played only a marginal role in regulating these dynamics. At times, segments of the political elite were themselves complicit in systems of violence and criminal activity.⁵ International actors, including the UN peacekeeping mission, mandated since 2014 to stabilize the country and protect civilians, have also faced scrutiny over allegations involving individual peacekeepers and associated networks implicated in misconduct, including illicit economic activities.⁶ While such cases do not represent the mission as a whole, they have nonetheless reinforced aspects of the crime–conflict nexus by creating additional channels through which foreign personnel – drawn from a diverse pool of troop- and police-contributing countries – have facilitated linkages between local violence and broader illicit networks.⁷

SHIFTING ALLIANCES OF ARMED GROUPS



COALITION OF PATRIOTS FOR CHANGE (CPC)

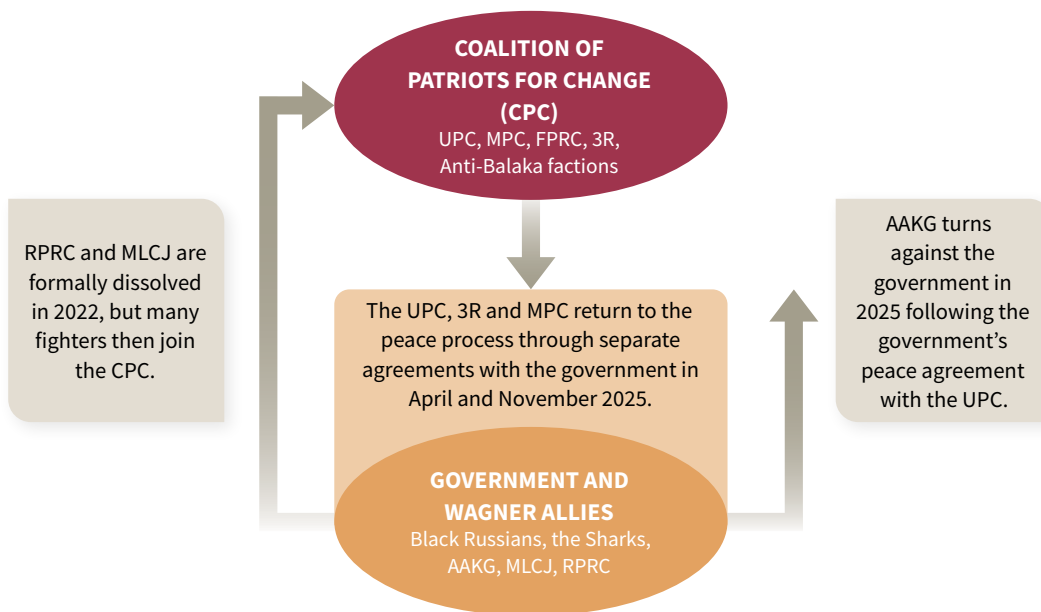
Union for Peace in the Central African Republic (UPC): Fulani-dominated group under the leadership of Ali Darassa. Strongholds in Maloum and Kouki (centre, centre north).

Central African Patriotic Movement (MPC): Arab-dominated group under the leadership of Mahamat Al-Khatim. Stronghold in Kouki (centre north).

Popular Front for the Rebirth of the Central African Republic (FPRC): Runga-dominated group under the leadership of Nourredine Adam. Stronghold in Tissi (extreme north-east).

Return, Reclamation, Rehabilitation (3R): Fulani-dominated group under the leadership of Sembé Bobbo. Strongholds in Kouki (extreme north-west) and Noufou (south-west).

Anti-Balaka factions: Animist and Christian militias previously opposed to the Séléka coalition. Its principal wing formerly under Maxime Mokom is now led by Bernard Bonda, the director of cabinet of former president and overall CPC leader Francois Bozizé. Scattered in the central and western parts of the country.



GOVERNMENT AND WAGNER ALLIES

Black Russians: Fighting units that operate alongside the Wagner Group drawn from CPC factions, particularly the UPC and Anti-Balaka.

The Sharks: A Bangui-based militia established by Héritier Doneng involved in extrajudicial operations.

Azandé Ani Kpi Gbe (AAKG): Ethnic Zandé-based militia established in the extreme south-east in 2023 in opposition to the UPC.

Movement of Central African Liberators for Justice (MLCJ): Kara-based militia formed in Birao (north-east) under Toumou Deya. Mahamat Deya and followers join CPC after the group's formal dissolution in 2022.

Patriotic Rally for the Renewal of the Central African Republic (RPRC): Goula-dominated armed group formerly led by Zakaria Damane, who was killed in 2022. Anour Adam and followers joined the CPC shortly before the RPRC's formal dissolution in 2022.

In early 2018, confronted by the threat of armed groups, mounting regional tensions and declining international engagement, President Faustin-Archange Touadéra turned to Russia for security support. Within weeks, the mercenary Wagner Group – founded by Yevgeny Prigozhin – arrived in the CAR and established a permanent foothold in Bangui, gradually deploying hundreds of armed elements throughout the country.⁸ Over the next three years, Wagner representatives meticulously mapped the country's political economy, patronage networks, armed group hierarchies, resource corridors and institutional vulnerabilities.⁹ The objective was clear: create a durable pro-Russian regime through a multi-layered strategy combining security control, political influence, economic penetration and coordinated propaganda.¹⁰

Wagner's covert operations for control

The expansion of the Wagner Group in the CAR reflects a coordinated, multi-dimensional strategy that combines security with economic and political levers to consolidate control over natural resources and reshape state institutions in ways that entrench long-term Russian influence.

Security: Security advice; presidential protection; military training and deployment; weapons supply; surveillance.

Political influence: Political party control; peace process supervision; election influence; control of legal mechanisms and UN and regional relations.

Economic penetration: Mining companies; gold and diamond purchases; resource barter; customs and taxation; logistical infrastructure.

Propaganda and narrative control: Social media influence; sponsored media; organized demonstrations; sponsored civil society networks; university engagement.

With Russian backing, Touadéra has consolidated political authority, and Wagner-linked and allied actors have become embedded in key ministries, the security apparatus, the customs administration and strategic resource sectors. Rather than delivering stability, Bangui and Moscow have deepened and systematized patterns of coercion, extraction and predation.

In early 2021, amid the electoral process, the attempted takeover of Bangui by the Coalition of Patriots for Change (CPC) – a rebel movement that brought together the UPC, 3R, the FPRC and elements of the Anti-Balaka – triggered an acute political and security crisis.¹¹ The spectre of regime collapse heightened strategic concerns in Bangui and Moscow, prompting a three-year violent counterinsurgency campaign across the CAR. Framed as an effort to liberate the country from the grip of war criminals, these operations were marked by widespread abuses and economic control.¹² Territorial gains were aligned with gold- and diamond-rich areas, integrating violence, resource extraction and revenue generation into a hybrid coercive-extractive system. Political survival and economic privilege became mutually reinforcing, shifting the dynamic from security-for-access to security-as-extraction.

As a result, a parallel process of reclaiming economic markets previously controlled by armed groups began to take shape. In the most lucrative sectors, this did not result in the restoration of formal state

governance but in the emergence of a reconfigured criminal ecosystem that was more sophisticated, centralized and hierarchical than before. At its core, this model is structured around the consolidation of power by the Touadéra–Wagner nexus, which has reorganized control over high-value markets, embedding them within a tightly managed patronage and security framework.

The consolidation of economic control has been accompanied by a structured reward system. Access to wealth has become closely tied to political alignment and loyalty to the regime. Political, military and economic actors – domestic and foreign – who demonstrate allegiance gain entry into decision-making circles, influence over regulatory institutions and privileged access to contracts, concessions and public appointments, as well as to illicit enrichment channels.¹³

The state's violent criminal ecosystem

The CAR's political economy of conflict is increasingly shaped by a hybrid system of governance in which state authority, non-state armed actors and transnational business networks converge to control and profit from lucrative markets – with the line between licit and illicit becoming increasingly blurred. Since 2022, amid the heavy counteroffensive led by Wagner and CAR armed forces, this ecosystem has become more hierarchical and politically embedded, with the state acting as a key broker.

- **State-embedded political and military actors.** Elements of the political and security apparatus have privatized core functions of sovereignty, monetizing state prerogatives such as security provision, licensing, taxation and access to land and resources, while increasingly outsourcing their enforcement and expansion to transnational criminal networks. For example, the Ministry of Energy – with the complicity of a Cameroonian oil company and a Russian shadow fleet vessel – has allegedly organized a widespread kickback scheme involving artificially high prices at the pump.¹⁴
- **Russia's Wagner Group.** Deployed under bilateral security arrangements, Wagner has become a core pillar of the regime's survival. In exchange for security and political protection, Wagner has secured access to key resources; embedded itself in military, intelligence and economic structures; and contributed to the centralization of coercion and resource control. Designated as a transnational criminal organization by the United States, Wagner has relied on a vast network of transnational companies engaged in illicit activities.¹⁵
- **Rwandan military and business networks.** Under bilateral agreements, Rwanda deploys troops and provides direct protection to the presidency, including through its presence within the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA). Rwandan-linked business networks have secured concessions, including in the mining sector. Activities combine licit operations with opaque and informal practices. For example, several sources claimed that RwandAir has been used by individuals with alleged ties to military networks to facilitate the illicit export of gold.¹⁶
- **Gulf-based financial and trading networks (UAE).** The UAE has emerged as a key financial and commercial hub for CAR diamond and gold flows. While providing financial support and investment channels, the country also hosts trading networks, including Wagner-linked entities, that facilitate the commercialization of resources. Dubai, in particular, functions as a primary destination and key node for the integration and laundering of the CAR's minerals – licit and illicit – into global markets.¹⁷

- **Co-opted and aligned armed groups.** In recent years, some armed groups have been partially integrated, co-opted or weaponized. Certain leaders have been incorporated into government structures, including ministerial positions, while combatants have been absorbed into parallel units within the Central African Armed Forces (FACA), operating with loyalty to the presidency and Wagner. This includes factions linked to the UPC, RPRC and MLCJ.¹⁸ These actors continue to engage in resource trafficking, but now within a more centralized and hierarchical system structured around the presidency and Wagner. For example, Hassan Bouba, now the minister of livestock and animal health and a pivotal Wagner-aligned figure who was previously political coordinator of the UPC, is reportedly involved in siphoning revenues from the cattle trade.¹⁹

The use of proxy militias – including the ‘Black Russians’, the ‘Sharks’ and various local self-defence groups – has become a central mechanism for projecting power and extending control beyond formal state structures. In the south-east, for example, the mobilization of Azandé Ani Kpi Gbé (AAKG) militias has reportedly been encouraged by the CAR presidency and Wagner to counter rival armed actors. These militias are implicated in serious human rights abuses and engaged in illicit activities.²⁰ The state also signed a ‘peace’ agreement with major groups such as 3R and the UPC, which nevertheless continue to be involved in major security incidents and illicit activities.²¹

- **State-aligned economic operators.** From Lebanese and Chinese business networks to Cameroonian and domestic businessmen, private operators have become central actors in the CAR’s violent criminal ecosystem, particularly since the post-2021 shift. They have been implicated in a range of illicit activities, notably in markets that perpetuate instability and drive violence across the country. For example, while some former Chinese operators engaged in illicit gold extraction have left,²² new networks have since emerged that are reportedly trafficking gold.²³

Despite reported tensions between certain actors, notably Wagner and Rwandan networks,²⁴ this ecosystem functions as a coercion-based criminal system. Competing interests coexist with pragmatic collaboration, allowing these actors to collectively capture the country’s resources and perpetuate poverty and instability.

Today, despite vast deposits of gold, diamonds, timber and other strategic minerals valued in the billions, the CAR remains among the most multidimensionally poor countries in the world.²⁵ Most citizens survive on less than US\$3 a day and lack access to necessities such as clean water, sanitation, electricity and education.²⁶ Civilians bear the brunt of persistent insecurity,²⁷ and 2025 was one of the deadliest years in the past decade, marked by extrajudicial killings, kidnappings and targeted attacks.²⁸ The FACA and the Wagner Group have intensified operations around economically strategic sites, while armed groups continue to conduct attacks in violation of international law. The spillover of the Sudan conflict has further increased arms flows and cross-border armed movements, compounding instability.²⁹ At the same time, civic space has narrowed sharply: Political opposition faces mounting constraints, media and civil society operate under growing pressure, and public dissent carries growing risk.

Ultimately, the convergence of domestic powerbrokers and foreign actors around illicit markets has reshaped them into systems of control and accumulation, embedding criminal markets at the core of governance and conflict dynamics and entrenching the CAR in a cycle of violence, fragility and chronic poverty.

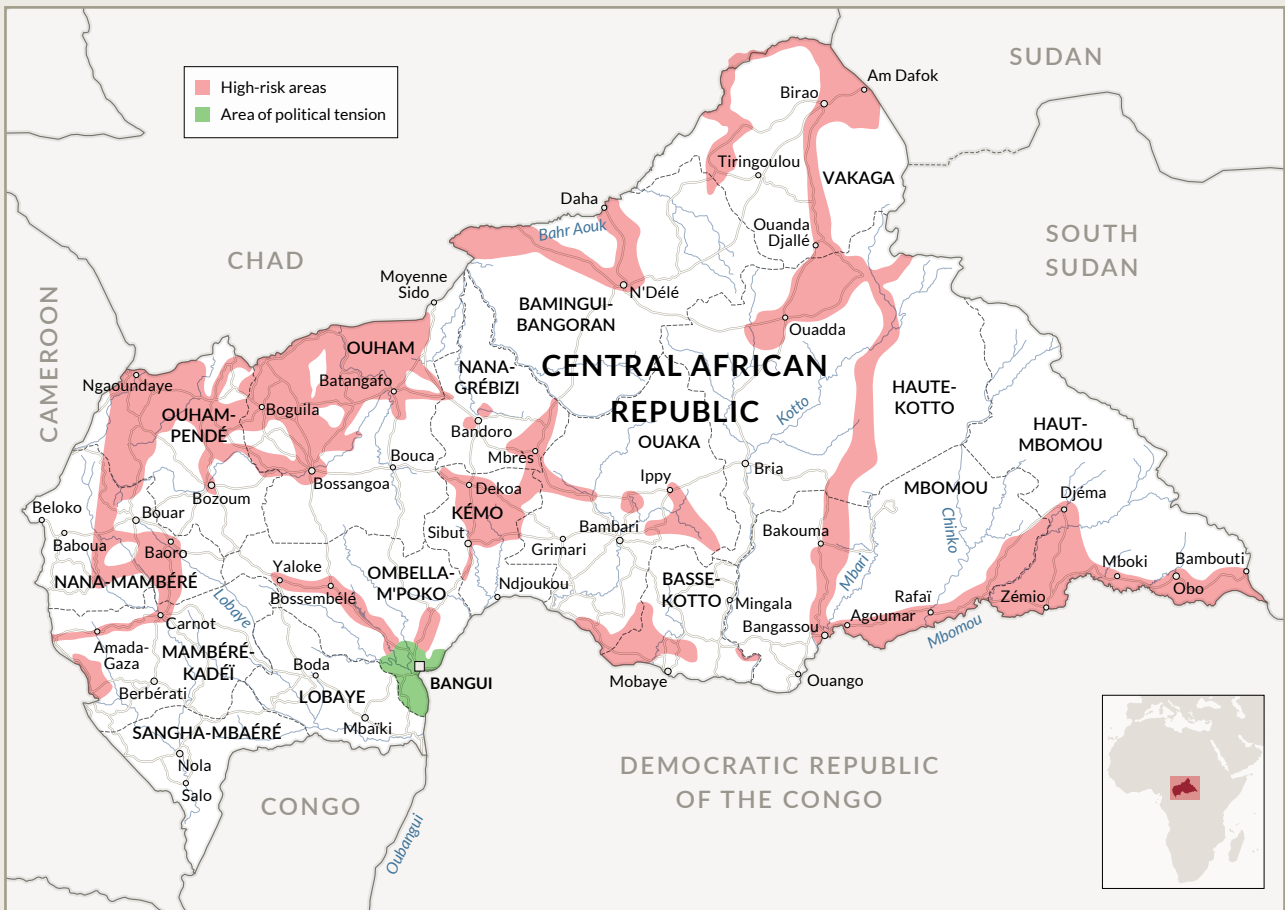


FIGURE 1 Areas of elevated risk and political tension in the CAR, March 2026.



Instruments of violence

Illicit flows of arms, fuel, synthetic drugs and associated rents sustain frontline actors in the CAR, including non-state armed groups, elements of the national security forces and foreign mercenaries.

Arms remain the most consequential inward flow. In earlier phases of the conflict, trafficking networks primarily supplied non-state armed groups, enabling them to rival and often outmatch government forces. More recently, however, government-condoned illicit supplies, combined with the diversion of official shipments, have strengthened Wagner Group forces aligned with the presidency, reshaping the balance of coercive power through access to arms and embedding politically linked armed criminal networks.

Fuel and synthetic drugs are less visible but equally critical enablers of violence. In a vast territory with weak infrastructure, fuel determines mobility, territorial reach and operational sustainability. While formal supply chains have historically centred on Bangui, cross-border trafficking long sustained armed groups in peripheral regions. More recent parallel supply systems tied to the Wagner Group and government forces have further consolidated state coercive control. Synthetic drugs, particularly tramadol, whose inflows are partially facilitated by state security actors, are used to enhance endurance, suppress fear and embolden combatants.

Arms

The CAR has been under an arms embargo since 2013, when the UN Security Council banned the supply of arms and related material to, from or through the country, as well as any assistance related to military activity – including the provision of armed mercenary personnel.³⁰ The embargo has changed since then, with each revision loosening restrictions for state forces until, in 2024, the embargo on the government was fully lifted and replaced with a narrower embargo on the supply of arms to armed groups.³¹ A sanctions regime, introduced alongside the arms embargo, remains in place and forbids the provision of weapons to armed groups and criminal networks.

Throughout these changes, the inflow and transfer of arms – trafficked or otherwise – in violation of the embargo and sanctions regime has continued unabated. Moreover, over the past five years the magnitude and sophistication of the weaponry being used in the conflict has increased significantly, as have the humanitarian and security consequences, with these changes being largely attributable to the presence of the Wagner Group.

The Wagner-led counterinsurgency of 2021 marked a critical escalation. It brought an unprecedented inflow of Wagner Group mercenary personnel, as well as Russian arms, military aircraft and military vehicles. Deliveries to the CAR government routinely violated the embargo or disrespected its exemption and notification conditions for state-to-state transfers, while onward transfers to Wagner – a non-state actor and criminal network – were and are a violation of the arms embargo and the sanctions regime. In parallel, the Wagner Group has established a separate, unauthorized supply chain to circumvent all applicable rules and controls. An international oversight mechanism was unilaterally suspended by the CAR Ministry of Defence.³²

At the same time, armed groups saw some of their weapons supply lines cut in the counterinsurgency campaign, but they have since adapted to meet the military pressure, increasingly deploying more technically sophisticated weaponry, including landmines, improvised explosive devices (IEDs) and drones. New opportunities for arms acquisition also arose as war erupted in Sudan in April 2023.

Amid the intensifying conflict, civilians have paid the heaviest price. Armed groups' explosive devices – particularly roadside bombs in western CAR – have reportedly killed dozens of civilians each year.³³ Wagner, meanwhile, has used explosives more than any other actor, notably through helicopter-borne rocket attacks on rebel bases, mining sites and settlements.³⁴ Allowing for rapid deployment across the country, airborne operations have resulted in substantial civilian casualties.³⁵

Overall, civilian targeting in operations involving Wagner has increased over the past two years, having declined in 2022 and 2023.³⁶ Civilian harm is more frequently reported in incidents where Wagner operates independently than in joint operations with the FACA.³⁷



Members of the armed group Union for Peace in the Central African Republic (UPC) present weapons to be collected at a DDR site, July 2025. © Mariam Kone/AFP via Getty Images

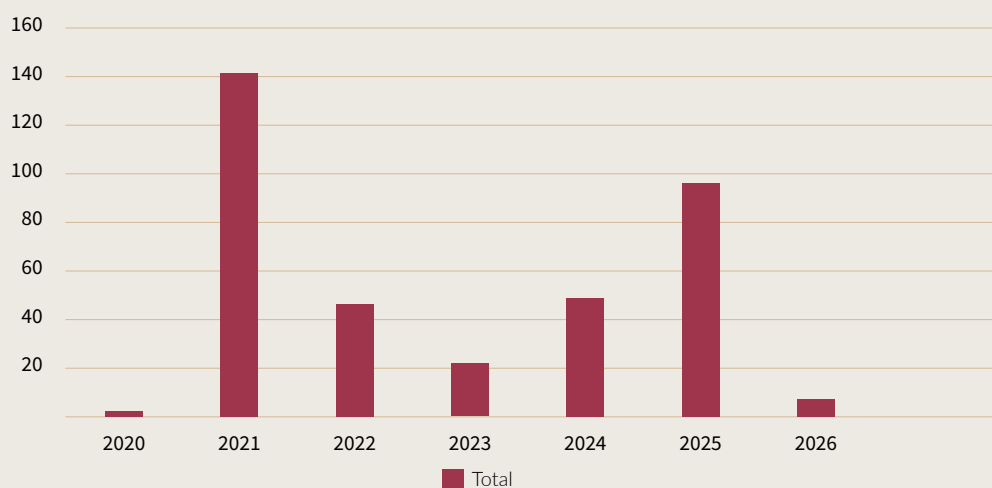


FIGURE 2 Civilian targeting incidents involving Wagner Group, 2020–2026.

SOURCE: Armed Conflict Location & Event Data (ACLED), <https://acleddata.com/conflict-data>

Wagner Group

Embargo violations through non-compliance and diversion

Present in the country since mid-2018, Wagner Group rapidly expanded operations from December 2020, coinciding with the launch of counterinsurgency operations. According to leaked internal documents obtained by *Le Monde*, the group deployed about 210 personnel across seven sites in July 2018; by September 2021, this had increased to nearly 1 500 personnel operating at 47 locations.³⁸ This figure far exceeds the approximately 500 ‘unarmed Russian instructors’ formally notified to the UN Security Council, most of whom were Wagner operatives.³⁹ With respect to their observed personal arms, Russian representatives acknowledged to the UN Panel of Experts that these weapons originated from previously notified or exempted shipments from Russia to the CAR.⁴⁰ Their subsequent transfer to Wagner personnel thus constituted a breach of CAR end-user commitments and a violation of the arms embargo.

Besides firearms, armoured vehicles and helicopters reportedly covered by notifications in 2020 and 2021 have been visibly operated by the Wagner Group in military operations in direct violation of the arms embargo.⁴¹ There is also substantial evidence that armoured vehicles and aircraft have been deployed in Wagner’s criminal economic activities, including in the protection and exploitation of natural resource concessions. Notably, aerial imagery of Wagner’s Ndassima gold concession from April 2023 shows a military Mi-8 helicopter and a civilian Gazelle helicopter within the site’s perimeter.⁴² The UN Panel of Experts also observed at the concession a mine-resistant vehicle of the ‘Chekan’ type, a model produced exclusively for the Wagner Group. The vehicle was probably diverted from a notified overland delivery of five such vehicles from a Russian training facility in Sudan in March 2021.⁴³ Wagner-operated Mi-8 helicopters have also been reported to ferry pillaged goods and transport paying civilian passengers.⁴⁴ Within the CAR, Wagner has also been operating two small Antonov An-28 aircraft, transferred to the Ministry of Defence without notification; these were formerly owned by Kratol Aviation, a UAE-registered, Russian-owned company sanctioned by the US in January 2023.⁴⁵



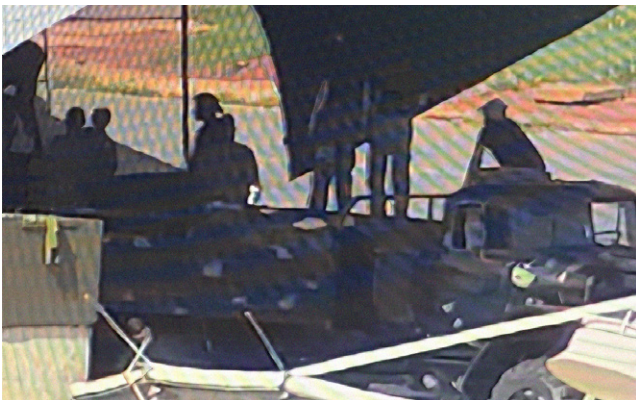
Satellite imagery shows a military Mi-8 helicopter and a civilian Gazelle helicopter at the Ndassima concession, 27 April 2023.
Photos: Google Earth

Parallel air supply

While Russia officially facilitated Wagner Group deployments and supplies under the guise of notified Russian instructors and arms deliveries to the CAR government, Wagner also established a parallel air supply chain and domestic rotation system for personnel and materiel, beginning in mid-2021.

This system initially relied on three long-haul aircraft that had been transferred to the Ministry of Defence without notification to the UN Security Council Sanctions Committee; at least one of the planes was transferred with the help of Wagner representative and presidential adviser Valery Zakharov.⁴⁶ Another one of these planes, an Ilyushin Il-18 passenger aircraft, was used primarily for personnel rotations before being destroyed in Libya in January 2023.⁴⁷ Two Ilyushin Il-76 cargo aircraft were employed to transport military materiel and Wagner personnel between Russia, Syria, Libya, Sudan, the CAR and South Sudan.⁴⁸ The one registered as TL-KMO stopped operating at the end of 2023, while the one registered as TL-KPA was replaced at the end of 2024 by another aircraft of the same type registered as TL-KPJ, which performed the same functions and was additionally observed operating flights into West Africa.⁴⁹

Taken together, these arrangements indicate that CAR aircraft registration has functioned as a flag of convenience for Wagner Group’s transnational air logistics network, enabling sustained military and personnel movements well beyond CAR territory.



Military boxes being unloaded from an Ilyushin Il-76 cargo aircraft TL-KPA, M’poko international airport in Bangui, June 2023. Photo supplied

Shifting weapons systems

With the establishment of its own weapons supply chain, the Wagner Group appears to have been able to bring in more advanced and heavier weapons systems beyond the AK-pattern rifles, 40 mm rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs), machine guns and various types of ammunition allocated to the group for delivery by September 2021.⁵⁰ Such weapons systems include RPG-22 disposable rocket launchers that are capable of engaging armoured vehicles, as well as B-8V20A rocket pods, commonly loaded with S-8 (80 mm) unguided rockets, which have been seen mounted on Wagner-operated Mi-8 helicopters.⁵¹ These rocket systems are probably the ones that have been used in helicopter bombardments, which have been increasingly reported.

Covert deliveries in West Africa?

By late 2024, West Africa appeared to have been integrated into Wagner's Bangui-based air logistics. GI-TOC identified a newly CAR-registered Il-76 cargo aircraft (TL-KPJ) on the tarmac in Bangui on 22 November 2024 and again on 22 February 2025, delivering mercenaries and equipment.⁵² The same aircraft was first observed departing Osh, Kyrgyzstan – an Il-76 modification hub – on 22 July 2024 before flying to Africa.⁵³ During the first half of 2025, the aircraft was tracked repeatedly over the tri-border area of Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger,⁵⁴ countries where Africa Corps has been deploying since late 2024.⁵⁵ The absence of verifiable landing data or ground observations strongly suggests that the aircraft was being used for covert deliveries, probably at secondary airports in these or other West African states where Africa Corps may be expanding operations.

The Wagner Group has also allegedly been in possession of man-portable air-defence systems (manpads).⁵⁶ At the start of the conflict in Sudan, Wagner reportedly proposed supplying manpads to the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) to counter the Sudan Armed Forces' (SAF) aerial superiority.⁵⁷ According to the UN Panel of Experts on Sudan, manpads were included in two truckloads of weapons transferred from Birao to the RSF in Am Dafock on 28 April and 3 May 2023. The UN Security Council reported that the transfer was carried out by Al Djazouli, a Taisha Arab militia leader with a record of arms trafficking from Sudan on behalf of Central African armed groups, who had been integrated into RSF-aligned networks shortly before the outbreak of hostilities.⁵⁸ Local sources confirmed that the two truckloads of weapons had been collected from the Wagner camp in Birao, directly implicating the group in the onward transfer of manpads across the border into Sudan in violation of the UN arms embargo on Darfur.⁵⁹

In addition to supplying arms to the RSF at the start of the conflict, the Wagner Group further violated the Darfur embargo through cross-border incursions, reported in February 2025 and again in early January 2026, near Karkar, 50 kilometres south-east of the main Am Dafock border crossing, said to be an arms trafficking hotspot.⁶⁰ Video footage suggests that the February 2025 incident led to a rupture between Wagner and Al Djazouli.⁶¹ However, local sources indicate that senior RSF officers granted Wagner access to Darfur on both occasions, possibly to facilitate arms exchanges out of sight of UN peacekeepers.⁶² In turn, the RSF reportedly established a presence in two remote locations in north-eastern CAR in January 2026, in coordination with Wagner.⁶³

Wagner air operations

Several incidents reported since 2022 point to the Wagner Group's recurrent use of air assets in combat operations, marking a clear escalation in Wagner's firepower and operational methods.

In January 2022, a Wagner-operated helicopter gunship allegedly bombed the Ndassima mining site, killing two civilians and injuring 10.⁶⁴ Subsequent reporting indicates that such aerial attacks increasingly became a regular feature of Wagner operations around strategic mining areas. In January 2023, there were credible reports of aerial rocket bombardments during heavy clashes between Wagner forces and 3R fighters over the Yidere mining concession that reportedly resulted in at least 18 fatalities.⁶⁵ Later, in October 2023, reported bombings of mining sites in Kouki killed 12 civilians and four rebels from the MPC.⁶⁶

Testimony and video footage obtained from non-state armed actors document several impact sites and munition fragments after an aerial attack – allegedly by helicopter – on a 3R camp near Koui in north-western CAR in October 2024.⁶⁷ In this incident, the presence of an Aero L-39 Albatros trainer jet, transferred to the CAR in May 2023 with notification,⁶⁸ was also reported. However, the L-39 appears to have been unarmed and was probably employed for reconnaissance in support of helicopter strikes and ground assaults. There is no evidence that the L-39 has been used to conduct airstrikes in the CAR.



A CAR-registered Mi-8 with rocket pods in operation alongside Wagner forces in north-eastern CAR.

Photo: X post



A crater, a damaged tree and rocket fragments after a helicopter bombing near Kouki, north-western CAR.

Photos supplied

Armed groups

Before the counterinsurgency campaign, armed groups controlled as much as 80% of the CAR,⁶⁹ enabling them to operate extensive cross-border trafficking networks. These networks allowed them to tap into regional ‘legacy’ arsenals from past wars and to maintain their stockpiles through illicit arms flows across every frontier.⁷⁰

The 2021 joint FACA–Wagner campaign, however, reclaimed key corridors, extending state authority and curtailing the mobility of armed groups. As a result, many of these groups saw their access to vital arms trafficking routes significantly reduced.⁷¹

The Fulani-led UPC, for example, progressively lost control of southern routes from the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) across the Oubangui River. Routes in the far south-east – Mboki and Zemio, for instance – have since fallen into the hands of ethnic Zande militias, which first cooperated with the FACA and the Wagner Group but later turned against them.⁷²

The Arab-led MPC and the Runga-led FPRC had their trafficking routes from Chad disrupted as they lost control of most major border crossings (Moyenne-Sido, Bemal and Markounda) with the progressive deployment of CAR security forces.⁷³ CAR and Chad also agreed to establish a joint border force in October 2024, further disrupting FPRC routes.⁷⁴

Finally, the Fulani-led 3R lost significant terrain in south-western CAR, reducing its ability to tap into arms trafficking with Cameroon through the formal and informal border crossings around Gamboula and Gaoua Boulai/Beloko.⁷⁵

Nevertheless, significant trafficking corridors remain active, most notably in north-eastern CAR, along the borders with Sudan and South Sudan, where long-standing ties between CAR armed groups and the RSF and other Sudanese militias continue to facilitate cross-border weapons transfers.⁷⁶ In the far north-west, 3R continues to exploit bush tracks in the tri-border area between the CAR, Chad and Cameroon to traffic small arms, primarily by foot and motorcycle.⁷⁷ Moreover, despite the increased deployment of regular forces along the Chadian border, Chad is the principal source of explosive devices, drones and associated training, sustaining the operational capabilities of armed groups in western CAR.⁷⁸

Flashpoint: Sudan–CAR borderlands

The war in Sudan has supercharged the CAR’s conflict economy, turning the porous borderlands into a supply base for armed groups and an artery for the wider regional arms market. The north-eastern frontier stretching from Karkar to Am Dafok and Um Dukhun, where historic rebel ties intersect with the interests of war economies on both sides of the border, has emerged as the epicentre of these flows. Most transfers involve small arms, light weapons and vehicles,⁷⁹ but there is growing potential for the spread of more advanced systems, including new-generation assault rifles, vehicles with mounted weapons, heavier mortars and guided munitions.

Initially, the conflict in Sudan drew arms and mercenaries away from the CAR, but as early as December 2023 RSF-linked supplies reportedly reached the UPC in the CAR.⁸⁰ New AKM assault rifles observed in the hands of the UPC appear, according to the UN Panel of Experts, identical to those filmed in a warehouse in Amdjarass in eastern Chad, allegedly having been delivered to the RSF.⁸¹

Recruitment for the RSF in the CAR and subsequent returns have further intensified arms flows in the Chad–CAR–Sudan tri-border area. RSF recruitment has tapped combatants from a range of Central

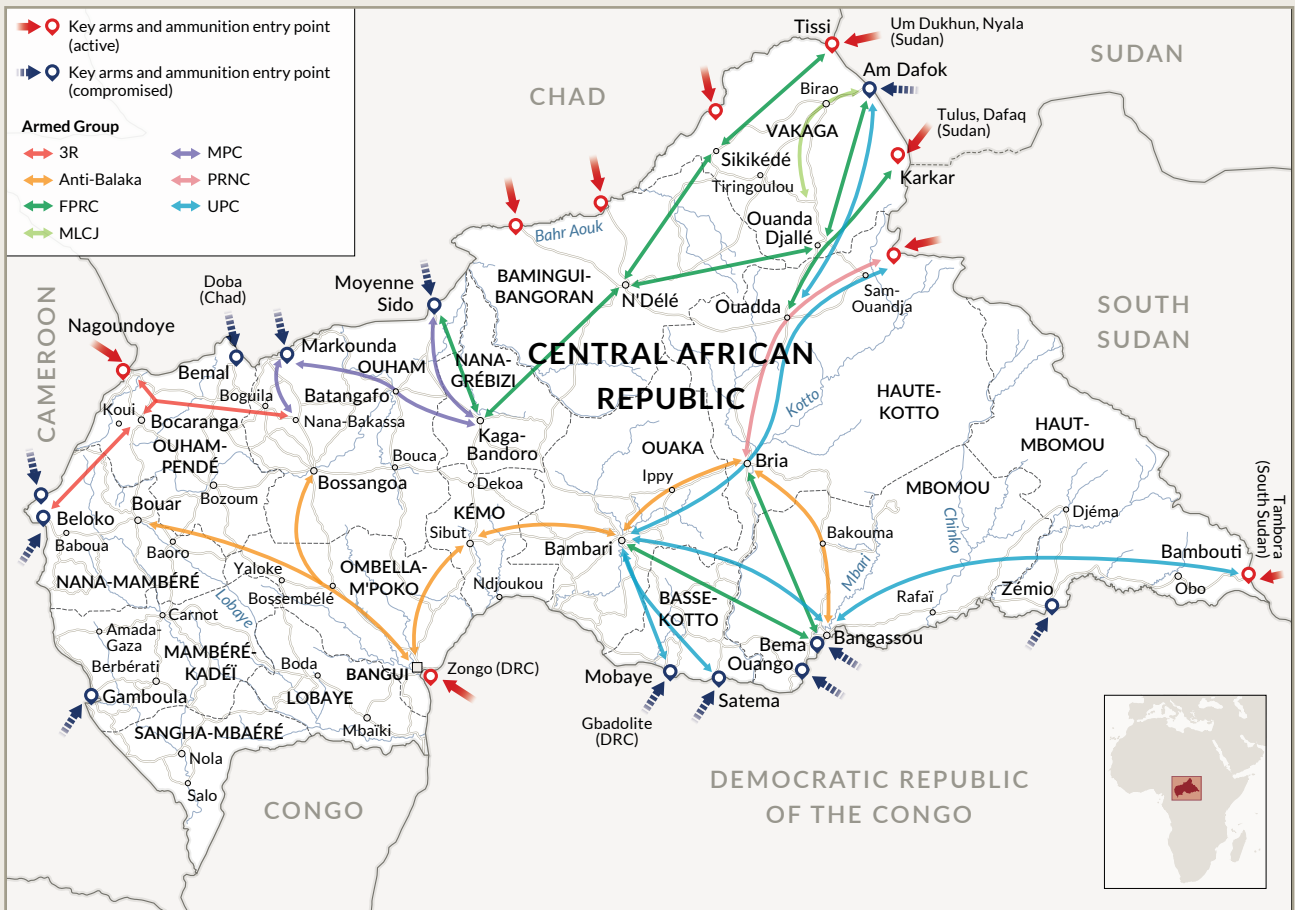


FIGURE 3 Armed groups' firearm trafficking corridors and entry points.

SOURCE: Adapted from Fiona Mangan, *Organized crime and conflict in the Central African Republic*, UN University Centre for Policy Research, 2024, https://collections.unu.edu/eserv/UNU:10172/Organized_Crime_and_Conflict_in_CAR

African armed groups, particularly Salamat and Misseriya Arab fighters represented in the MPC and FPRC – even though FPRC leader Nourredine Adam leans toward the SAF.⁸²

From April 2025, however, fighters started to return to the CAR from Sudan, drawn by the prospect of entering future disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) processes after the revival of the peace process with the UPC and the MPC.⁸³ According to local sources, about half of an initial group of 300 MPC recruits have returned, bringing with them newly acquired weaponry and vehicles, and many have settled in the gold mining area of Kouki.⁸⁴ In September 2025, this led to clashes with rival UPC forces – some of whom had also returned from Darfur and settled there awaiting DDR.⁸⁵

While the MPC and the UPC have sought to obtain weapons from the RSF, other Central African armed groups have tried to acquire weapons from Sudanese armed groups fighting alongside the SAF in Darfur. In November 2024, leaders of the RPRC, FPRC and Anti-Balaka met at Illidriiss in the tri-border area between Chad, the CAR and Sudan to coordinate supplies and explore potential joint action.⁸⁶ The meeting notably included the FPRC's Haroun Gaye, a UN-sanctioned figure accused of involvement in

arms trafficking,⁸⁷ and the RPRC's Arda Hakouma.⁸⁸ Days later, Hakouma reportedly travelled to al-Fashir to seek support from the Sudan Liberation Army of Minni Minnawi.⁸⁹

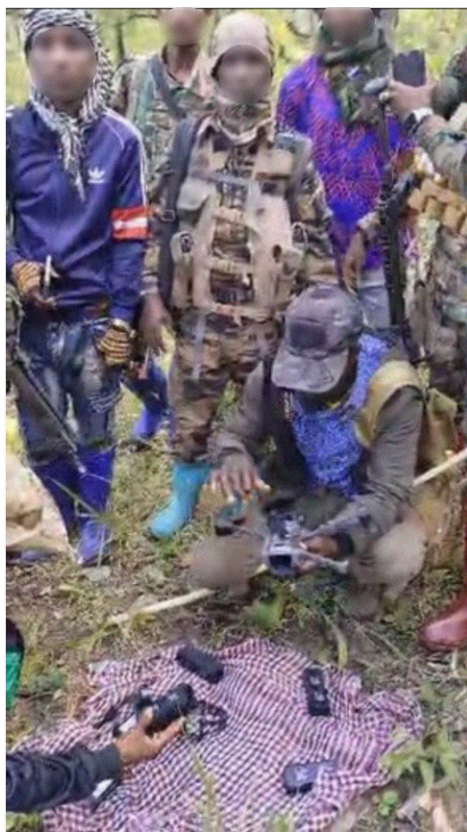
The Illidriiss meeting recalled earlier coordination efforts in 2022 in the same area that brought together the same individuals and Adam,⁹⁰ and resulted in new deliveries of vehicles and weapons from Sudan.⁹¹ This continuity shows that cross-border arms flows are deeply rooted and driven by fluid, transactional networks rather than fixed alliances. It suggests that regardless of how the war in Sudan evolves, the CAR will remain exposed to a steady influx of weapons.

The case of drones and explosives

Since 2022, Central African armed groups have been markedly escalating the technical sophistication of their arsenals. What began as opportunistic battlefield acquisitions of consumer drones and legacy explosives has shifted into experimenting with drone-borne munitions, securing training across borders and implementing attacks using IEDs.

The first confirmed drone sightings were in September 2022, when MINUSCA reported flyovers – suspected to be CPC-operated – in Nzako and Ouandja Djallé of DJI Mavic 2 quadcopters, a commercial model widely available for civilian use.⁹² The UN Panel of Experts later found images of CPC forces in possession of a DJI Mavic 2 control device containing images of a Wagner-occupied compound in Moyenne-Sido, suggesting proficiency in reconnaissance use.⁹³

Rather than being procured from abroad, this type of drone appears to have been acquired on the battlefield from FACA fighters. The UN Panel and the GI-TOC obtained footage of armed groups unpacking military bags containing Mavic-type drones after combat in Nzako in May 2022 and in Kouli in October 2024.⁹⁴



Fighters from 3R unpacking captured drones in October 2024. Photos supplied

By 2023, allegations emerged that some drones were being modified to deliver explosives. The first incident was reported in January in Ndélé, where a drone allegedly dropped explosives on a Wagner base, damaging an Mi-8 helicopter.⁹⁵ A second alleged incident occurred in Kagabandoro in December 2023 and reportedly killed three Wagner operatives.⁹⁶ Both events remain unconfirmed and were denied by armed groups.⁹⁷

In March 2024, government forces in Moyenne-Sido recovered a much more sophisticated but still commercial DJI Matrice 350 that had allegedly been equipped with improvised 40 mm aerial munitions.⁹⁸ Sources confirmed that 3R experimented with the drone after receiving training in Chad, but claimed that its use remained limited due to a lack of further supplies from an unnamed ‘international partner’.⁹⁹ Diplomatic sources and non-state armed actors further indicated that several elements received drone training in early 2024 at Koro Toro in central Chad.¹⁰⁰

Parallel to these developments, armed groups in north-western CAR have been using suspected landmines and IEDs since 2020.¹⁰¹ After a decline in 2022,¹⁰² usage increased in 2023, with armed groups sometimes directly targeting Wagner Group and FACA camps. However, deployed devices have often exploded indiscriminately, significantly restricting the freedom of movement of civilians and humanitarian workers.¹⁰³

Alongside usage trends, the sophistication of devices has also grown. For example, on 3 April 2023 near a Russian camp in Kabo (Ouham-Fafa Prefecture),¹⁰⁴ a motorcycle allegedly packed with a plastic explosive substance and fitted with a Wi-Fi detonator exploded.¹⁰⁵ In an incident on 19 September 2023 in Béloko (Nana-Mambéré Prefecture),¹⁰⁶ a suspected improvised charge equipped with an improvised mortar-attached detonator was used inside a customs post under construction.¹⁰⁷ These operations are alleged to have taken place after elements received training in Chad.¹⁰⁸ The UN attested to the existence of an explosives training centre and deployment in north-western CAR, but without giving the centre’s precise location.¹⁰⁹

Armed groups have also deployed conventional mines. Since 2021, the use of PRB M3 anti-tank mines – a Belgian-manufactured system exported widely in Africa in the 1970s and 1980s – has been reported in 3R-controlled areas in north-western CAR.¹¹⁰ These mines were probably harvested from active minefields in Chad and Sudan or trafficked from Libyan stockpiles.¹¹¹ A PRB M3 mine killed three MINUSCA peacekeepers on 3 October 2022 near Kouï, though the device was probably intended for Wagner or FACA convoys.¹¹² The Wagner Group claimed to have discovered another mine in July 2024 near Bocaranga, allegedly placed by 3R in preparation for an ambush.¹¹³

Looking ahead

DDR processes are ongoing in western and central regions, but to what extent they will succeed in recovering weapons and curbing arms flows remains to be seen. Large parts of the eastern regions remain volatile, as non-compliant Central African armed groups – or



A PRB M3 mine found in the Bocaranga area in north-western CAR, July 2024. Photo: Telegram

factions thereof – and loosely aligned armed actors of Chadian and Sudanese origin continue to operate with relative freedom.

Similarly, recent intensified operations by Wagner forces in the east, reportedly spilling across the Sudanese border in cooperation with the RSF, may reflect an attempt to secure sanctuary while maintaining operational relevance amid the anticipated transition to the Africa Corps. This may point to a future hybrid engagement rather than a clean institutional handover.¹¹⁴

Stabilization in these borderlands therefore appears distant, sustained in part by continued inflows of arms from Sudan, whether via RSF-linked channels or alternative trafficking networks.

Beyond the inflow of arms, control over imports of strategic commodities – particularly fuel – has become an equally critical factor shaping conflict dynamics in the CAR. Here, the focus shifts westward to the Cameroon supply corridor as a key contrast to eastern border dynamics.

Fuel

Since the government launched its counterinsurgency campaign in 2021, and with the global fuel crisis that followed in 2022, the CAR's formal and illicit fuel economies have shifted significantly, and fuel has emerged as a strategic pillar of the Wagner-backed state.

Parts of the formal fuel sector in the CAR have increasingly come under the control of multiple criminal networks, some of which are embedded within the state. Operators in the sector range from legitimate to overtly criminal, with a significant grey area in between. In particular, one tight-knit cartel of complicit officials and politically connected operators – national and foreign – have consolidated control over much of the country's fuel supply, maintaining artificially elevated prices while systematically evading tax liabilities to maximize revenue. In 2024, this cartel probably generated between US\$17.5 million and US\$30 million in excess revenues.¹¹⁵

At the same time, the dynamics of the illicit fuel economy have changed. As government and Wagner forces progressively severed armed groups' access to key cross-border fuel trafficking corridors beginning in 2021, groups such as 3R in north-eastern CAR have been forced to turn to less reliable and more expensive routes, undercutting their war economies.¹¹⁶ Wagner has built its own illicit fuel supply chain to meet its increased demand. And in 2024, the government issued a new directive that created a loophole for smuggling and enabled the government to 'regularize' smuggled fuel.

Commandeering the formal economy

Under the pretext of global fuel shortages that followed Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the CAR government restructured the fuel sector in 2023, first by forcing out French operator Total Centrafrique, which enabled the UK-based Tamoil to take over Total's import and distribution infrastructure.¹¹⁷ By September of that year, however, the Ministry of Energy granted Cameroonian firm Neptune Oil exclusive rights to import all fuel supplies in a deal reported to violate a 2007 law liberalizing the fuel market.¹¹⁸ Tamoil was then squeezed out on the basis of alleged supply disruptions,¹¹⁹ and in mid-2024, the government confiscated all Tamoil petrol stations.¹²⁰ Control of the stations was transferred to Prisca Roseline Mamadou, ruling party donor and wife of FACA chief of staff, Zéphérin Mamadou, and Souleymane Bassoum, a Malian national who reportedly has ties to Bangui's political elite.¹²¹

With its monopoly established, Neptune Oil has benefited from artificially inflated pricing structures and apparent off-record import tax exemptions that, together,¹²² have yielded significant profits. A ministry of energy source claimed that portions of these profits were funnelled back to key insiders.¹²³

The CAR state applies inflated international reference prices and grants unusually high importer premiums. These elements, which drive up the base cost of fuel, are embedded in the official pricing structure. By comparing the price structure in the CAR with that of Cameroon, it is estimated that Neptune Oil would make additional profits of FCFA 160 and FCFA 186 per litre of petrol and diesel, respectively, yielding additional profits of US\$17.5 million on its 2024 imports.¹²⁴

An independent audit conducted on behalf of the CAR government at the recommendation of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) calculated an even higher overcharge. It found that Neptune Oil overcharged to the tune of FCFA 190–241 per litre of petrol and FCFA 221–288 per litre of diesel.¹²⁵ Estimates are higher and cover a range because the audit compared the CAR with Cameroon and the DRC and included unjustified transport costs. With these margins, unjustified profits in 2024 would have been between US\$31 million and US\$40 million.

The audit also noted that the government and Neptune Oil applied the peak international reference price (from July 2024) throughout the end of that year and into 2025, without providing any proof that the marketed fuel came from stocks purchased at that time.¹²⁶ In fact, the audit deemed this impossible, considering the way the market is structured, and trade databases show Neptune Oil having commercial shipments to the CAR after July 2024.¹²⁷ The apparently disingenuous international reference price calculation comprises more than 40% of the total price inflation calculated in the audit.

Trade insiders further report that significant volumes of Neptune Oil's fuel enter the CAR untaxed under diplomatic exemptions facilitated by complicit customs agents.¹²⁸ These exemptions arguably contributed to a sharp drop in government fuel revenue from US\$41.6 million in 2021 to US\$29.5 million in 2024, despite similar import levels.¹²⁹ The independent audit also highlighted tax exemptions, but it referred only to those formally granted to Tristar, which previously supplied MINUSCA,¹³⁰ and Petrolex,¹³¹ which supplies the army and the Wagner Group, according to international fuel trade experts.¹³² It is unlikely that these exemptions alone could account for the tax revenue shortfall between 2021 and 2024, given that, in 2024, exempted diesel and petrol comprised only 8% of total imports.¹³³

Neptune's tax exemptions come on top of elevated costs and margins and would, according to a trade insider, yield a total excess profit of FCFA 400 per litre.¹³⁴ This would have meant excess profits of US\$30 million on Neptune Oil's 2024 imports, which were largely distributed through confiscated Tamoil stations.¹³⁵ Distribution in these stations would have allowed for a portion of these unjustified benefits to be funnelled back to government actors through a system of fuel vouchers. Government agencies linked to the Ministry of Energy give fuel vouchers to security officers for operational needs. These vouchers are then exchanged at confiscated fuel stations for cash, which is distributed upwards to reach senior officials, including members of Touadéra's ruling party.¹³⁶

Illicit networks

The Wagner Group's supply chain

The Wagner Group has built its own illicit fuel supply chain to sustain its joint military operations with the FACA and to facilitate its mining operations. Since late 2018, Wagner's fuel network has shifted from informal smuggling to a structured system that moves fuel along the regular supply route through Cameroon and that is anchored in front companies, licensed marketers and government-granted exemptions.¹³⁷

Wagner front company Petrolex was registered in the CAR in 2021 and began importing tanker trucks of fuel via Cameroon in 2022.¹³⁸ It is now also the army's main fuel supplier, apparently exempt from Neptune Oil's monopoly.¹³⁹ Another company, Solaris Energy, has also imported small quantities of diesel since 2022. According to media reports, the company has been distributing tax-exempt fuel to Chinese and Wagner Group-associated mining companies.¹⁴⁰ Customs-based trade databases indicate that Cameroon's National Refining Company (SONARA) is the importer of the fuel that Petrolex and Solaris market in the CAR. While data indicates this fuel is mostly of Russian, and some Belgian, origin, the upstream international trader is not specified.¹⁴¹

Fuel as a strategic objective for armed groups

Control over illicit cross-border fuel flows has long been a defining characteristic of the CAR's conflict dynamics.¹⁴² Historically, armed groups established war economies built on the exploitation and taxation of natural resources, including fuel.¹⁴³ Their access to key trafficking corridors has been increasingly limited since the 2021 counterinsurgency campaign.

But armed groups have also struck back by targeting fuel supplies benefiting the Wagner Group and government forces. 3R, for instance, has positioned itself to disrupt overland routes from Cameroon, including with attacks on fuel infrastructure. In one such attack in January 2023, 3R destroyed 23 trucks carrying fuel and killed three individuals – two FACA soldiers and a Wagner Group operative.¹⁴⁴ Insider accounts suggested that the trucks had been seized by customs authorities with Wagner assistance,¹⁴⁵ and that the attack may have been commissioned by fuel traders seeking to prevent confiscated fuel from falling into government or Wagner hands.¹⁴⁶ At present, 3R's capacity to interrupt key corridors is diminishing due to sustained offensives, but sporadic disruptions persist.¹⁴⁷

The parallel supply chain

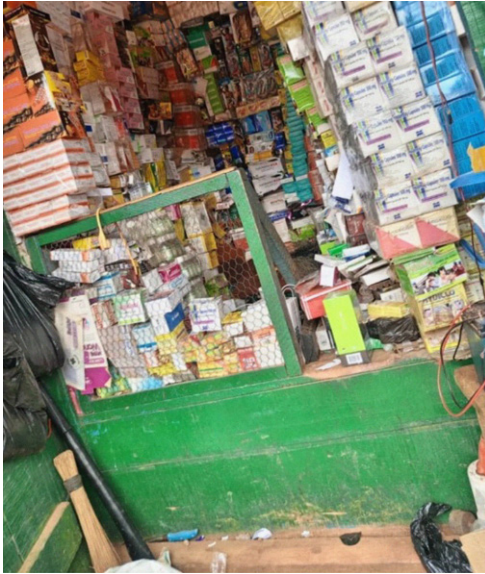
Although the government centralized fuel imports under Neptune Oil's monopoly, in June 2024 it authorized operators without a formal import licence to bring in fuel intended for remote regions under a separate pricing scheme, as long as taxes were paid.¹⁴⁸ In practice, this system has functioned as a smokescreen for large-scale smuggling.

The system relies heavily on cheap smuggled fuel originating in Nigeria.¹⁴⁹ This fuel is transported down the Benue River into Garoua in northern Cameroon; from there, it is transferred into small tankers or barrels and loaded onto trucks that join commercial convoys entering the CAR.¹⁵⁰ Once inside the country, the fuel is systematically underdeclared and diverted to Bangui in direct violation of the government's directive.¹⁵¹

Beyond enabling increased smuggling, the directive has also been used to 'regularize' fuel seized by the Ministry of Energy's anti-fraud committee. The committee has reportedly seized modest quantities smuggled to Bangui across the Oubangui River from the DRC,¹⁵² and although traders can officially reclaim the fuel by paying duties, most payments are framed as penalties rather than taxes, and the money never reaches the public treasury.¹⁵³

Tramadol

The trafficking and non-medical consumption of synthetic opioids – particularly tramadol – has become one of the most pervasive illicit drug economies in the CAR.¹⁵⁴ This drug market, concentrated in urban centres such as Bangui, offers high financial returns while providing cheap, unsafe tramadol-based products that fuel local insecurity and violence.



A retailer in the PK5 neighbourhood of Bangui selling illicit pharmaceutical products, including tramadol, 2025. *Photo supplied*



A shipment of 100-milligram tramadol tablets. Retailers typically buy batches of 10 tablets. The stock comes from the DRC and is transported by river or by military units whose officials control the logistics. *Photo supplied*

Across West and Central Africa, the market for pharmaceutical opioids has grown rapidly over the past decade. The region accounted for more than half of global pharmaceutical opioid seizures between 2019 and 2023, largely driven by the illicit circulation of tramadol.¹⁵⁵ Within this broader regional market, the CAR has emerged as a destination and redistribution point for high-dose tramadol products.¹⁵⁶ Although quantitative data is limited, field research and interviews indicate that tramadol tablets circulate widely through informal retail networks linking the capital to provincial towns and cross-border routes. A significant share of tramadol available on the CAR's illicit markets exceeds medically recommended dosages. While therapeutic doses typically range between 50 milligrams and 100 milligrams, tablets of 120 milligrams, 200 milligrams or higher are commonly sold. At these concentrations, tramadol produces stimulating and euphoric effects, including reduced perception of pain and fear, while significantly increasing the risks of dependency.¹⁵⁷

In the CAR, as elsewhere in the region, tramadol consumption is widespread among young people and manual labourers, who use the drug to combat fatigue, suppress hunger and sustain long working hours.¹⁵⁸ Typical consumers include motorcycle taxi drivers, labourers and unemployed youth, many of whom rely on the drug to cope with economic hardship or physically demanding work. The side effects, however, contribute to increased road accidents, petty crime and interpersonal violence, underscoring tramadol's role as a driver of urban insecurity.¹⁵⁹

Pills of war and control

Beyond widespread civilian use, tramadol plays a critical role in conflict dynamics, extending into more opaque and coercive spheres. Armed actors, including soldiers and militias, use the drug to enhance aggression, suppress fear and sustain combat performance. Several sources confirm that armed actors often rely on high-dose pills (200 milligrams or more); one vendor confirmed that they sometimes consume between six and 10 pills per day, equivalent to intakes of up to 2 000 milligrams.¹⁶⁰ At such levels, users become highly volatile and unpredictable, experiencing seizures, loss of behavioural control and

memory gaps.¹⁶¹ These effects lower inhibitions, increase risk-taking and directly intensify the brutality of violence in conflict settings.¹⁶²

In the CAR, sources indicate that both soldiers and proxy militias relied heavily on tramadol during the Wagner-led military campaign that resulted in mass atrocities over three years.¹⁶³ One militia member reported that without such substances, carrying out attacks against his own community and even his family would have been extremely difficult.¹⁶⁴ A tramadol vendor confirmed that the pro-government militia known as the Sharks – created in 2019 to conduct extrajudicial operations – operated under the influence of tramadol.¹⁶⁵

This phenomenon is not new. The use of tramadol by militias in PK5 and by other armed groups dates back to at least 2014–2015.¹⁶⁶ During episodes of violence in Bangui in 2018, attackers were reportedly supplied with tramadol alongside weapons, ammunition and fuel before assaults on civilian neighbourhoods.¹⁶⁷ Combined with ideological indoctrination, the drug functioned as a tool to lower inhibitions and facilitate acts of extreme violence.

Similar patterns of combat-related tramadol use have been documented in other conflict contexts across the region. In Nigeria and Cameroon, fighters linked to Boko Haram reportedly used tramadol

Annex 7.5 MAOC hunting ammunition and tramadol seized in Bangui on 17 July and 29 August 2017.

Photographs taken by the Panel in Bangui, Customs Office and Port Beach, on 21 September 2017.



Rounds of MAOC hunting ammunition, packages of tramadol, marijuana and vehicles seized in Ippy on 29 January 2017. Photographs obtained by the Panel from a confidential source on 1 February 2017.



Trafficking of narcotics and soft drugs

Fighters from the anti-balaka and self-defence groups consume significant amounts of narcotics and soft drugs, especially before and during the attacks. Soft drugs and tramadol, whose importation into the Central African Republic is prohibited¹², are openly sold on the markets and shops in the entire country. Boxes of tramadol are trafficked into the Central African Republic via Zongo in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Garoua Boula in Cameroon.¹³ Customs office showed substantial numbers of tramadol boxes seized in Bangui and expressed concern with the increasing trafficking of these prohibited narcotics.¹⁴



Tramadol is frequently seized alongside weapons and ammunition, as illustrated by reporting from the UN Security Council. *Photos: UN Security Council, Final report of the Panel of Experts on the Central African Republic extended pursuant to Security Council resolution 2339 (2017), S/2017/1023, 6 December 2017, Annex 7.5, <https://docs.un.org/en/S/2017/1023>*

before attacks, including suicide bombings and assaults on civilian communities.¹⁶⁸ Aid workers in internally displaced persons camps in Borno State, Nigeria, reported that former Boko Haram fighters took more than four tablets at a time before raids, entering a state in which nothing mattered except the mission. This use has earned the drug the nickname ‘the jihadist pill’.¹⁶⁹ The frequent co-occurrence of tramadol seizures alongside weapons and ammunition further highlights its integration into the preparation and execution of violent acts.¹⁷⁰

A profitable, militarized illicit supply chain

As with other illicit economies penetrated by organized crime, the tramadol trade in the CAR has gradually shifted from militia-controlled distribution to a more centralized system. After the 2014 interreligious crisis,¹⁷¹ the trade was largely controlled by self-defence groups that integrated tramadol into broader illicit activities, including taxation and trafficking.¹⁷² The drug was sourced primarily from regional markets – through neighbouring Chad, Cameroon and the DRC – and distributed across Bangui and rebel-held areas beyond state oversight.

Since 2022, however, sources indicate that control over the trade has increasingly shifted towards high-ranking members of the CAR security apparatus.¹⁷³ This reflects broader patterns of state-linked criminalization, where segments of the security apparatus capture illicit markets as sources of revenue and political leverage.

The tramadol trade generates high financial returns with relatively limited risks, making it particularly attractive to criminal networks and armed actors. Data suggests that an initial investment of FCFA 1 million can yield up to FCFA 1.8 million in revenue.¹⁷⁴ Profitability appears to increase further when shipments are trafficked to neighbouring markets with higher retail prices, such as Cameroon. A vendor reported in early 2026 that a shipment valued at FCFA 4 million could generate up to FCFA 12 million if sold in Cameroon, even though FCFA 2 million would be allocated to bribes.

Prices for tramadol are dynamic and vary considerably depending on supply and demand, market availability, supply chain disruptions and geographic location. In early 2026, a 200-milligram pill – known locally as *kete ndongo* (Sango for a small red chilli pepper) – sold for about FCFA 400 in Bangui, while in rural areas prices ranged from FCFA 600 to FCFA 1 000 due to higher transport costs and limited availability. Similarly, 100-milligram pills typically sold for FCFA 200–FCFA 350.

At the regional level, supply chains have historically linked pharmaceutical production in India to West African markets, with goods transiting Libya or Benin before moving east via Nigeria into Central Africa.¹⁷⁵ More recently, routes have shifted towards the DRC, with tramadol entering the CAR through corridors linking Bangui to Zongo and Gbadolite across the Oubangui River.¹⁷⁶ These routes rely on low-visibility transport methods, including female couriers, and exploit porous borders and weak regulatory environments.

Open-source trade and pharmaceutical data points to the role of legal import channels as potential entry points for diversion. Across Africa, tramadol is widely imported from international producers through licensed pharmaceutical companies before being redistributed through formal and informal networks. For instance, companies such as Shalina Laboratories in Mumbai legally export tramadol products to African markets, including the DRC,¹⁷⁷ while firms such as Phatkin Laboratories in Kinshasa have legally imported large volumes of pharmaceutical products in recent years.¹⁷⁸ These imports are typically registered as standard-dose medications (e.g. 50 milligrams). Field observations in the CAR,

however, indicate the widespread circulation of high-dose formulations (e.g. 200-milligram tablets such as Tramadol 200), which exceed typical therapeutic ranges and the origins of which are unknown.

A stronger opioid, tapentadol, is also increasingly circulating in Bangui and other West and Central African capitals. Compared to 200-milligram tramadol, tapentadol has a faster onset and can produce effects that are two to three times more potent, resulting in a more intense high and a greater loss of control.¹⁷⁹ This higher potency increases the risks of disorientation, dependency and overdose, but it also has implications for violence.

Branded as Royal 225 or TramaKing, tapentadol is available in markets. Perhaps due to regulatory crackdowns on tramadol in Nigeria and tighter export rules in India, companies in Mumbai have begun exporting tapentadol pills, exploiting regulatory gaps.¹⁸⁰ Tapentadol imports have surged, with more than 2 300 shipments from India since 2022, and regional distribution has been facilitated through warehouses in Nigeria, Ghana and Niger. The CAR's common trade partners, Nigeria, Niger, Chad, Congo and Cameroon, account for 385 shipments, highlighting the growing regional importance of this opioid.¹⁸¹

The growing use of tapentadol alongside the widespread availability of tramadol carries serious social implications, as the market for these illicit drugs has historically funded violent actors while the drugs themselves have enabled fighters to commit acts of mass violence.



Tapentadol for sale at a market in the PK5 neighbourhood of Bangui, 2025. *Photos supplied*



Illicit value chains

While inward flows of arms, fuel and drugs sustain combat capacity, the most significant financial engine of violence in the CAR lies in outward flows of commodities. Minerals, timber, cattle and wildlife are extracted from territories controlled by armed groups and mercenaries and move through formal and informal channels. Commodities are often exported under opaque arrangements that blur the lines between legal trade and illicit extraction. Minerals, particularly gold and diamonds, provide the largest and most visible returns to frontline actors, while timber and wildlife contribute to a lesser extent. The contribution of cattle raiding and taxation is difficult to quantify.

Other mineral resources, including hydrocarbons, iron, uranium, lithium, coltan and various precious metals, are largely unexplored or underdeveloped. Although these resources have potential geo-strategic significance and have already attracted foreign interest, they have not yet generated substantial revenues or directly influenced armed violence in the CAR.

The trafficking of these natural resources has historically been the primary driver of the flow of illicit finances in the CAR. Smuggling, misinvoicing and opaque contracting have been compounded by weaknesses in the formal financial sector to create a high-risk environment. In this context, the government has shifted more towards informal economies, with the latest venture being a series of questionable cryptocurrency initiatives that not only outsourced national wealth to private interests but also opened the country up to further illicit financial flows.¹⁸²

Minerals

The artisanal and largely informal mining sector, primarily involving diamonds and gold,¹⁸³ has long been central to shaping and sustaining conflict in the CAR. For years, these sectors fuelled state mismanagement and corruption while providing motivation and financing for armed groups. But what initially functioned as a loosely governed criminal conflict economy – characterized by artisanal production in rebel-controlled areas, plural trading circuits involved in legal and illegal transactions, and the tolerance of weak state offices – has since 2021 become a more centralized and predatory system as the state and its foreign allies have reasserted control over much of the CAR's mining heartland. Today,

in exchange for protecting the central regime, state-backed, foreign and mercenary-linked enterprises play an increasingly important role in extractive activities, particularly in the gold sector, engaging in large-scale illegal resource appropriation under the cover of formal exploitation and trade permits.

Diamonds were historically the CAR's main export earner, but since the implementation of the Kimberley Process in 2013, they have been overtaken by gold as the most dynamic and lucrative conflict commodity,¹⁸⁴ and gold smuggling has been pervasive. Between 2013 and 2020, almost no gold production was officially declared for export.¹⁸⁵ By 2019, the production capacity of artisanal gold – primarily from zones controlled and taxed by armed groups – had increased to about 5.7 tonnes, almost all of which was smuggled.¹⁸⁶ The customs value of smuggled gold that year would have reached about US\$180 million, – with market value reaching much higher – providing armed groups with a vastly larger revenue base through taxation, protection rackets and control over trade routes.

Since 2021, however, the political economy of mining has undergone a rapid transformation, particularly in the gold sector. As Russian- and Rwandan-backed national forces recaptured key mining areas across the country, armed groups lost much of their direct territorial control. In parallel, an increasing share of artisanal gold production has begun being exported through formal channels, driven by the proliferation of buying houses and gold foundries in Bangui.¹⁸⁷ Official gold exports, mostly artisanal, first peaked at 1.7 tonnes in 2023, with gold becoming the dominant export commodity, delivering roughly half of national export earnings.¹⁸⁸ Based on first-quarter projections, they were expected to reach about 2.5 tonnes in 2025, but rose to as much as 7 tonnes by the end of the year.¹⁸⁹ Given that this exceeds artisanal production capacity in recent years – and that it is unlikely artisanal output suddenly began being exported legally at scale – the figures most likely include industrial gold production as well.

This apparent gold trade formalization masks a parallel and deeply opaque transformation, however. In territories retaken by government-aligned forces, semi-industrial mining operations expanded rapidly, drawing on mining permits awarded both before and after the start of the military offensive. An already opaque attribution system became even less transparent after the 2023 constitutional reforms, which removed the requirement for parliamentary approval of mining permits and concentrated full discretionary authority in the hands of the president.¹⁹⁰

View of the Ndassima gold mine. It is estimated that almost all artisanal gold – primarily extracted in zones controlled and taxed by armed groups – is smuggled out of the CAR. © Thierry Bresillion/Anadolu Agency via Getty Images



In this context, the Wagner Group emerged as the dominant player, securing key mining sites, ducking oversight and retaining strong influence with the regime. Chinese companies, which had been well established in the sector, particularly close to Bangui, have seen their opportunities for expansion limited. Meanwhile, Rwanda-linked companies are beginning to establish a small foothold at the invitation of the regime.

Unlike artisanal production, outputs from these industrial and semi-industrial operations largely bypass formal export channels. Vast quantities of gold – linked to Wagner-affiliated operations, foreign mining companies, individual smugglers and entrenched criminal networks – are moved out of the country through a combination of licensed exporters, covert air transport and cross-border trafficking routes, indicating large-scale revenue losses for the state. Given that the estimated production volume of just one of Wagner’s industrial mines is almost equivalent to the country’s entire artisanal production, the potential governmental losses incurred through illicit and criminal export are tremendous.¹⁹¹ Wagner’s off-the-books access to gold revenues is widely understood to function as compensation for the security services it provides to the government.¹⁹²

The Wagner Group’s domination

Having been a player in the CAR mineral sector since at least 2018, the Wagner Group’s mining strategy shifted decisively in 2020 towards high-value concessions, beginning with the Ndassima gold concession near Bambari in central CAR, which is estimated to hold deposits valued at US\$2.8 billion.¹⁹³ Wagner’s front company Midas Ressources had, without legal basis, obtained the Ndassima permit from Canadian firm Axmin, which had declared force majeure on its project due to rebel occupation.¹⁹⁴ Midas allegedly paid the UPC to provide protection during the early development of the industrial pit.¹⁹⁵

Ndassima became the first major mining site from which Wagner expelled rebel forces in early 2021. This was followed by a violent campaign to remove artisanal miners from the concession. Wagner fighters and allied forces reportedly arrested, assaulted and killed numerous miners and traders accused of trespassing or perceived as threats to industrial operations.¹⁹⁶ Since then, Ndassima has remained effectively off-limits to CAR authorities. In 2024, a mining officer from Ouaka prefecture was reportedly summoned by Wagner’s chief representative, the EU- and US-sanctioned Dmitry Sytii,¹⁹⁷ and threatened with death for attempting to investigate operations at the site, while another official was dismissed after visiting Ndassima.¹⁹⁸

How Wagner captured the diamond trade

The diamond-trading hub of Bria emerged as Wagner’s operational nerve centre in the east during the 2021 counter-offensive. Wagner forces seized the offices of BADICA, one of the country’s main diamond-buying houses, and converted them into their provincial headquarters and an extrajudicial detention centre.¹⁹⁹ In 2022, during the reconquest of diamond-producing areas north of Bria, including Aïbando and Yanga, Wagner reportedly killed at least 22 civilians.²⁰⁰ Subsequent military operations enabled the FACA, with Wagner’s support, to capture the diamond-mining areas of Nzako.²⁰¹

To penetrate the diamond sector in the east, Wagner relied on long-standing Lebanese diamond dealers. Lebanese dealers were observed in Wagner-linked aircraft landing in Ndele in late 2022.²⁰² A 2023 media

report identified family members of Aziz Nassour – a previously UN sanctioned diamond dealer who arrived in the CAR from Liberia in 2016 – as key intermediaries.²⁰³

The Wagner Group's diamond trading front company, Diamville, established in 2019, operated extensively in eastern CAR, providing large prefinancing sums to collectors and forcing miners to sell or hand over stones directly under the threat of violence.²⁰⁴ Between 2019 and 2022, Diamville officially declared limited exports from western zones of 1 600 carats, worth US\$600 000.²⁰⁵

After revelations by the All Eyes on Wagner investigative consortium, Diamville was sanctioned by the European Union (EU) and the US in February and June 2023.²⁰⁶ Although no official diamond exports were recorded after the December 2022 revelations, sources reported continued diamond collection in the west and the east using small aircraft registered to sanctioned Wagner-linked companies M-Invest and M-Finance.²⁰⁷ The appearance of Diamville's representative on M-Finance timesheets, as well, suggests the covert continuation of the company's operations under Wagner's logistical cover.²⁰⁸

After the full lifting of the Kimberley Process suspension in November 2024,²⁰⁹ Wagner retained control over the most valuable diamonds now legally originating from the east. In January 2025, the attempted legal sale of an exceptional 177-carat stone from Nzako was blocked after pressure from Sytij.²¹⁰ The prospective buyer, the owner of a registered buying house, fled the country after police intimidation, and the diamond's whereabouts remain unknown – sending a clear deterrent signal to legitimate traders and undermining confidence in the CAR's diamond sector.²¹¹



A Chekan-type armoured personnel carrier associated with the Wagner Group at a gold-mining concession in Yidéré, 2023. Photo: Google Earth

By early 2023, the FACA and Wagner captured the gold-mining zone around Sikikédé in the far north-east, displacing rebel groups from most of the east's key mining areas.²¹² In the west, operations in 2022 and 2023 focused on removing 3R from gold-mining sites in Yidéré and Abba near the Cameroonian border, and Kouki in the centre-north towards the Chadian border.²¹³ Several sources report that the capture of Yidéré was accompanied by atrocities against civilians aimed at clearing populations perceived as competing with Wagner's mining interests.²¹⁴ Local residents reported seeing Wagner operatives inside the mining perimeter, and at least one individual was detained after approaching the site.²¹⁵

Following these reconquests, additional Wagner front companies obtained permits for strategic mining sites. Mining Industries reportedly secured a permit covering Sikikédé,²¹⁶ but no permanent industrial presence has been established, probably due to persistent insecurity. In January 2024, the company Heavy Industrial obtained a permit for Yidéré, where industrial development has since advanced.²¹⁷ Satellite imagery from December 2023 – predating the permit – shows industrial-scale infrastructure, defensive perimeter walls and a Chekan-type armoured personnel carrier associated with Wagner.²¹⁸

Airlifts and trading accomplices

Despite having secured control of several key mining sites, the Wagner Group and its front companies have not reported any meaningful official gold exports, suggesting that most of the group's production is trafficked.

Based on analysis of satellite imagery, mining experts estimate that Midas Ressources' Ndassima concession has the capacity to produce more than 5 tonnes of gold annually, worth about US\$250 million at current export prices. This output would be equivalent to the country's entire artisanal gold production. However, mining officials and experts note that the company has never declared any production, sales or exports, nor has it allowed mining authorities to monitor its operations, as required by law.²¹⁹ A senior official at the Ministry of Mines in Bangui noted that he has not seen any production reports from Yidéré.²²⁰

According to a source within the Ministry of Mines, the only payments Midas Ressources has made to the government were surface taxes in 2024, totalling about US\$42 700.²²¹ This amount is negligible when compared to the 3% royalty that should have been paid on the export value of its production, which would be approximately US\$7.5 million. This figure excludes unpaid corporate income taxes and export duties, implying substantially higher losses for the state that cannot be reliably quantified in the absence of transparency regarding production costs and the share of gold smuggled out of, or laundered within, the CAR.

Several sources reported that two primary channels are used to move Wagner's gold production out of the country: local buying houses and foundries with export licences, to which gold is sold to generate cash for local operations; and direct illegal export by plane.²²²

According to trade insiders, a Malian national formally associated with Sigma Gold from its establishment in March 2021 until at least June 2023 has been purchasing gold from Wagner Group operatives, particularly from the Ndassima concession, since 2022.²²³ Established shortly after Wagner's arrival in the country, Sigma Gold is widely regarded by officials in the mining administration as a front company for Wagner's interests.²²⁴ One senior official claimed there had been direct political interference at the highest levels whenever efforts were made to hold the company accountable for possession of undocumented gold.²²⁵ Sigma Gold's export records for November 2022 and October 2023, covering a combined 90 kilograms of gold, list Bambari – where Ndassima is located – among the declared areas of origin.²²⁶

In the absence of evidence that other local buying houses are laundering Wagner-associated gold, and given that Sigma Gold appears to source only a portion of its gold from Bambari,²²⁷ most of Wagner's gold is probably smuggled out of the country by air.

Sigma Gold

Sigma Gold Ltd. is part of a broader network of gold exporting companies operating across the Great Lakes region and has documented ownership links to the UAE. The company was initially registered in March 2021 by Pakistani national Saqlain Raza,²²⁸ who also owns Sigma Mining Corporation in Rwanda.²²⁹ In 2024, Raza was involved in shipping Congolese gold to Dubai via Kigali, according to the UN Group of Experts on the DRC.²³⁰ The gold was presumably smuggled, since there are no official exports between the DRC and Rwanda.

In June 2023, Sigma Gold Ltd. was reregistered as Sigma Gold CAR and placed under the joint control of UAE-based Sigma Mining Ltd. and the CAR state.²³¹ Export records, however, make no distinction between these entities and continue to refer simply to 'Sigma Gold', which became the leading exporter of gold in the CAR in 2023 with over 850 kilograms of gold exported.²³²

Beginning in 2024, both Sigma Mining Ltd. and Sigma Gold CAR were incorporated as subsidiaries of the UAE-based International Holding Company,²³³ one of the Middle East's largest investment conglomerates. Around the same time, Sigma Gold changed its name to Royal Trading.²³⁴

In 2022, The Sentry reported that Wagner exported gold by air to Sudan, where the group operated another mining company, Meroe Gold.²³⁵ Supporting this allegation, on 18 August 2022, Wabem Ndede – a businessman whose phone number appeared on the Midas Ressources website – travelled from Khartoum to Bangui and back on a special flight operated by an Antonov An-32 aircraft (registration ST-PAW).²³⁶

More recent information points to special flights for Wagner's gold shipments departing from the military airfield at Berengo, just west of Bangui, as well as flights from Bangui to Puntland or Somaliland.²³⁷ While no direct evidence of gold shipments along this route has been documented, the Somalia corridor remains plausible. On 12 October 2024, an Ilyushin Il-76 military cargo aircraft, used for Russian state deliveries in the CAR and operated by the sanctioned Abakan Air (registration RA-76370),²³⁸ flew from Bangui to Bosaso in Puntland, switching off its transponder over Hargeisa in Somaliland.²³⁹ Bosaso has hosted a UAE military airbase and is emerging as a hub for gold exports to the UAE.²⁴⁰

Similarly, Il-76 aircraft operating under the CAR flag and reportedly controlled by the Wagner Group represent another potential channel for gold transport. All Eyes on Wagner traced the travel in 2023 of an engineer formerly employed by Gazprom from Libya to Bangui and onward to the Ndassima concession.²⁴¹ His itinerary corresponded exactly to the flight path of an Il-76 aircraft registered as TL-KPA,²⁴² which is operated by Wagner in the CAR. While no cargo manifests are publicly available, the use of heavy cargo aircraft for apparent Ndassima mining personnel raises credible concerns that such flights may also be used to smuggle gold.

Challenges for Chinese companies

Before the counter-offensive, Chinese mining activities had been largely confined to areas under FACA control north of Bangui, particularly around the towns of Yaloké and Bozoum. These operations caused significant environmental damage and were accompanied by abuses against local communities by FACA personnel,²⁴³ a pattern that still persists in Yaloké.²⁴⁴ Two major Chinese-owned companies, IMC and Thien Pao, operated further west in Abba sub-prefecture (Lamy and Ndiba Mole), where protection arrangements with 3R had been common for several years.²⁴⁵

After the counter-offensive, Chinese-owned companies sought to expand into newly secured areas in central CAR, but they were met with resistance. When IMC attempted to move equipment to its concession in Yassine near Ndassima in early 2022, Wagner operatives reportedly looted its assets to deter operations.²⁴⁶ In March 2023, nine Chinese nationals were killed by unknown assailants at a recently awarded concession, just east of Bambari, held by the newly arrived Gold Koss Group.²⁴⁷ In July 2023, after threats to a mine in the same area, 12 Chinese workers were rescued and evacuated with Wagner's assistance.²⁴⁸ In 2024, the government revoked two Chinese mining licences in central CAR, citing violations including exploitation under exploration permits, failure to declare production and alleged cooperation with armed groups.²⁴⁹

While long-established Chinese operations in western CAR continue to enjoy government protection, including FACA security deployments, newer Chinese entrants appear to lack reliable political cover and remain vulnerable to both state and non-state interference. Several sources attribute this to Wagner pressure, as the group increasingly views Chinese companies as economic competitors, particularly in central CAR where its principal Ndassima concession is located.²⁵⁰ A senior official involved in countering mineral smuggling reported that he had received explicit instructions to target Chinese networks, resulting in increased field monitoring.²⁵¹ Local media has criticized the government for selective enforcement, noting that Wagner and Rwandan-linked actors continue to operate with relative impunity.²⁵²

Underreported exports and trafficked gold

Gold mining companies owned or operated by Chinese nationals are widely alleged to engage in illegal exports of gold, these being primarily routed through Cameroon, where many of their parent companies and business partners are based.²⁵³ In 2021, the UN Panel of Experts reported the seizure of seven kilograms of raw gold (worth US\$336 000) from a Chinese national linked to a Chinese-owned company operating in Yaloké.²⁵⁴ Another case in February 2025 involved a Chinese national arrested in Dubai with 45 kilograms of undocumented raw gold – worth US\$3.2 million – originating from the CAR.²⁵⁵

Beyond these isolated seizures, large discrepancies between estimated production and declared exports provide a stronger indication of the scale of trafficking linked to Chinese mining operators, many of which also hold export licences. Despite actively exploiting small-scale mining permit areas since 2017, Chinese companies have reported exports that fall far below their estimated production capacity – or have declared no exports at all. For example, the UN Panel of Experts noted that Thien Pao and HW-Lepo did not declare any gold exports in 2020, despite ongoing production.²⁵⁶ In the same year, IMC Mining declared exports of only 19 kilograms, an amount the Panel estimated to be equivalent to just one month of production from IMC's mines in the Yaloké area alone.²⁵⁷ In preceding years, IMC's declared exports did not exceed one kilogram annually.²⁵⁸ Although IMC's reported exports increased significantly in 2021 and 2022, they subsequently fell back to 2020 levels, despite continued mining activity.

The UAE as a mirror market: Declared CAR exports and concealed regional flows

Since at least 2023, almost all the CAR's officially declared gold exports have been destined for the UAE.²⁵⁹ Declared CAR exports to the UAE closely mirror the UAE's reported gold imports from the CAR.²⁶⁰ This degree of mirror reporting is unusual in the region and suggests a relatively high level of accuracy in customs declarations by officially licensed CAR exporters.

By contrast, the UAE reports substantial gold imports from Cameroon and Chad, despite those countries recording few official gold exports to the UAE.²⁶¹ This asymmetry strongly indicates that the gold entering the UAE from Cameroon and Chad is largely smuggled out of those countries and declared only upon import. Moreover, the volumes declared by the UAE far exceed the estimated artisanal production capacities of both countries.²⁶²

In this regional context, gold that continues to be smuggled out of the CAR – estimated at more than half of national production – is likely to be absorbed into these flows, considering available evidence of trafficking patterns.

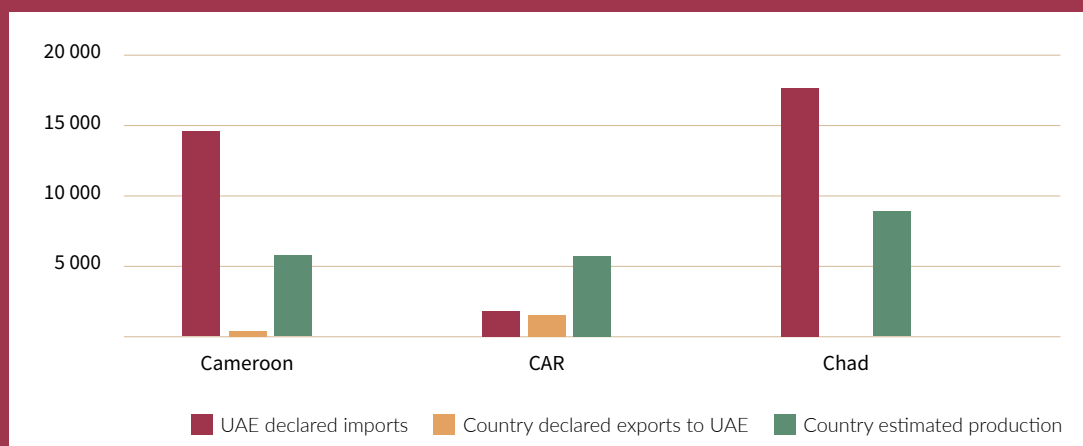


FIGURE 4 UAE gold imports compared with declared exports and estimated production, kilograms, 2023.

SOURCES: Comtrade, CAR Ministry of Mines, Swissaid

Rwandan mining companies' cautious entry

Rwandan-owned mining companies entered the CAR mining sector following Rwanda's bilateral military support for the CAR government in its 2021 counterinsurgency campaign.²⁶³ Shortly thereafter, CAR authorities courted Rwandan investors, offering incentives including expedited naturalization.²⁶⁴ Within a year, three Rwandan-owned companies obtained gold and diamond exploration permits. Two of these – Oko Africa and Vogueroc, an offshoot of Crystal Ventures – received protection from Rwandan bilateral forces during site visits, according to security and diplomatic sources.²⁶⁵ To date, there have been no reports linking Rwandan-owned companies to abuses, armed group collaboration or illicit exploitation.

As happened with a few Chinese concessions, the Wagner Group has displayed some hostility towards the Rwandan mining presence. In July 2024, Wagner operatives reportedly confronted Oko Africa during a prospecting mission near Ndassima.²⁶⁶ That same year, Wagner forces attempted to forcibly seize permits held by Rwandan operators at the Ministry of Mines in Bangui.²⁶⁷

Only one Rwandan-owned mining company has exported gold and diamonds in recent years,²⁶⁸ but there is no evidence that this or any other Rwandan company holding exploration permits has engaged in smuggling or the under-declaration of mineral exports.

However, the favourable business environment for Rwandan nationals has attracted individual gold traffickers. Several Rwandan individuals established local businesses that formally operate in import-export, catering, currency transfer or construction while simultaneously engaging in gold smuggling activities. According to several sources, these traffickers allegedly transport parcels of up to 10 kilograms of gold by hand on RwandAir flights to Kigali with the complicity of airport officials, who reportedly deliver undeclared packages either in the departure lounge or directly at the aircraft steps.²⁶⁹

Local sources indicated that a Rwandan gold refinery pre-finances gold buyers recruited from within the Rwandan business community.²⁷⁰ Security sources stated that several of these buyers operate from Rwandan military bases in the CAR, benefiting directly from Rwanda's military presence.²⁷¹

Opening avenues

Despite the proliferation of mining permits in the gold sector and the growing footprint of foreign-owned companies, much of the country's artisanal gold production remains beyond their effective control. Many Chinese-owned companies have yet to commence operations or establish commercial oversight of their permits, particularly along the Cameroonian border, where artisanal miners continue to operate and sell most of their production across the border to a range of buyers.²⁷² Yet the concentration of permits here is a clear demonstration of the intention to start mine development soon.²⁷³

Similar dynamics persist in northern mining areas such as Kouki and Sikikédé, where permit holders have remained largely absent and much of the artisanal gold continues to be trafficked, mostly into Chad.²⁷⁴ While industrial or semi-industrial development has not yet materialized in these areas, recent reconnaissance missions involving newly deployed Africa Corps personnel have reportedly been conducted across these and other mining sites in recent months to assess their economic potential, possibly foreshadowing future commercial involvement.²⁷⁵

Environment

Environmental crimes tied to armed violence in the CAR fall chiefly into two categories: wildlife and forestry. Both were closely linked to conflict in 2013, during the Séléka insurrection and its aftermath, but later declined in prominence. While environmental crimes tied to wildlife and forestry are still prevalent and devastating, they are, for the most part, much less closely associated with armed groups and violence than they were in the past, with one major exception.

The arrival of Wagner in 2021 revived the forestry sector's connection to armed violence and illicit exploitation. Wagner's timber venture in the CAR, however, was commercially modest, increasingly unprofitable and, by 2025, had apparently slowed to a halt. While export volumes have diminished, Wagner's pattern of renaming companies, relying on other front companies for exports and creating cross-border entities demonstrates that the group continues to maintain a foothold in timber exploitation and trade, albeit as part of a broader, opportunistic portfolio of resource exploitation that is dominated by more lucrative ventures, notably gold mining.

Wildlife crimes

Wildlife crime has historically been closely tied to the movement of armed transhumant pastoralists – mainly Fulani herders from the CAR, Sudan, Chad and Cameroon – who enter protected areas in search of pasture and water. These incursions can lead to habitat destruction, poaching and violent clashes with rangers and local communities.²⁷⁶ In recent years, these movements have become increasingly militarized under the influence of *neo-éleveurs* or urban ‘cattle barons’ – often politicians, businessmen or senior officials from Chad and the wider region – who invest in mega-herds and employ armed escorts.²⁷⁷ This weaponized pastoralism deepens local conflict and undermines park governance.

Wildlife trafficking in the CAR primarily targets ivory, pangolin and bushmeat,²⁷⁸ but opportunities for large-scale commercial poaching are now limited. Protected areas in ex-Séléka rebel strongholds such as Chinko and Manovo-Gounda St Floris had already been heavily depleted in the 1990s and 2000s, primarily by Sudanese hunting parties,²⁷⁹ with the slaughter of at least 26 elephants in 2013 probably being the country’s last major mass-poaching event.²⁸⁰ Today, poaching persists, but on a small, localized scale. In recent years, at least six elephants have been killed near Chinko, though strengthened park

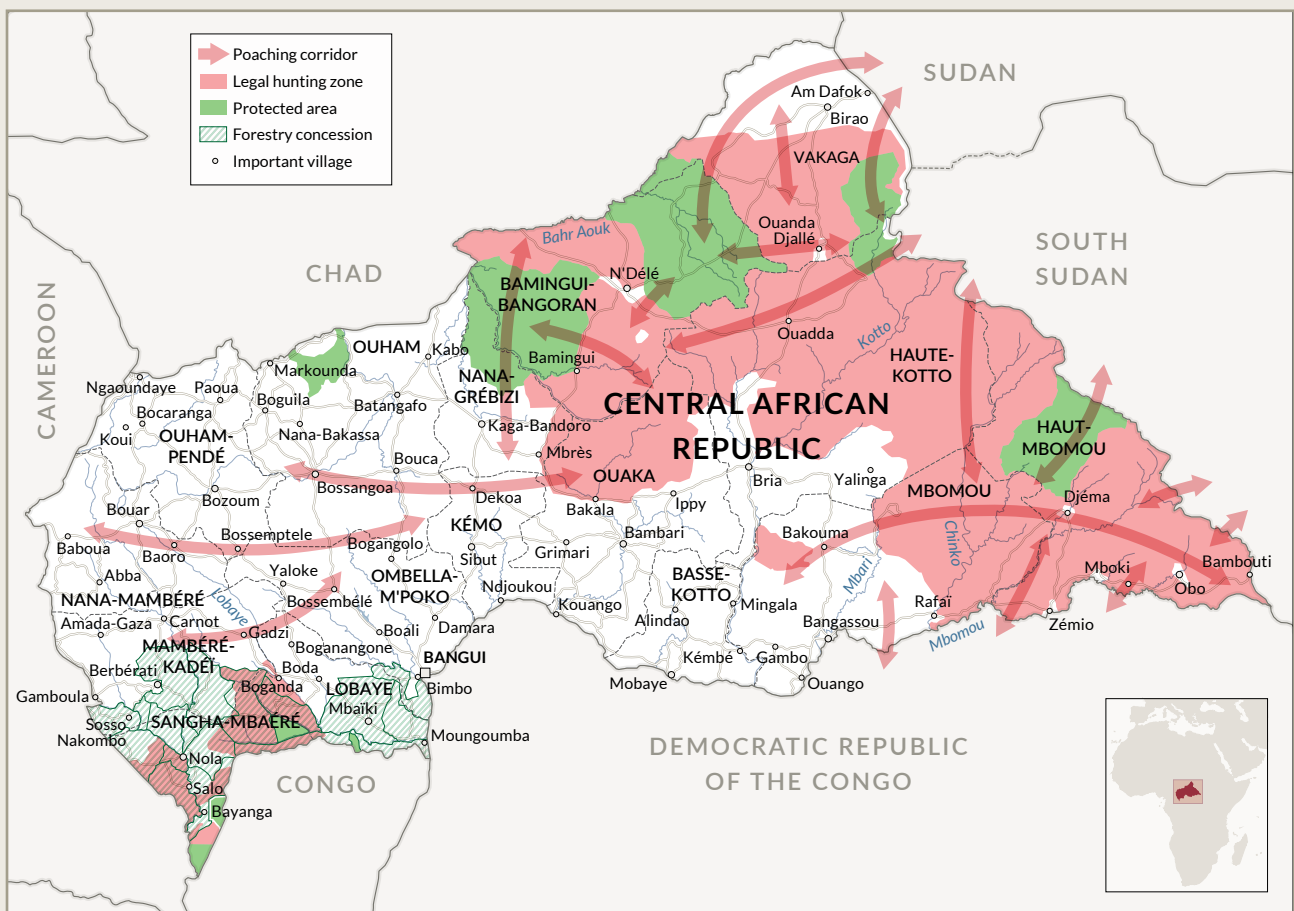


FIGURE 5 Wildlife and forestry crimes: hotspots and routes.

SOURCE: Adapted from the International Peace Information Service, https://ipisresearch.be/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/1704024_caf_resnat_A0_mn.png

protection has prevented further devastation of the few surviving herds.²⁸¹ The most recent documented incident related to pangolin trafficking was the seizure in 2020 of 500 kilograms of scales in Bouboui.²⁸²

Small-scale poaching primarily for meat consumption is recurrent in the south-western CAR tropical forest area, with products destined for urban markets in the CAR and neighbouring Cameroon. Logging trucks are often used to transport bushmeat to these markets.²⁸³

Forestry crimes

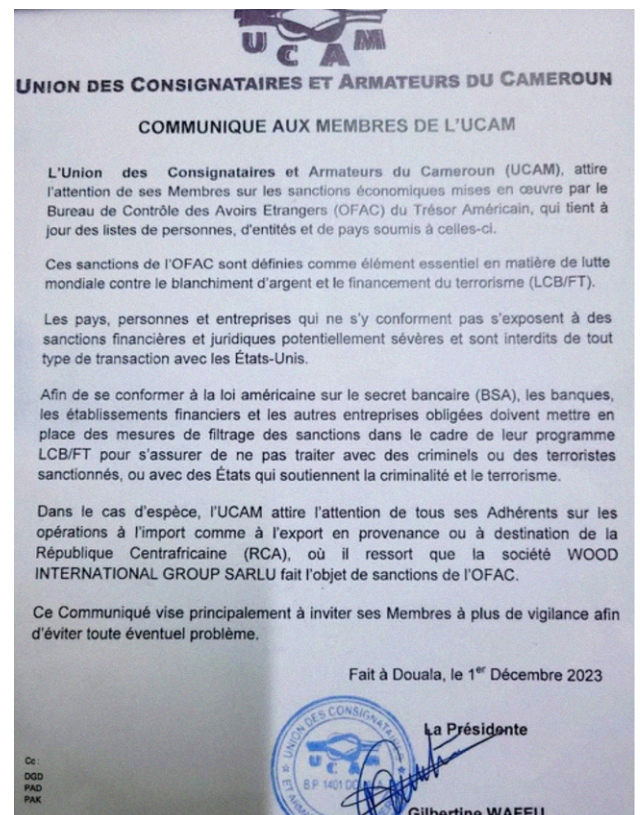
Forestry-based conflict financing spiked during and after the brief 2013 Séléka takeover in the south-west, where the CAR's forestry concessions are concentrated. At the time, illegal artisanal exploitation expanded, especially in unallocated forest areas, while logging trucks and concessionaires were systematically subjected to illicit taxation by armed groups and militias.²⁸⁴ These practices were gradually curbed through African Union and later UN peacekeeping interventions, as well as the progressive redeployment of state services.²⁸⁵

With the arrival of the Wagner Group, however, the forestry sector re-emerged as a source of funding for mercenary activity – this time not through illegal taxation or protection rackets but through direct commercial control. In February 2021, as Wagner forces were being deployed in large numbers to repel rebel advances towards Bangui,²⁸⁶ CAR authorities granted forestry concession no. 169 in the western Lobaye region to the Russian company Bois Rouge.²⁸⁷ In the days leading up to the concession being granted, government and Wagner forces were securing control of territory around the concession, including the city of Boda, where Bois Rouge later put its sawmill.²⁸⁸

Despite having no track record in the timber industry, Bois Rouge secured a favourable agreement for the concession. It was reportedly granted a moratorium on concession rent and export tax payments – measures that appear unlawful and that come at the expense of state revenues and of benefit-sharing with local communities.²⁸⁹

The company's success proved brief, however. In mid-2022, following public reporting by All Eyes on Wagner, Bois Rouge changed its name to Wood International Group (WIG).²⁹⁰ WIG was sanctioned by the US in September 2023 for its role in the wider Wagner business network and for its links – through designated entity Broker Expert LLC – to Yevgeny Prigozhin's Concord Group.²⁹¹ Export records and sources at Douala port indicate that the company halted shipments within a month of the US sanctions,²⁹² a move reinforced by Cameroon's Union of Shipping Agents and Shipowners, which issued guidance urging vigilance considering the sanctions.²⁹³

Even at its peak, however, timber was only a modest earner for Wagner. Early projections had suggested that over the full 30-year concession, Bois Rouge could



The communiqué from Cameroon's Union of Shipping Agents and Shipowners after WIG was sanctioned by the US in 2023. Photo supplied



A Wood International Group timber shipment awaiting transport to Douala port at the Kassai military camp in Bangui, 7 June 2023. Photo supplied

earn US\$36 million in profit, but the reality wound up being much less.²⁹⁴ According to Cameroonian customs records, the company's exports – mostly sapele hardwood destined for Turkey, the UAE and China – rose from 839 cubic metres in 2022, valued at US\$156 468, to 5 810 cubic metres in 2023, worth US\$1.37 million.²⁹⁵ This represented about 3% of total timber exports from the CAR in 2023. After deducting costs, taxes and customs, it is estimated that the venture generated at least US\$1 million in profit based on freight on board values,²⁹⁶ and possibly as much as US\$5 million when calculated using commercial prices in Asia for sapele.

In October 2023, WIG exported its last timber shipment. The company soon changed its name to Société Industrielle Forestière, according to government filings transmitted to the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI), which also recorded its concession as inactive.²⁹⁷ No exports could be confirmed under this new name.

Nevertheless, operations appear to have continued under different front companies. In April and May 2024, a new company, Standard Export Limited, carried out seven shipments totalling 164 cubic metres on behalf of WIG,²⁹⁸ as confirmed through cross-checked trade datasets. Four shipments went to a regular trading partner in China while one went to a Turkish firm.²⁹⁹ The GI-TOC was unable to locate publicly available corporate records or other references for these firms – or for Standard Export – in their respective jurisdictions. The final two shipments were declared as exports to a carpentry business registered in the CAR, though Turkey was listed as the final destination.³⁰⁰

Another front seems to be one of WIG's declared freight forwarders in Cameroon, which dealt exclusively with WIG in the CAR. In May and July 2024, this company shipped seven consignments totalling 386 cubic metres – declared to have come from the CAR – to one of WIG's trading partners in China.³⁰¹

At 550 cubic metres, the combined exports for the two front companies were modest,³⁰² even lower than the volumes of 2022. It is possible that the 2024 exports were of wood harvested in 2023 that WIG was unable to export under its own name after it was sanctioned by the US. In June 2023, well before US sanctions in September, a source in Douala port said WIG timber was being held up in port due to the company's demonstrated association with the already sanctioned Wagner Group.³⁰³

By mid-2024, Wagner's forestry interests appeared to be shifting across the border into Cameroon, but there is little indication this materialized.³⁰⁴ In the CAR, the WIG saw mill in Boda appeared inactive as of September 2024.³⁰⁵ Stacks of neatly piled timber that had been visible in December 2022 had vanished, replaced by scattered wood debris seemingly left abandoned in the yard.

A second Wagner Group forestry concession?

In January 2023, a forest concession with permit no. 194 in Sangha-Mbaéré province was allocated to Forest Consulting Company (FCC),³⁰⁶ which may be linked to the Wagner Group. Documents indicate that FCC is among a group of Wagner-linked companies holding accounts at a bank identified in the context of international sanctions enforcement.³⁰⁷

Further circumstantial evidence of FCC's ties to Wagner emerge from its supply chain. The company imports chemicals from the same Chinese supplier used by First Industrial Company,³⁰⁸ another Wagner-linked firm believed to be controlled by Dmitry Sytii.³⁰⁹

According to data transmitted by CAR authorities to the EITI, FCC has remained inactive since its attribution.³¹⁰ Satellite imagery confirms this assessment: There are no visible logging roads, clearings or other signs of timber extraction within the dense primary forest of the concession.³¹¹ Nor are there any records of timber exports under FCC's name. Nevertheless, records show that in December 2023, FCC imported hypochlorites,³¹² a chemical compound used to strip copper, chromium and arsenic from treated wood, suggesting that the company has somehow been active in processing rather than extraction.

Cattle

Transhumant pastoralism in the CAR serves as a nexus between crime, armed mobilization and state authority. Armed herd protection, cattle raiding and retaliatory attacks, as well as the taxation of livestock markets and transhumance corridors, have long been core activities of armed factions – most notably the UPC in the central region, 3R in the west and the MPC in the central north.

Although these groups were among the most powerful challengers to the government in Bangui, including during the 2020–21 CPC insurgency, elements of their leadership have been progressively co-opted into the government, while foot soldiers have been instrumentalized in the territorial reconquest. This incorporation has given former rebel commanders formal authority over the livestock sector, enabling organized wealth extraction in partnership with state security networks, expanding the government's fiscal reach and institutionalizing predatory practices. Rather than dismantling wartime economic systems, successive waves of rebel elite incorporation appear to have reconfigured them.



A Fulani herdsman at a cattle market. The livestock sector, where crime, armed mobilization and state authority converge, has long been targeted for various forms of wealth extraction. © Nacer Talel/ Anadolu Agency via Getty Images

Pastoralist armed group formation and governance

The UPC, 3R and MPC armed groups emerged from cross-border cattle-rearing communities whose seasonal migrations into the CAR from Cameroon, Chad and Sudan became increasingly militarized from the late 1990s. As herd sizes grew – with many widely believed to belong to military and political elites in Chad – transhumant networks invested in heavier weaponry to defend livestock against banditry and communal violence.³¹³

Over time, protection networks developed into armed movements with territorial ambitions. Commanders accumulated substantial herds, blurring the boundary between military authority and commercial interest. Leaders such as Ali Darassa of the UPC and Mahamat Al Khatim of the MPC reportedly became major livestock owners.³¹⁴

Protection and predation operated simultaneously. 3R, founded in 2015, framed its mobilization as a defensive response to anti-Balaka attacks on Fulani returnees from Cameroon and Chad.³¹⁵ Yet it also engaged in retaliatory cattle raiding and taxation.³¹⁶ Its late leader, Sidiki Abass, had previously been associated with the zaraguina – roadside bandits emerging in northern CAR and across its border whose activities included cattle rustling.³¹⁷

The UPC followed a similar trajectory. Establishing itself in central CAR in 2013 amid fighting with anti-Balaka militias advancing from the west, it constructed a parallel governance system. Herds were taxed according to fixed tariffs, receipts were issued and revenue flowed into a true rebel administration.³¹⁸ The UPC's endurance in central CAR was partly enabled by its function as a buffer against rival ex-Séléka factions, especially the FPRC, limiting their southward expansion towards Bangui.³¹⁹ While there is no evidence of explicit coordination, state authorities and international actors appeared to tolerate this parallel rebel governance as a means of balancing rival factions and containing the broader security threat.

Political incorporation and territorial reconquest

The 2019 Political Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation – concluded with 14 armed groups in a context of expanding Russian influence – marked a shift from containment to incorporation.³²⁰ The agreement brought several armed group leaders into formal state structures, entrenching their influence over the livestock economy while simultaneously advancing the government's strategy of territorial consolidation.

Issa-Bi Ahmadou, a prominent Fulani leader and representative of 3R, was appointed minister of territorial administration and later became minister counsellor for livestock.³²¹ His inclusion in the government made him a key intermediary in efforts to restore state authority in the north-west, from which he hails.

Hassan Bouba has been the government's most instrumental ally in reasserting territorial control, including over the livestock sector. Appointed minister of livestock and herding in 2020, the former senior UPC coordinator reportedly played a central role in Wagner-backed counteroffensives from 2021 onwards, leveraging his command over former UPC and anti-Balaka fighters – the so-called 'Black Russians' who often carried out some of the most brutal frontline operations against civilians.³²² His political significance was underscored when he was escorted out of prison in November 2021, despite having been charged by the Special Criminal Court for war crimes and crimes against humanity.³²³ He has not yet formally pleaded to these charges or issued any public denials.

In 2023, under the banner of ‘peaceful transhumance’, Bouba participated in several joint FACA–Wagner missions across the country. These operations, carried out with a heavy security presence, simultaneously aimed at advancing DDR while compelling herders to use government-controlled transhumance routes and centralized cattle markets.³²⁴

A prime example of this strategy has been the establishment of the centralized cattle market at Bouboui (PK45), 45 kilometres outside Bangui.³²⁵ Intended to revive a key pillar of the pre-conflict economy, the market has instead become emblematic of coercive state control and predation.

Herders frequenting the market report losing up to one in four cattle to racketeering by state security forces before even entering the premises.³²⁶ Confiscated livestock are allegedly diverted to Bangui slaughterhouses or transported across the Oubangui River into the DRC, reducing the possibility of recovery claims.³²⁷ Security forces have also detained herders suspected of being foreign nationals, allegedly extorting cattle or payments in exchange for release.³²⁸

Bouba is reported to play a central role in this system, with sources alleging that he has monopolized key services at Bouboui, including transport and animal feed, while siphoning off taxes that should accrue to the state.³²⁹ Interviewees further describe Bouba threatening the arrest of Fulani herders who resist the new tax regime or refuse to channel their cattle through the market.³³⁰ In recent months, Bouba has put forward Dahirou Amadou Zarno, a member of the consultative council of youth, to oversee his illegal commercial interests.³³¹

The April 2025 agreements between the government and the UPC and 3R, followed by disarmament operations in July, signalled a renewed phase of armed group accommodation.³³² In areas such as Maloum, combatants were formally disarmed, yet patterns of cattle-based organized crime appear to persist. According to a security official and a human rights defender, UPC chief of staff General Hamadou Bounghous, while leading disarmament efforts, allegedly used the rapprochement to sell looted cattle over the course of the year, benefiting from means of transport made available through Wagner-linked networks.³³³ In a subsequent phase of the agreement with the UPC, its elements incorporated into the national security and defence forces are expected to formally secure transhumance routes, a role that could potentially provide opportunities for racketeering and parallel taxation. UPC leader Ali Darassa, who had sought to replace Bouba as minister, accepted this arrangement as an alternative.³³⁴

Illicit finance

Economic growth in the CAR is weak,³³⁵ in part due to illicit financial flows and financial crimes, including fraud, embezzlement and misuse of public funds, as well as legislative and structural deficiencies such as opaque contracting, lack of financial inclusion, insufficient regulations and limited oversight mechanisms.

In response to Touadéra’s partnership with Russia, France and the EU suspended budgetary assistance to the CAR in 2021,³³⁶ which had a significant impact on the liquidity of the state and resulted in the government turning more towards the informal economy, with its accompanying risks.³³⁷ At an event for the country’s cryptocurrency initiative in 2022, Touadéra stated: ‘For us, the formal economy is no longer an option.’³³⁸

An extended credit facility granted by the IMF in 2023 aimed to address some of the country’s financial shortfalls while requiring transparency and governance reforms, but implementation has been limited.³³⁹ The CAR’s illicit finance risk profile remains significant, and government authorities’ limited

understanding of money laundering and terrorist financing risks – as well as the country’s lack of policies on anti-money laundering and countering the financing of terrorism (AML/CFT) – has left it vulnerable to recurrent offences such as misappropriation of public funds, corruption, and the trafficking of minerals, metals, drugs, wildlife and arms.³⁴⁰ With regard to the extractive industries, which are vital to the government revenue,³⁴¹ concerns have been raised about mining permits being granted under irregular conditions, and constitutional reforms have reduced oversight of mining contracts and thus amplified the associated risk.³⁴²

Beyond potential corruption and embezzlement, natural resource trafficking has historically been the principal driver of illicit financial flows in the CAR. Illicit schemes commonly involve the movement of cash within the country to finance mineral purchases, as well as the conversion of trafficking proceeds into imported goods through major trading hubs such as Dubai. The profits from these transactions are often reinvested into further mineral purchases for smuggling, creating a self-reinforcing cycle of illicit trade and finance. In some cases, commercial entities – reportedly including certain supermarkets in Bangui – have been suspected of facilitating aspects of this trade-based money laundering network.³⁴³

In addition to outright smuggling, under-invoicing of legal natural resource exports constitutes another significant channel for illicit financial flows. By deliberately understating export values, traders can shift funds abroad, resulting in tax losses, unrecorded capital outflows and, in some cases, the recycling of illicit proceeds back into the domestic economy. In 2025, the government undervalued its gold exports by almost half of the international market price, allowing for massive under-invoicing.³⁴⁴ In 2022, the CAR recorded a cumulative trade value gap of US\$62 million – equivalent to 26% of total trade – indicating substantial trade misinvoicing.³⁴⁵ That same year, natural resource exports, including gold, diamonds and timber, accounted for 76% of total export value, underscoring the economy’s structural dependence on sectors particularly vulnerable to abuse.³⁴⁶

These risks are compounded by weaknesses in the formal financial sector. The limited effectiveness of AML/CFT controls, combined with integrity concerns among certain banking personnel, creates opportunities for illicit proceeds to enter and circulate within the CAR banking system.³⁴⁷ The sector’s comparatively high exposure to the public sector also heightens the risk that political connections or informal influence may indirectly affect banking operations.³⁴⁸

These structural weaknesses may explain how, despite the Wagner Group having been under international sanctions since 2017, several of its associated businesses – including Midas Ressources and Diamville – maintained accounts at major banks in the CAR until their separate sanctions designation years later, according to sources in the financial sector.³⁴⁹ Such arrangements raise concerns about the potential handling of proceeds from illicit gold and diamond sales and the risk of transactions in foreign currencies in violation of sanctions.

Cryptocurrency controversy

The interaction between corruption, extractive sector vulnerabilities, trade misinvoicing and financial sector weaknesses has created a permissive environment for illicit financial flows. Against this backdrop, the emergence of virtual assets such as Bitcoin and Sango Coin introduces additional channels for illicit finance and enrichment, potentially amplifying existing risks by enabling faster, less transparent cross-border value transfers.

In 2022, Touadéra began championing a series of cryptocurrency ventures. At a time when the country was struggling financially and would need to pay the bill for its Russian military support, cryptocurrency

was presented as a progressive initiative that would pave the way to prosperity and modernization.³⁵⁰ In reality, the CAR's many cryptocurrency initiatives, rolled out over the following three years, were poorly executed, lacked meaningful safeguards and opened the door to potential exploitation by transnational criminal networks.

Despite only 15.7% of the population of the CAR being connected to electricity,³⁵¹ the state adopted a new law in April 2022 that made cryptocurrency legal tender.³⁵² A few months later, in July 2022, the CAR began issuing its own cryptocurrency, Sango Coin.³⁵³ The programme offered foreigners CAR passports, e-residency and plots of land for varying amounts of Sango Coin held over a given period.³⁵⁴ The scheme also enabled foreign investors to acquire shares in the mining and forestry sectors at low cost.³⁵⁵

The Sango Coin programme failed to meet its objectives and faced legal challenges from the Constitutional Court, which ruled that the purchase of citizenship, e-residency or land using cryptocurrency was unconstitutional.³⁵⁶ Parliament similarly walked back its previous position, removing cryptocurrency's status as legal tender in March 2023.³⁵⁷ Nevertheless, four months later, parliament adopted a new law that set the stage for the digitization and commodification of the country's natural wealth, including minerals, petroleum, forests and agricultural land, by allowing foreign investors to register companies online and acquire titles.³⁵⁸

With this new legislation in place, Touadéra launched the volatile meme coin \$CAR on X in February 2025.³⁵⁹ Three months later, he signed a presidential decree to make 99-year concessions in the Lobaye prefecture available for purchase with \$CAR.³⁶⁰ To purchase land in the CAR with 'no paperwork' and 'no delays', buyers need only some \$CAR and an email address.³⁶¹ Touadéra announced in October 2025 that he hopes to expand the programme to include mining rights.³⁶²

These cryptocurrency ventures reflect a long-standing pattern of fragmenting state authority and outsourcing national wealth to private foreign interests.³⁶³ Lacking state oversight and robust legal frameworks, envisioned and promoted by individuals with controversial backgrounds, and launched amid a time of tremendous violence and unrest,³⁶⁴ they also expose the CAR to severe and well-recognized risks, including extreme price volatility, crypto crime, money laundering, terrorist financing and tax evasion.³⁶⁵ The UN Conference on Trade and Development has cautioned that cryptocurrencies create new channels for illicit financial flows in developing countries,³⁶⁶ while the IMF has emphasized that without comprehensive regulatory and policy frameworks, the inherent risks of crypto assets could be 'dire'.³⁶⁷



Conclusion

The CAR has become a strategic hub for organized crime, fuelled by state fragility, corruption and alliances with domestic and foreign criminal actors, including the Wagner Group, increasingly formalized under the Africa Corps framework. These networks exploit porous borders and state collusion to control resources, while embedding foreign influence and indebting the state to secure long-term leverage.

As traditional partners like France, the EU and the US appear to intend to reinvigorate their engagement with the Central African government, including its security sector, there is an opportunity to adopt a more decisive new approach that places the fight against organized crime at the core of peacebuilding, governance and development efforts, while counterbalancing strategies that expand influence through crime.³⁶⁸ Any meaningful engagement, however, must contend with the deeply embedded nature of organized crime within state structures and the country's reliance on Russian security support.

A billboard displays President Touadéra ahead of the CAR's 2025 presidential election. The president turned to Moscow for security support, and any meaningful engagement to tackle crime embedded within state structures must contend with the country's ongoing reliance on Russia as a security ally. © Annela Niamolo / AFP via Getty Images



Recommendations

The following clusters of policy recommendations outline practical avenues for regional, international and multilateral actors to address state-embedded organized crime and gradually reduce the CAR's dependence on foreign criminal and mercenary structures.

Tackling the regional implications of organized crime and violence

Criminal networks exploit porous borders, corruption, ineffective policing cooperation and the lack of data-sharing on illicit networks at regional level. To advance peace and stability in the region, heads of state must adopt and endorse, at summit level, a regional strategy against organized crime, with clear political ownership, dedicated resources and an implementation mechanism empowered to deploy and coordinate instruments across borders.

The strategy could establish permanent joint corridor task forces operating across multiple countries on key trafficking routes – roads, rivers, ports and airports – bringing together customs, police and financial investigators. It could also create a regional illicit markets intelligence unit, working with civil society observatories and supported by the Central African Police Chiefs Committee, to build real-time data-sharing platforms that map flows, detect anomalies and trigger coordinated responses. Core measures should include harmonizing legislation on trafficking, environmental crime and illicit finance; deploying cross-border financial teams targeting money laundering, trade-based fraud, cybercrime and front companies; and implementing 'follow the licences' audits to revoke concessions linked to criminal networks. Additional instruments should include strengthened oversight of strategic logistics hubs, protected cross-border whistleblowing channels, mobile anti-corruption courts, and conditioning international support on measurable progress in dismantling state-criminal linkages.

Improving cross-border cooperation to stem illicit weapons flows with international peacekeeping and regional support

Reducing illicit arms flows requires coordinated action between CAR forces, regional actors and UN peacekeeping, with a focus on disrupting illicit economies. While FACA and Wagner operations have temporarily limited trafficking by armed groups, lasting impact depends on strengthened cross-border cooperation, such as joint patrols with Chad around Moyenne-Sido and Sarh, supported by the Economic Community of Central African States. Along the Sudanese border, worsening conditions risk increasing flows, making it critical for MINUSCA to establish temporary bases, expand joint patrols and integrate the disruption of illicit arms and trafficking into its mandate. Over time, such measures can gradually reduce reliance on mercenaries and reinforce legitimate security structures.

Fostering transparent and equitable natural resource governance

Natural resource and energy sectors in the CAR, particularly mining and fuel imports, are characterized by opaque concession allocations, preferential contracting, limited oversight, underreporting of production and widespread smuggling and tax evasion. These dynamics disproportionately benefit state-embedded actors and organized crime networks linked to the Wagner Group, warranting urgent and far-reaching reforms in which donors should play a more active role.

In the fuel sector, an independent audit requested by the IMF recommended opening the market to additional importers to improve supply stability and reduce prices. Implementing this measure would

significantly curb illicit and unjustified profit-making.³⁶⁹ However, this key recommendation has so far been ignored by the government, underscoring the need for stronger pressure from the IMF, particularly in the context of future budget support disbursements.

In the mining sector, transparency remains limited. Although the new mining code mandates the publication of contracts – many of which are now accessible through the EITI – and requires licence holders to declare beneficial ownership,³⁷⁰ the CAR still lacks a comprehensive framework for public disclosure of beneficial owners across the mining, oil and forestry sectors.³⁷¹ This gap complicates efforts to trace links to politically exposed persons and criminal networks. Moreover, parliamentary approval of natural resource contracts has yet to be reinstated.

Beyond transparency gaps, a key challenge lies in the systematic shielding of certain front companies from regulatory oversight and standard taxation regimes. Discussions with national authorities suggest growing frustration within the ministries of finance and mines, though they remain constrained in their ability to act.³⁷²

Advancing reform at these different levels will require creating space to mobilize civil society, opposition actors and reform-minded officials within the state to build a critical mass for change. The EU and other international donors can play a key role through technical cooperation at the ministerial level and sustained engagement in opening civic space.

Gearing security sector reform to fight organized crime

Since 2021, the EU and MINUSCA have ended direct engagement in training and vetting the CAR's national defence forces, as security sector reform shifted towards opaque, fast-track integration processes under Russian supervision.³⁷³ These processes, characterized by the recycling of armed group elements into state structures without transparent vetting, continue to shape the security landscape, including the recent incorporation of fighters from the UPC.

While EU military and civilian training missions have remained present, their role has shifted from operational engagement to strategic advice and institutional reform, raising questions about their practical impact.³⁷⁴ Orienting EU engagement towards combating organized crime offers a viable and politically relevant pathway for further engagement.

Addressing transhumance-related criminal economies could provide a concrete entry point. Rather than endorsing loosely regulated livestock protection arrangements, the EU military training mission could revive and adapt elements of earlier security sector reform approaches towards this end. Under the 2019 Political Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation, temporary joint security units brought together vetted state forces and armed group elements to secure transhumance routes.³⁷⁵ Building on this model, EU and MINUSCA support could focus on deploying joint, state-controlled units composed of gendarmerie and police, operating under clear command-and-control structures with robust human rights vetting and civilian protection mandates.

At the same time, effective corridor security must be anchored in local governance mechanisms, including negotiated agreements between herders, farmers and traditional authorities, supported by early-warning and mediation systems. Complementary investments in infrastructure – such as water points, grazing zones and demarcated routes – would help reduce resource competition and reinforce security gains.³⁷⁶

Beyond transhumance, a crime-focused security sector reform approach could also envision strengthening specialized enforcement authorities. The EU's civilian mission already provides strategic guidance to internal security actors and could increasingly prioritize anti-fraud and illicit economy oversight. In mining, the Ministry of Mines' Special Anti-Fraud Unit offers an existing structure for engagement. The fuel sector lacks a comparable structure, with only a weakly institutionalized anti-fraud committee, highlighting a clear need for donor-backed institutional development.³⁷⁷ Meanwhile, the CAR's financial intelligence unit remains under-resourced, limiting its ability to tackle illicit financial flows.³⁷⁸

Focusing EU engagement on these areas – transhumance corridor security and specialized anti-fraud institutions – would provide a tangible way to address organized crime. It would also demonstrate continued European relevance on the ground, offering an alternative to Russian-led security arrangements.

Extending international financial pressure to networks and enablers

Wagner-linked businesses in the CAR do not operate in isolation. This report identifies corporate networks in neighbouring countries and international trading hubs that facilitate the flow of resources such as fuel to Wagner forces and affiliate companies, while also enabling the liquidation and export of commodities – notably gold – extracted by these entities.

The EU, UK and US should therefore rapidly expand financial sanctions to cover these supporting entities. In parallel, they should apply diplomatic pressure on host governments to activate national sanctions regimes against companies that have already been designated internationally.

In addition to corporate actors, sanctions authorities should consider designating aircraft registered in the CAR but operated by, or on behalf of, the Wagner Group. Such measures would prohibit the servicing of these aircraft and restrict their access to airspace in sanctioning jurisdictions. They would also send a clear political signal to the CAR government about the need to end the misuse of its aircraft registry as a flag of convenience for illegal, sanctions-busting deliveries of military materiel, mirroring practices observed in Russia's so-called 'shadow fleet'.

National authorities could further engage industry associations and financial institutions in their countries to discourage commercial relationships with designated entities. For example, in Cameroon, the Union of Shipping Agents and Shipowners has already called on its members to exercise heightened vigilance following the US designation of Wood International Group in September 2023, warning of potential sanctions exposure and legal risks.³⁷⁹ Ultimately, coordinated regional and international sanctions efforts are essential to disrupt Wagner's transnational networks, which have allowed the criminal enterprise to endure in the CAR.

Ensuring criminal accountability for Wagner-linked abuses

While international sanctions against Wagner-linked companies signal global disapproval and disrupt immediate financial flows, additional legal measures are needed to address the full spectrum of abuses – from war crimes and human rights violations to the systematic plunder of natural resources – perpetrated by its leadership, affiliated company executives and political facilitators, as codified under CAR law.

Effective prosecution of these cases through the Special Criminal Court – a hybrid jurisdiction established in 2015 in the CAR – the International Criminal Court (ICC) and other Western jurisdictions with international competence is critical, particularly for crimes that cross borders or where national

enforcement is obstructed. The case of Hassan Bouba, who has evaded arrest by the Special Criminal Court,³⁸⁰ highlights the limitations of the current system and underscores the urgent need to strengthen enforcement mechanisms and refer high-level cases to the ICC, especially as the Special Criminal Court faces potential closure due to funding shortages.³⁸¹

In parallel, the establishment of a commission of inquiry – operating under UN auspices or supported by willing states – could systematically document violations, collect admissible evidence and support judicial proceedings. Such a commission would provide a credible evidentiary foundation for prosecutions and reinforce the work of domestic and international courts.



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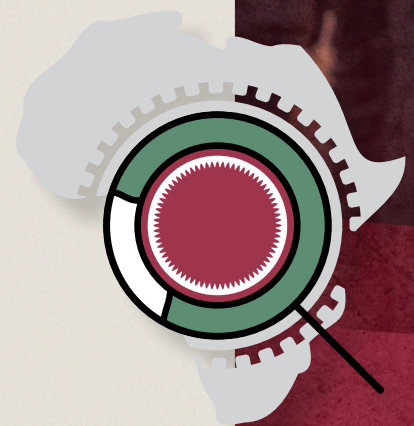
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