

REPORT

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MAPPING VIOLENCE AND ORGANIZED CRIME IN CAMEROON

Criminal networks, conflict dynamics and security implications in a context of armed conflict and violent extremism

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Contents

Acronyms and abbreviations.....	ii
Executive summary.....	1
Methodology.....	2
Key findings and recommendations.....	2
Introduction.....	4
Overview of key criminal markets.....	5
Mapping Cameroon’s main crisis zones.....	7
From the Mandara Mountains to Lake Chad: violent extremism and the resurgence of cross-border criminal activity.....	8
Criminal groups and networks.....	10
Criminal activities.....	12
The North-West and South-West regions of Cameroon in the grips of the conflict economy.....	21
Criminal groups and networks.....	23
Criminal activities.....	24
Cameroon’s eastern border regions: a crossroads for criminal movements and illicit trafficking.....	32
Key groups and networks.....	34
Operating methods.....	38
Conclusion.....	47
Recommendations.....	49
Notes.....	51

Acronyms and abbreviations

3R	Retour, Réclamation et Réhabilitation
ADF	Ambazonia Defence Forces
AGC	Ambazonia Governing Council
ANTIC	National Agency for Information and Communication Technologies
CAR	Central African Republic
CCPAC	Central African Police Chiefs Committee
DDR	Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration
IED	Improvised Explosive Devices
ISS	Institute for Security Studies
ISWAP	Islamic State West Africa Province
JAS	<i>Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'Awati Wal-Jihad</i>
SOCADEF	Southern Cameroons Defense Forces
UNODC	United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime
UPC	Unité pour la Paix en Centrafrique





Executive summary

Cameroon faces significant challenges linked to organized crime, armed conflict and violent extremism. The country continues to contend with Boko Haram and its splinter factions in the Far North, separatist violence in the North-West and South-West, incursions by Central African rebel groups in the east, and rural and cross-border banditry in several regions. Across all these areas, organized and transnational criminal networks exacerbate conflict and sustain violence. This report examines the patterns of organized crime and violence in Cameroon, the groups involved and the resulting security challenges. It identifies both established and emerging trends, with a particular focus on regions affected by armed conflict and violent extremism.

Drawing on a diachronic, thematic, territorial and cross-cutting approach, the report maps criminal activity across Cameroon and highlights the activities that finance armed groups and fuel ongoing violence. Particular attention is paid to the territorial dimension of organized crime and the ways in which criminal activity is shaped by local contexts. The analysis combines secondary sources with primary data. Across the strategic zones examined, a cross-analysis of groups, activities and territories reveals the adaptability of criminal networks, the hybrid nature of illicit activities and the transnational character of both criminal networks and trends.

The findings point to the transformation and increasing urbanization of banditry through its interaction with violent extremism, alongside a broadening of the actors involved, the targets selected and the methods employed. Groups operating in the North-West and South-West regions also continue to exploit a situation in which political conflict and organized crime have become increasingly intertwined. In these regions, armed groups have adopted territorial strategies while continually reshaping and splintering into smaller factions. The study also identifies operational and logistical collaboration between armed groups and criminal networks, as well as links between separatist groups and Nigerian pirate networks. In eastern Cameroon, a highly interconnected criminal system, characterized by blurred lines between criminal and armed networks, has given rise to a resilient criminal ecosystem. Criminal activities in this strategic area also sustain a cycle of violence. At the same time, certain pastoral practices that were once tolerated are increasingly being treated as criminal offences, reflecting the gradual criminalization of

pastoralism. This shift is reflected in the normalization of crimes linked to pastoral livelihoods, including cattle theft, kidnappings and the killing of herders and livestock owners, as well as the growing use of the pastoral economy as a vehicle for criminal activity. Across all three strategic zones identified in the report, criminal activity provides a key source of financing for non-state armed groups.

The report concludes by identifying a number of issues that warrant further research and sets out recommendations for the Cameroonian state and its partners. These recommendations call for more effective measures to curb criminal economies while ensuring that security priorities are guided first and foremost by the needs of local communities.

Methodology

This report draws on a combination of qualitative and quantitative research methods and is based on both primary and secondary sources. The research began with an extensive review of academic literature, reports produced by international and regional organizations, and publications by specialist NGOs. This review helped identify both established and emerging trends in organized crime in Cameroon and highlighted their links to armed conflict and violent extremism. The report also draws on field research conducted with the support of consultants who contributed to a series of preliminary thematic studies. Semi-structured interviews were carried out with a range of stakeholders, including defence and security officials, administrative authorities, representatives of civil society organizations, journalists, academics and whistle-blowers. This field research added depth and context to the findings of the literature review by providing local perspectives and up-to-date insights.

The analysis is based on a strategic-zone approach, which captures continuities, recent developments and emerging trends while taking into account the geographic dimension of organized crime in Cameroon. This approach is better suited than a sector-based analysis to identifying situations in which groups operate across multiple activities, criminal markets overlap and cross-border networks and patterns play a significant role. Particular attention was paid to triangulating sources in order to improve the reliability of the findings.

In line with established research ethics, informed consent was obtained from all participants, who were granted anonymity where necessary. This methodology made it possible to identify major trends, emerging threats and the factors likely to shape the evolution of organized crime in Cameroon, as well as its impact on conflict and violent extremism. The report's systemic analysis of the evolving nature of organized crime in Cameroon helps inform recommendations grounded in local realities.

Key findings and recommendations

The analysis of established and emerging trends in organized crime and violence in Cameroon highlights the geographic patterns that shape criminal markets and networks. The findings show that:

- Across all crisis-affected areas in Cameroon, organized and transnational criminal networks exacerbate conflict and sustain violence.
- Criminal groups take advantage of conflict and insecurity to diversify their activities, resulting in a system characterized by adaptable networks, overlapping criminal activities and cross-border connections.

- Operational and logistical cooperation between armed groups and criminal networks further blurs the line between political conflict and organized crime.
- Criminal activities such as kidnapping, cattle theft, smuggling, arms trafficking, drug trafficking, informal fund transfers and cybercrime play a central role in the political economy of non-state armed groups, serving as key sources of revenue.

The following measures are recommended to help the Cameroonian state and its partners respond more effectively to the criminal economies identified in this report:

- Provide capacity building on combating organized crime for civil servants responsible for justice, mining, the environment, finance, wildlife, livestock and fisheries. Priority should be given those working in border regions and the strategic areas identified in this report.
- Introduce institutional incentive mechanisms, including financial rewards for officials involved in the seizure of criminal assets, in order to reduce the economic appeal of criminal activity and discourage corruption among law enforcement personnel.
- Allocate proceeds derived from selected border seizures (including precious stones, precious metals and timber), as well as assets frozen or confiscated in connection with money laundering offences, to efforts to combat organized crime.
- Reduce the risk of reoffending by monitoring former participants in disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) programmes, as well as former organized crime offenders following their release from prison.



Introduction

Cameroon is facing a gradual transformation of its security landscape, marked by the growing convergence of organized crime, armed violence and informal economic activity. This shift is taking place within a national and regional context shaped by increasing flows of goods, capital and people, as well as profound changes in governance and systems of authority. In this environment, criminal economies are no longer marginal or opportunistic phenomena. Instead, they play an increasingly important role in defining patterns of violence and altering local, national and cross-border power relations.

Several factors contribute to the growth of organized crime in Cameroon. Limited state presence in some peripheral and border areas creates opportunities for illicit activity to flourish. At the same time, Cameroon's location at the crossroads of central and West Africa makes it an important transit point for a wide range of cross-border activities, both licit and illicit.¹ Persistent socio-economic challenges, including unequal access to resources, youth unemployment and the marginalization of certain communities, also make criminal networks an attractive source of income and opportunity for some people.²

Together, these factors create complex patterns of interaction that strengthen the resilience and adaptability of criminal networks. Trafficking networks dealing in natural resources, arms, consumer goods and kidnapping for ransom increasingly overlap, creating opportunities for direct cooperation, exchange of expertise and mutual reinforcement. These links have given rise to hybrid networks that operate across economic, social and criminal spheres and move easily between the formal and informal sectors. As a result, criminal economies have become embedded in complex value chains encompassing sourcing, transport, processing and distribution, often across national borders.

National governance plays a critical role both in countering these trends and in shaping how they evolve. The institutional and security measures adopted by the authorities reflect a commitment to addressing rising levels of organized crime. Nevertheless, significant challenges remain, particularly in relation to inter-agency coordination, the effective enforcement of laws and regulations, and the provision of public services across the country. In some contexts, criminal networks take advantage of these weaknesses by adapting their methods and finding ways around existing controls. Furthermore,

informal practices and local regulatory arrangements contribute to reshaping relationships between communities, public authorities and criminal networks, sometimes fostering forms of coexistence or cooperation.³

A longer-term perspective reveals significant changes over the past decade. Illicit activities have become more diverse, criminal methods more sophisticated and criminal groups increasingly professionalized. Criminal networks now operate through more structured arrangements, relying on local intermediaries as well as regional and international connections. At the same time, cross-border movements have intensified and Cameroon has become increasingly integrated into wider criminal markets linking production areas to consumer markets across Africa and beyond.

This raises a central question: how do criminal economies contribute to shaping, transforming and sustaining violence in Cameroon, beyond merely coexisting with ongoing security crises? This report seeks to answer that question by examining the patterns, groups and networks that underpin organized crime in Cameroon, exploring how they interact with local security and geographic contexts, and informing institutional responses through recommendations tailored to national and regional realities.

Overview of key criminal markets

This report focuses on nine criminal markets selected because of their role in financing armed groups and sustaining violence across the three main strategic zones in Cameroon affected by armed conflict and violent extremism. These criminal activities are outlined below.

Drug trafficking: In 2025, 430 cases involving the trafficking of cannabis, tramadol, cocaine and amphetamines were recorded in Cameroon. Organizers, recruiters and couriers ('mules') are becoming increasingly astute, and making greater use of countries perceived to present a lower risk of interception. Drugs are concealed in false-bottom suitcases, packets and bags of tea, medication packaging and computer towers, and are sometimes wrapped in aluminium foil or other materials designed to evade X-ray screening.⁴ Between January and August 2024, police recorded 470 cases involving cannabis, tramadol, cocaine and amphetamines.⁵ In 2024, police seized 24.5 kilograms of cocaine from Brazil, much of it originating in São Paulo, as well as 8 415 800 tramadol tablets and 5 614 tonnes of cannabis.⁶ This trade is largely controlled by armed groups operating in the North-West and South-West regions. Drug use also influences the behaviour of parties to the conflict, including corrupt members of the armed forces.

Trafficking in arms, explosive precursors and components for improvised explosive devices:

The trafficking of chemical precursors and components used in improvised explosive devices (IEDs) supplies armed groups operating in the North-West, South-West and Far North regions. In 2024, authorities recorded 86 seizures involving IEDs.⁷ In 2025, these devices caused 99 casualties, including 36 deaths in the North-West, 30 in the South-West and 33 in the Far North.⁸

Kidnapping for ransom (including extortion): Kidnappings occur primarily in the North-West, South-West and Far North regions. However, the practice has spread across the country and is now also used by criminal groups operating in urban areas. In the northernmost regions (Adamawa, Far North and North), this form of banditry is reminiscent of the raids that once characterised the region.⁹ Kidnapping has become an additional source of revenue for armed groups as other funding streams come under pressure.¹⁰

Cattle theft and trafficking: Often combined with the kidnapping of herders or their relatives, cattle theft is carried out by all categories of armed groups, including terrorist, criminal and politico-military organizations. The proceeds are channelled into terrorist financing and money laundering networks. These activities have led to the forced displacement of pastoral communities and, in some cases, the loss of their economic and social standing.

Smuggling: In areas affected by terrorist and separatist violence, armed groups engage in the smuggling of arms, ammunition, medicines, food and livestock for profit. Boko Haram and armed groups operating in the North-West and South-West rely on pre-existing smuggling networks to sell goods obtained through extortion and looting and to secure supplies.

Informal fund transfers (including *hawala*): Informal fund transfer systems are becoming increasingly common in Cameroon and play a role in money laundering. Organized through informal networks of brokers, these systems facilitate the transfer of funds between locations, often across international borders. They are most common in the country's major cities, particularly around hotels, airports, shopping centres and other locations frequented by international business communities.

Money laundering: Money laundering takes place through a variety of channels, including real estate, offshore investments, transfers to foreign bank accounts, the purchase of high-value assets and foreign currencies, shareholdings in major companies, investments in industrial, agricultural and commercial ventures (including hardware stores and art dealerships), and the purchase of cryptocurrencies and other digital assets.

Environmental crime: Armed groups operating along the border with the Central African Republic engage in the trafficking of precious minerals (gold and diamonds) as well as cross-border poaching of large mammals. They also levy taxes on illegal logging. These activities form part of a wider web of illicit practices involving multiple groups and criminal enterprises that function as interconnected networks outside legal frameworks. These groups act opportunistically, taking advantage of instability to expand their operations.

Cybercrime: Between January and August 2024, 385 cybercrime cases were recorded in Cameroon. The most common forms included fraudulent investment schemes (253 cases), ransomware attacks, online identity theft (32 cases), electronic money theft (55 cases), online defamation (31 cases) and cyberharassment (14 cases). In the North-West and South-West regions in particular, cryptocurrencies are used to mobilize external funding discreetly and to receive ransom payments. In 2025, 1 289 cybercrime cases were recorded nationwide, primarily involving online loan scams, electronic money theft, cyber extortion, identity theft, fraudulent cryptocurrency investment schemes, email account hacking and scams involving cryptocurrency-to-cash exchanges whether for commercial purposes or through fake online platforms.

The forms of criminality examined in this report play an important role in sustaining violence. They weaken social, economic and fiscal cohesion, undermine state governance, intensify competition over resources and provide armed groups with additional sources of revenue.¹¹ As a result, these multidimensional criminal threats directly fuel armed conflict, create a vicious cycle of violence and increase political and social vulnerability. Rather than mapping each criminal market separately, this study adopts an integrated cross-cutting approach that takes account of the three strategic zones identified in the report, as well as the cross-border and transnational patterns that connect them.

Mapping Cameroon's main crisis zones

Cameroon has experienced a broad-based deterioration in its security environment over the past decade, despite having long been regarded as a haven of peace and stability in central Africa. Owing to its strategic geographic position, the country faces a range of security challenges, including cross-border terrorist attacks, identity-based conflicts and pressure from rebel groups operating amid instability in neighbouring countries.

Today, Cameroon continues to face a threefold asymmetric threat: violent extremism, separatism, and rural and cross-border banditry linked to incursions by rebels from the Central African Republic. These threats undermine both border security and national cohesion, forcing the state to deploy its defence forces on three distinct fronts, each shaped by its own sociopolitical and operational dynamics (differences in the tactics, capabilities and organization of the armed groups involved). According to the current mapping of crisis zones, the country is divided into three main fronts. In the Far North region, the departments of Mayo-Tsanaga, Mayo-Sava and Logone-et-Chari remain the scene of attacks by Boko Haram factions. In the east, the East, Adamawa and North regions continue to experience the consequences of a highly porous border with the Central African Republic (rebel incursions and kidnappings for ransom). In the west of the country, a violent separatist insurgency continues to affect the North-West and South-West regions, driven by internal identity-based grievances.



From the Mandara Mountains to Lake Chad: violent extremism and the resurgence of cross-border criminal activity

Over the past 15 years, the security situation in the area stretching from the Mandara Mountains to Lake Chad has gradually deteriorated. Once primarily affected by traditional forms of rural and cross-border banditry, such as ambushes, cattle theft and armed robbery along major roads,¹² the region has undergone a steady transformation with the emergence of violent extremism. Since 2013, factions linked to Boko Haram have carried out attacks in the area.¹³ This shift has altered patterns of violence, leading to an increase in attacks, kidnappings and illicit activity. In a context marked by porous borders, limited state presence and precarious socio-economic conditions, links between terrorism and organized crime have become increasingly pronounced. This trend was reinforced by the 2016 split within Boko Haram, that gave rise to rival factions, notably *Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati Wal-Jihad* (JAS) and Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP). The split contributed to the fragmentation of armed groups and the spread of violence in a more diffuse, yet persistent, form.¹⁴ These fragmented Boko Haram splinter groups continue to exploit security weaknesses and local vulnerabilities.

At the same time, security measures, while significant, have produced mixed results. Although they have helped suppress some major offensives, they have not succeeded in establishing lasting stability in the region. Instead, they have contributed to the reorganization of armed groups into smaller, more mobile and resilient units capable of becoming embedded in local economies. Against this backdrop, criminal activity has become increasingly diverse and widespread, drawing on long-standing cross-border networks as well as new opportunities created by insecurity. Kidnapping for ransom, cattle trafficking, drug trafficking, arms trafficking and piracy on Lake Chad are no longer isolated phenomena but now form part of integrated criminal economies. This evolution has gone hand in hand with growing

insecurity in everyday life, a weakening of state authority in some areas and increasing difficulty in distinguishing criminal networks from armed groups, further complicating security and institutional responses.

The Far North strategic zone encompasses the region itself as well as the Mayo-Louti department in the North region. It includes several distinct subregions: Lake Chad and the cross-border corridor stretching from the Mandara Mountains to Serbewel, where Boko Haram armed factions (JAS and ISWAP) operate, as well as the Mayo-Louti department, which lies opposite Adamawa State in Nigeria Mayo-Louti is a hotspot for trafficking and has seen a rise in kidnappings. The zone also includes the Logone Valley, which extends from Mayo-Danay to Logone-et-Chari along the border with Chad. This area is affected by intercommunal conflict, clashes between border communities and insecurity linked to kidnappings and cattle theft during seasonal movements of livestock.

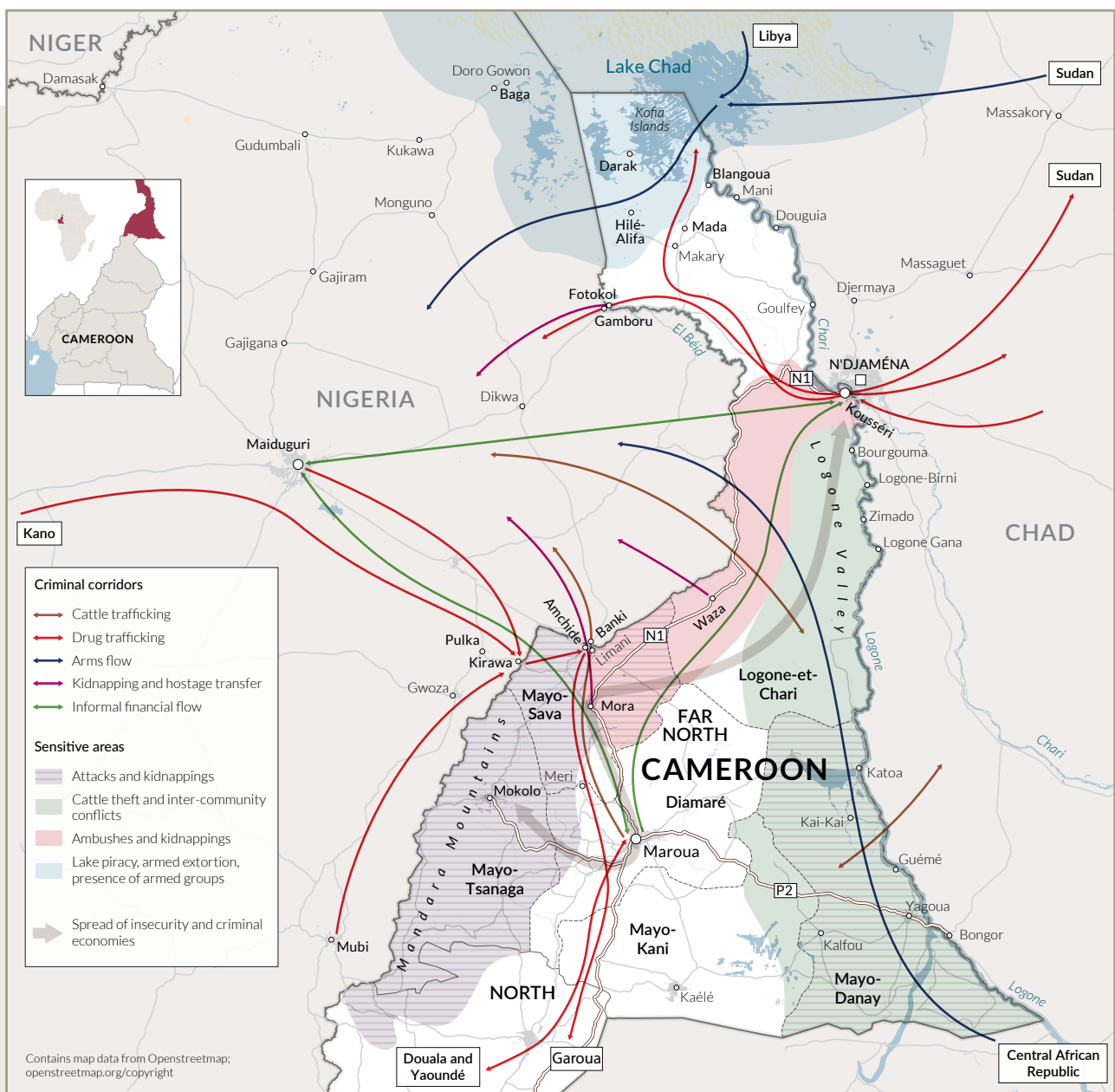


FIGURE 1 Criminal activity in the Far North and North regions of Cameroon.

Criminal groups and networks

The criminal landscape in this strategic zone can be divided into three broad, fluid categories, reflecting the fact that individuals and groups may move between them. These categories comprise rural and cross-border bandits, armed groups linked to Boko Haram, and groups affiliated with ISWAP.

Bandit networks

Banditry is the oldest form of organized crime in this area. Since the 1980s, it has evolved in response to changing local and regional conditions, as well as shifting vulnerabilities. For many years, road banditry, village raids and cattle rustling were the principal forms of bandit activity in the region. Roadside ambushes were so common that those responsible became known as *coupeurs de route* (road bandits). In the early 2000s, kidnapping for ransom became an additional source of revenue. Whatever its form or underlying motive, road banditry became established as ‘a form of income-generating violence in an environment conducive to criminal entrepreneurship’.¹⁵ The multiple crises that have affected the region over the past 15 years as a result of Boko Haram’s presence have fuelled a resurgence of banditry along the border with Nigeria, where criminality and terrorism have become increasingly intertwined.

This new form of banditry combines earlier criminal practices while exploiting the Boko Haram label. The concept of the crime–terror nexus helps explain the emergence of a form of banditry characterized by ambushes, kidnappings and the looting of villages during deadly attacks resembling those carried out by violent extremist groups. Kidnappings following ambushes on the road between Waza and Mora have become so common that, during the second half of 2025, they emerged as one of the area’s fastest-growing criminal markets. This reflects a form of criminal hybridization characterized by looting and raiding practices of a bygone era: people, livestock, motorcycles, food supplies, cash and other valuables are seized for financial gain. However, it is important to move beyond predatory narratives that portray the expansion of banditry by Boko Haram members or suspected affiliates as evidence of the group’s decline, and instead examine how these repeated attacks contribute to a pervasive sense of insecurity. This climate discourages the return of displaced people and helps sustain conditions conducive to a wide range of criminal activities, illicit economic activity and the movement of armed gangs. These attacks, which combine multiple tactics, also serve to finance terrorist activities and to generate private enrichment within a cross-border economy that has long been shaped by criminal practices.

Alongside these rural and cross-border dynamics, urban networks of sponsors, handlers and beneficiaries also play an important role in kidnappings and drug trafficking (cannabis, tramadol and other psychotropic substances). The widespread use of mobile phones and the difficulty of tracing users and transactions allow criminal networks to collect ransom payments and trafficking proceeds, transfer funds, including to contacts in neighbouring countries, and channel them into legitimate income-generating activities. Mobile network coverage near the border facilitates cross-border transfers. Electronic ransom payments have contributed to the growing incidence of kidnappings in both urban and rural areas. At the same time, transfer limits imposed by mobile phone operators often place a ceiling on the amount that can be paid in a single transaction.¹⁶

A number of arrests have led to the dismantling of criminal groups operating from Maroua and Kousséri whose activities included recruiting and arming kidnapping gangs. Media reports on the dismantling of these groups suggest that kidnappings in parts of the Far North and North regions are often carried out by local networks involving community members living in urban areas and people who attract little suspicion, including traditional leaders and teachers.¹⁷ These groups are also involved in motorcycle theft, residential burglary and drug trafficking, particularly the sale of cannabis in urban areas.

Beyond the urbanization of banditry, another emerging trend is the growing collusion between bandits and jihadist networks, to the point that Boko Haram is sometimes mistakenly portrayed as the successor to smugglers and road bandits.¹⁸ Boko Haram has undoubtedly benefited from smuggling networks and from operational methods long used by bandits, intermediaries in the cross-border economy and other borderland actors who have become facilitators. However, there is no direct connection between road bandits and Boko Haram. Although a few conversion cases have been documented,¹⁹ there is no evidence of a broader pattern of movement from one to the other.

Boko Haram's use of existing criminal networks is, in reality, part of a broader historical pattern. Rural and cross-border banditry in the Lake Chad basin has consistently adapted to social change within 'a socio-political environment in which survival is a constant concern, vigilance is the only guarantee of security and everyone must be ready to fight'.²⁰ Beyond criminal groups directly linked to Boko Haram, many attacks attributed to jihadists are in fact carried out by bandits.²¹

Within local communities, the presence of vulnerable groups, including internally displaced people, refugees and individuals who passed through the Meri Transit Centre²² operated by the National committee for disarmament, demobilization and reintegration, is increasingly perceived as a risk factor amid the resurgence of ambushes, kidnappings for ransom and village raids. The emergence of groups known as Marlian gangs²³ in some displacement camps in Nigeria is a warning sign. These groups consist of young offenders who embrace an identity as hardened gangsters and whose socialization in environments marked by violence and poverty has given rise to new forms of violence.

Armed groups linked to Boko Haram

The split within the jihadist movement in the Lake Chad basin in 2016 between JAS and ISWAP, combined with pressure from defence and security forces, contributed to the emergence of a number of resilient splinter groups that have fuelled both violence and criminal activity. These groups, typically comprising around a dozen members, operate in areas whose geography they know well and where they understand the local socio-economic landscape and economic networks. Their attacks are targeted and often based on strong intelligence. According to members of local vigilance committees interviewed by the Institute for Security Studies (ISS), these groups generally comprise people from different ethnic and religious backgrounds.²⁴ Through attacks, kidnappings and the looting of harvests, they combine predatory practices with efforts to sustain ongoing conflict.



The remains of a truck lie beside the road to Mokolo in Cameroon's Far North region. Persistent insecurity has also enabled criminal groups to expand their operations in the region. © Alexis Huguet/AFP via Getty Images

Armed groups linked to ISWAP

Splinter groups affiliated with ISWAP, particularly those based in Nigerian villages along the borders of the Mayo-Tsanaga and Mayo-Sava departments, levy taxes on people, marketplaces and economic assets such as fishing grounds, seasonal livestock migration routes and grazing areas.

ISWAP is also involved in the trafficking of fish, cattle, weapons and ammunition. Its main markets are located in areas under its influence, while it also supplies other markets with rustled livestock, stolen fuel and psychotropic substances for distribution across several countries.²⁵ Localities including Kousséri, Mada, Fotokol, Daboua, Kaya Kindiria, Gouboua, Darak, Kofia and Baga serve as major trafficking hubs in the Lake Chad region. ISWAP maintains influence over extensive areas south and west of the lake, as well as over numerous islands, that are rich in natural resources. The group seeks to secure local support by providing assistance, cultivating loyalty among local communities and employing less violence than under Abubakar Shekau.

At the same time, there are so many groups operating in Mayo-Sava and Mayo-Tsanaga that it is often difficult to link them to specific factions, which helps explain the increasingly fragmented nature of the war against Boko Haram.

Criminal activities

Criminal economies in Cameroon's Lake Chad basin are built around a range of activities: cattle theft; lake piracy; kidnapping for ransom; trafficking of weapons, ammunition, improvised explosive device components and psychotropic substances; and informal fund transfer systems. These activities help finance armed conflict and sustain cycles of violence.

Cattle theft and trafficking

Cattle theft and cross-border livestock trafficking play a central role in sustaining armed groups operating in this strategic zone. In addition to opportunistic theft by people and organized theft by small local groups, seasonal livestock migration and harvest periods are times of increased cattle theft, when livestock markings are manipulated to facilitate resale.²⁶

Where the borders of Cameroon, Chad and Nigeria meet lies the Logone Valley, which serves as a key hub for criminal networks. According to a report on terrorist financing in central Africa published by the Task Force on Money Laundering in Central Africa (GABAC), citing an assessment by Cameroon's Ministry of Livestock, Fisheries and Animal Industries, Boko Haram stole 31 101 cattle and 19 306 small ruminants between 2015 and 2016, with an estimated value of more than CFAF 8.5 billion (€13 million).²⁷ An increase in cattle theft incidents has also been recorded in the border regions of Cameroon and Chad, rising from two cases in 2015 to 131 in 2024.²⁸ This upsurge is largely attributable to the adoption of the practice by armed terrorist groups, particularly those affiliated with JAS.

In the border areas with Nigeria, particularly in the Mayo-Sava department, cattle theft has become increasingly complex and difficult to document accurately. At the start of the security crisis, many incidents stemmed from livestock straying after herders had been abducted or killed, or from animals being abandoned and subsequently recovered by retreating attackers. In both cases, recovered livestock was rarely returned to its owners, amounting to a form of unlawful appropriation. One example is that of a member of a local vigilance committee in Mayo-Tsanaga who was imprisoned for the fraudulent appropriation of livestock belonging to others.²⁹

Various strategies underpin a complex system of cattle raiding and cross-border trafficking. One common approach involves stealing livestock in Cameroon and taking it to Nigeria, where it is concealed in places used to receive stolen animals. There, the livestock is mixed with other herds before being transported to markets for sale. Perpetrators rely on accomplices in Nigeria to smuggle the stolen animals across the border without attracting attention. These cross-border routes also operate in the opposite direction, from Nigeria into Cameroon. As a result, the same stolen animals may eventually reappear on Cameroonian markets.³⁰ According to testimony collected by ISS, several border markets have been identified as points of sale. In 2015, the governors of Borno State and the Far North region ordered the temporary closure of certain livestock markets to prevent the sale of stolen animals.

Livestock controlled by Boko Haram is sometimes mixed with herds originating in Cameroon and taken to graze in border areas vulnerable to attack. These herds later return to Cameroon, where they continue to breed and graze undisturbed while retaining access to local markets. In effect, livestock benefits from a tacit non-aggression arrangement in these areas.

Animals stolen and moved into Nigeria are sold on local markets, and the proceeds help sustain armed groups and finance a range of profitable cross-border activities. Trafficking networks operate over considerable distances, supplying markets in southern Cameroon and as far as Gabon. Similar patterns have been observed in relation to cross-border cattle theft in the Logone Valley. One case illustrates the practice particularly well: in March 2021, a herd of 35 cattle stolen in Kalfou was located 48 hours later at the market in Banki, Nigeria. The speed with which the animals were moved highlights both the efficiency of the networks involved and the systemic nature of cattle theft.³¹ These practices are shaped by geographical factors – including borders, ecosystems, local



In Cameroon's Far North region, cattle theft and cross-border livestock trafficking provide an important source of revenue for criminal networks and armed groups. © Patrick Meinhardt/AFP via Getty Images

communities and security networks – which in turn require traffickers to rely on local intermediaries, concealment methods and alternative routes. Data collected by ISS also points to significant variation in modus operandi across different areas. Cattle theft and conflict are closely intertwined, particularly in relations between herders and farmers in areas of seasonal livestock migration. Cattle theft is also closely linked to money laundering, leading some livestock owners to underreport losses in order to avoid drawing attention to the true size of their herds.

Lake piracy

Lake piracy refers here to acts of theft, kidnapping and extortion targeting economic activities such as farming, livestock rearing, fishing, transport and trade conducted on or around Lake Chad. This is an age-old form of criminality here, which is highly organized and particularly violent.³² Boats operating on the lake are required to pay right of passage fees and fishing levies. Armed groups have carried out violent attacks on vessels, resulting in dozens of deaths, kidnappings and the seizure of transported goods.

Lake piracy takes place in complex natural environments comprising open water, marshland and islands. These settings make it easier for attackers to hide, and complicate efforts to pursue them when they retreat into areas that are difficult for defence and security forces to access. ISWAP propaganda videos released in November 2025 showed fighters parading across the lake aboard large, fast, motorized boats. This display of force is directed both at the defence and security forces and at those who depend on the lake for their livelihoods, many of whom have no choice but to comply with the demands of armed groups in the absence of a sufficient military presence. These groups collect taxes through fishing permits. Those who refuse to comply may have their fishing equipment

confiscated, be denied access to the lake, fined or killed. The levy for a large canoe is CFAF 20 000, compared with CFAF 10 000 for a smaller vessel. Along the shores of the lake, a levy of CFAF 5 000 is charged for each fish smoking kiln.

The most recent development in lake piracy is the growing use of kidnapping for ransom, recruitment or the settlement of disputes. People abducted from villages are transferred to islands on the lake. More generally, kidnappings on the lake are concentrated along the main trade routes linking cross-border markets on the shores of Lake Chad, particularly between Cameroon, Chad and Nigeria. Attacks also occur along the winding waterways between the islands, especially in the central part of the lake, where the border between Chad and Cameroon runs.

Arms trafficking

Attacks on military personnel and forward operating bases constitute the main source of weapons. Such attacks are more common in Nigeria, however they also occur in Cameroon and often result in the seizure of weapons, ammunition and military vehicles. A second source of arms supply is conflict zones. Supply routes originate in conflict hotspots across Libya, Sudan and the Central African Republic and feed trafficking networks whose geographical reach is largely shaped by weak state control along borders. According to ENACT, arms trafficking follows multiple routes and involves most of Cameroon's neighbouring countries, including Niger, Sudan and Libya, as well as Nigeria and the Central African Republic. On 14 June 2024, police uncovered a weapons cache in Makary, on the southern shores of Lake Chad. The supplies included 14 rockets, three PKM machine guns, 150 rounds of 7.65 mm ammunition, 14 rocket rounds and a 40 mm explosive grenade. The weapons and ammunition had come from Chad and were destined for Nigeria. Two suspects were arrested. More broadly, arms seizures during security operations and roadside checks have been frequent since 1990, partly owing to weapons dispersed during the flight of Hissène Habré and his entourage through Kousséri.

The Logone-et-Chari department serves as a transit zone linking the Lake Chad conflict area with towns in Cameroon's interior. One of Boko Haram's principal logistics experts operated from here, obtaining supplies from Chad and Sudan. Weapons shipments were concealed in tanker trucks, while weak border controls and porous frontiers facilitated their movement into Nigeria. The weapons were transported along river routes and then across the lake, departing from the shores of the Logone River and Lake Chad. According to available sources, numerous arms-trafficking routes operate within Chad as part of the broader trafficking networks linking Chad and Nigeria, all converging on the shores of Lake Chad.

The transport of weapons and ammunition by motorcycle provides a source of income for young people in the region, who risk both their lives and their freedom for what are often modest sums. Traffickers manufacture specially adapted boats for transporting weapons³³ and modify vehicles to create sophisticated hidden compartments. In some cases, ammunition is concealed in honey containers.³⁴

Boko Haram has also used transnational networks to procure weapons and ammunition. The outbreak of the Darfur conflict in Sudan in 2003 and the war in Libya both contributed to the emergence of trafficking routes for small arms. In July 2025, an arms trafficker was arrested in Makary while in possession of three PKM heavy machine guns and 940 rounds of ammunition. The consignment was destined for Boko Haram.³⁵ On the lake, the landing sites of Guitté and Mitériné, as well as Kinasserom Island, are regarded as trafficking hubs for a range of illicit goods, including weapons supplied to Boko Haram.³⁶

In addition to the trafficking of weapons and ammunition, there is significant trafficking in improvised explosive device (IED) components around Lake Chad and the Mandara Mountains. These include power sources (9-volt batteries), triggering mechanisms, detonators and main explosive charges. Criminal operators, particularly traders in villages located near insurgent transit routes, have specialized in supplying such components to armed groups.

For many years, Boko Haram used improvised explosives made from a mixture of fuel and oxidizing agents. As a result, there remains a residual trade in ammonium nitrate from which rebels continue to profit. Recipients of agricultural inputs from NGOs sometimes resell part of their fertilizer donations. Boko Haram members also purchase acid containers at inflated prices. Shipments of IED components destined for Nigeria have been seized, including batteries, metal fragments and pressure-activated triggering devices composed of two plates that detonate an explosive charge when brought into contact. In the same vein, Cameroonian security agencies have repeatedly arrested traders involved in trafficking 9-volt batteries for Boko Haram. One such case occurred at the Kerawa checkpoint in 2020, when members of a local vigilance committee seized these items. Some of the IED components used by Boko Haram originate in southern Nigeria but transit through Cameroon via Mubi or Demsa. They are sourced in part through travel agencies before being repackaged and transported back into Nigeria by motorcycle.³⁷

Since 2016, Boko Haram has relied primarily on military-grade explosives, including mortar and artillery shells and grenades, as well as conventional explosives such as anti-tank mines. In suicide attacks, the group uses explosive devices manufactured from Russian and French submunitions.³⁸ These military explosives originate largely from arsenals looted by Boko Haram in Nigeria, Niger and Cameroon.

Drug trafficking

Drug trafficking and the trade in other psychotropic substances are among the criminal activities that generate income for armed groups and help sustain violence in northern Cameroon. In the Far North region, large cannabis seizures involving shipments originating in the country's southern regions are a regular occurrence. In September 2024, for example, more than four tonnes of cannabis were seized during operations conducted by the Far North Gendarmerie Legion in Moutourwa and Doualaré, in Maroua II subdivision.³⁹ More recently, in early 2025, the same unit intercepted a truck carrying sacks of cannabis that had travelled across the country.

A review of selected drug seizures, particularly of cannabis, highlights two significant aspects of the threat posed by this trade. Cannabis is the main drug cultivated and consumed in Cameroon.⁴⁰ Geographically, the city of Douala and the West and North-West regions are among the main departure points for this trade. In the North-West, separatist armed groups rely on cannabis cultivation as a source of revenue.⁴¹ Traffickers use National Road No. 1 to reach Kousséri, from where cannabis is transported towards Chad, Sudan and border towns in Nigeria such as Fotokol, as well as to the Lake Chad area, including Blangoua, Hilé-Alifa, Darak, Guitté and Kinasserom. These routes, linking Cameroon's main production and consumption zones, remain attractive to traffickers because roadside inspections are infrequent and corruption widespread. International cannabis trafficking takes place primarily by road. The main route runs from Douala through Yaoundé, Bertoua and Ngaoundéré to N'Djamena. Supplies destined for the Central African Republic follow the same corridor, branching off at Garoua-Boulai. Cannabis is also trafficked between the border areas of the Far North and the country's interior, by means of public buses and coaches. Informants and roadside checks have led to seizures and arrests of traffickers concealing drugs in sacks of vegetables.

The Lake Chad region is also home to local cannabis production that feeds transnational trafficking networks. According to security sources in Chad's Lac region, some of the lake's interior islands are reportedly home to large cannabis plantations whose harvests are distributed across the sub-region. Armed groups are gradually reducing their dependence on external supplies by cultivating cannabis themselves. Information gathered from leaders of vigilance committees in Mozogo, Moskota and Kerawa suggests that areas under the control of armed terror-criminal groups are also used for cannabis cultivation, a substance on which these groups depend and from which they derive revenue on sub-regional markets. Smaller cannabis plots are also being established and maintained near abandoned villages, although the phenomenon remains in its early stages.⁴²

In addition to cannabis trafficking, there is a significant trade in tramadol (locally known as tramol), a powerful analgesic that is popular among both fighters and civilians because it helps reduce fear and fatigue. One study highlights its consumption by motorcycle taxi drivers in tea houses, where it has become embedded as a cultural practice. Tramadol is even administered to livestock to help them pull ploughs under extreme heat.⁴³ As a result of the widespread use of this opioid by both humans and animals, traces of it have been detected in the roots of *Sarcocephalus latifolius*, a tree in the Rubiaceae family known locally as the African peach tree, or *bakurehi* in Fulfulde.⁴⁴ Present in large quantities in human and animal waste, these substances seep into the soil and are absorbed by local plant life.⁴⁵

Most tramadol originates in the Nigerian cities of Kano, Maiduguri and Mubi before being transported to destinations in Chad, Cameroon and Niger. In Cameroon's Far North region, the main entry points are Sandawadjiri, Kerawa, Amchidé and Fotokol, in addition to the numerous cross-border routes used for smuggling. Consumption markets are spread across the region. In 2020, local customs authorities in Maroua seized 1 500 boxes of injectable tramadol. Several consignments from Cameroon bound for Boko Haram-controlled areas of Nigeria have also been intercepted. In June 2017, for example, authorities in Fotokol seized a shipment of approximately 3 000 packets of cannabis and tramol destined for Nigeria.⁴⁶

Chad is also a major centre for the production and distribution of narcotics within the sub-region. While the seizure in Chad of 246 boxes of tramadol valued at CFAF 12.3 billion attracted considerable public attention,⁴⁷ it points to a broader problem unfolding linked to increasing pockets of instability and growing demand for narcotics in the Lake Chad basin, Sudan, the Central African Republic and Libya.⁴⁸ The Maiduguri–Gambaru–Fotokol–Mada corridor has emerged as an alternative to the northern route linking Niger and Chad. Markets in N'Djamena, Chad are supplied from the market in Mada, Makary, requiring traffickers to cross the Chari River. Other routes extending towards Kanem province and eastern Chad involve criminal networks connected to the conflict in Sudan. Trafficking has also intensified further south, concentrating along the porous border between Nigeria's Adamawa State and south-western Chad via Cameroon's North region. From Mubi, narcotics cross the border via multiple points before being transported along the Garoua–Magada–Yagoua corridor to Bongor, and then onward either north to N'Djamena or east towards the Sudanese border.⁴⁹

Drugs and other psychotropic substances enhance jihadist fighters' endurance and willingness to engage in combat.⁵⁰ From an anthropological perspective, they foster group cohesion and resilience, forging bonds through shared criminal activity.⁵¹ Some Boko Haram suicide bombers are also believed to have been drugged with analgesics, tramadol or the amphetamine derivative Captagon. Drug trafficking also plays a role in counter-insurgency dynamics. Numerous abuses committed by the Cameroonian military against civilians, as well as incidents of mutiny⁵² and insubordination, have reportedly involved soldiers acting under the influence of various drugs.⁵³

Informal fund transfers

Informal fund transfer mechanisms, which operate outside the formal, regulated financial system and may be vulnerable to criminal exploitation, provide an alternative means of resilience for local traders adapting to a context shaped by insecurity and the banking constraints.⁵⁴ Known locally as *Baadal* or *hawala*, these systems fulfil both social functions, such as family support and diaspora remittances, and economic functions, including cross-border trade and informal financing. They also appeal to traders because they offer a degree of discretion.⁵⁵

The system relies on wealthy Nigerian businesspeople who take advantage of the social dynamics of borderlands, corruption among public officials and weaknesses in national identity card issuance procedures to obtain genuine documents under false identities and open bank accounts in Cameroon. These businesspeople sponsor young Cameroonian *hawaladars* and extend them credit in naira, the Nigerian currency. The *hawaladars* then sell the naira and make daily deposits into their principals' accounts held in Cameroonian banks. Each morning, the Nigerian sponsors communicate the day's exchange rate to their Cameroonian partners. Operators can then add a small margin of between five and ten naira, allowing them to generate profits when handling large transactions.⁵⁶

Operators act as brokers or financial intermediaries between providers and recipients of international money transfers. Local traders export cattle, sesame, groundnuts and petroleum by-products from Chad used in the manufacture of plastic goods. In Nigeria, they receive cash payments that they prefer not to transport back to their home country. Given the volumes involved, transporting naira is difficult. Intermediaries therefore approach traders wishing to purchase goods in Nigeria. These traders deposit the equivalent amount in CFA francs with intermediaries in Cameroon and receive the corresponding amount in naira in Nigeria to complete their purchases. A trader requiring naira provides the bank account details of a supplier or business partner in Nigeria. Currency brokers then receive proof of payment, which they pass on to the client as confirmation that the Nigerian account has been credited.⁵⁷

These mechanisms are also used to repatriate proceeds from the sale of agricultural products in major southern and coastal cities, particularly Douala and Yaoundé, and are widely used in northern Cameroon. Domestic informal transfer systems are cheaper than mobile money services offered by operators such as MTN and Orange. Brokers typically charge between CFAF 1 000 and CFAF 2 000 to transfer CFAF 1 million, whereas withdrawing the same amount through MTN, for example, costs CFAF 3 000, in addition to a CFAF 500 transfer fee.⁵⁸

In Nigeria, banks such as UBA, Access Bank, First Bank and Zenith Bank, as well as the financial services company (fintech) Moniepoint, are commonly used for transfers originating in Cameroon. Since Nigeria digitized a large share of commercial transactions, many informal money-transfer operators have effectively transformed themselves into fintech providers.⁵⁹

Hawaladars play a central role in the local economy and often combine money transfer activities with currency exchange and trade. This multifunctional character makes suspicious financial flows more difficult to detect.⁶⁰ In addition, the absence of customer verification measures increases the risk that these systems may be used for money laundering, illicit financial flows and terrorist financing. More broadly, these financial transfer mechanisms help sustain and expand the criminal and terrorist activities of armed groups, which can use them to launder proceeds with relative ease.

Before turning to informal transfer mechanisms, Boko Haram typically channelled funds through licensed money-transfer agencies and local banks.⁶¹ The group relied on a range of intermediaries and facilitators to receive and move money. In some cases, it channelled funds through local associations in order to withdraw money and finance its activities in Cameroon. During searches conducted at the homes of Boko Haram leaders who had taken refuge in Cameroon, investigators discovered large quantities of US dollar banknotes bearing serial numbers traceable to local banks, which had been purchased through local associations. Today, any payment made to an association requires approval from the prefectural authorities.⁶² As a result, jihadists increasingly rely on informal money-transfer systems to procure food and fuel in Cameroon. Their importance to traffickers and armed groups has effectively shielded these systems from attack.⁶³

Informal fund transfer systems are often a critical component of integrated criminal economies. They are linked to the financing of kidnappings and ransom payments, arms trafficking, cross-border smuggling of goods, fuel and food, and the laundering of proceeds through investments in the informal economy or real estate. *Hawala*-type systems may also be used to transfer funds from diaspora communities to armed operators or local intermediaries, thereby circumventing reporting and due-diligence requirements. International bodies such as the Financial Action Task Force and UNODC have highlighted the risks associated with informal value transfer systems, and recommend approaches that combine proportionate regulation, international cooperation and greater financial inclusion in order to reduce risks without depriving vulnerable populations of access to financial services.

Kidnapping for ransom

Kidnapping for ransom had been practised in the sub-region for at least two decades before the Boko Haram insurgency.⁶⁴ It became even more profitable for criminal networks following the group's emergence in Cameroon. According to some unconfirmed sources, ransom payments for Western,⁶⁵ Chinese,⁶⁶ or Cameroonian hostages can reach up to CFAF 2 billion. In addition to the financial gains generated by such substantial ransoms, hostage-taking also enables armed groups to secure the release of senior members imprisoned in Cameroon.⁶⁷

The situation briefly improved as a result of the Cameroonian army's counter-insurgency measures, but kidnappings have persisted in this part of northern Cameroon since 2024. Often conflated with kidnappings carried out by extremist groups associated with the main Boko Haram factions, those perpetrated by criminal groups account for a significant share of this market in the region. In the wake of abuses committed by Boko Haram factions, kidnappings have increased sharply over the past two years. Two factors help explain this trend. First, kidnappings provide armed groups with a source of revenue that builds the resilience of their terro-criminal enterprises. Second, they are relatively easy to carry out and highly profitable. With the exception of areas under ISWAP influence, where kidnappings are rare and more selectively targeted, all other extremist armed groups have come to rely on kidnapping as a major source of funding. Groups affiliated with JAS are regarded as the main perpetrators of kidnappings in areas affected by terrorism. Unlike the kidnappings that occurred in 2014, at the outset of the security crisis, current kidnappings are systematic and violent. Two hotspots are particularly affected by this phenomenon: the Mandara Mountains and the Lake Chad basin.

After abducting their victims, kidnappers generally cross into Nigeria, taking their hostages with them. From there, they exert pressure through telephone calls to victims' families, threats of execution should instructions not be followed, financial negotiations and arrangements for the payment of ransoms. In several cases, hostages have been executed after payment deadlines expired. The frequency of

kidnappings has forced some kidnappers to seek alternative detention sites, and travellers on National Road No. 1 heading towards Kousséri to take the long detour through Yagoua, Bongor and N'Djamena. According to data provided by the Mora gendarmerie, 42 kidnapping cases were reported between January and May 2025. In 2024, 60 kidnappings for ransom were recorded.⁶⁸

Based on field data from multiple sources, ransom demands now range from CFAF 200 000 to several million CFA francs per person, depending on the victim's status. Mobile payment systems have become the principal means of transferring ransom payments. The geographical dispersal of both perpetrators and sponsors complicates efforts to track them. Once cash has been withdrawn, the SIM card associated with the payment number is immediately destroyed, making it impossible to trace. In addition to mobile transfers, kidnappers sometimes demand payment in cash and in naira, a currency widely used in Nigeria's border regions. In other cases, they request payment in consumer goods, such as sacks of rice, sugar and other foodstuffs. Some border markets serve as supply hubs for armed groups and as venues for transactions linked to ransom payments.⁶⁹



The North-West and South-West regions of Cameroon in the grips of the conflict economy

The crisis in Cameroon's North-West and South-West regions began in 2016 with socio-political grievances voiced by Anglophone lawyers and teachers, who protested what they saw as their marginalization within a system dominated by the Francophone majority. The initially peaceful protests were met with a security crackdown, triggering the gradual radicalization of the movement and its transformation into an armed insurgency from 2017 onwards.⁷⁰ The symbolic declaration of independence by some separatist leaders of the self-proclaimed 'Ambazonia' marked a turning point, heightening tensions and facilitating the emergence of structured armed groups.⁷¹ In this context, state authority gradually eroded across several rural areas, where public services ceased to function, giving way to parallel forms of governance imposed by non-state actors.

Over time, the conflict has become increasingly complex and fragmented, characterized by the proliferation of armed groups, internal rivalries and a growing convergence between political motivations and criminal interests. The intensification of military operations, large-scale population displacement and prolonged school closures have further weakened the local socio-economic fabric. This deterioration has fostered the emergence of both survival economies and predatory economies, within which armed groups and opportunistic operators exploit governance gaps and porous borders. The partial collapse of local institutions, combined with public mistrust of the state and growing reliance on informal networks, has created fertile ground for criminal activities to flourish and become increasingly intertwined with the conflict.

The North-West region (capital: Bamenda) and the South-West region (capital: Buea), commonly referred to as NOSO, are characterized by a complex and strategically significant topography

that strongly shapes patterns of conflict interaction. The South-West region borders the Gulf of Guinea, while the North-West region is defined by rugged highlands along the Cameroon Line volcanic mountain chain. In addition, a long and porous land border separates both regions from Nigeria. This permeability, combined with dense forests and mountainous terrain, provides ideal conditions for armed groups to operate and move freely. Criminal economies must be understood in the context of an evolving conflict and shifting relationships. These two regions have become particularly conducive environments for the emergence and consolidation of illicit markets. Exploiting weaknesses in local governance and the uneven reach of state institutions, these economies revolve around a range of activities, including arms trafficking, cocoa smuggling, kidnapping for ransom, cattle theft, informal fund transfers, environmental crime, cybercrime and money laundering. Drawing on institutional reports, academic research and local testimony, this overview provides an integrated analysis of these phenomena, examining the dynamics, operators, impacts and interconnections.

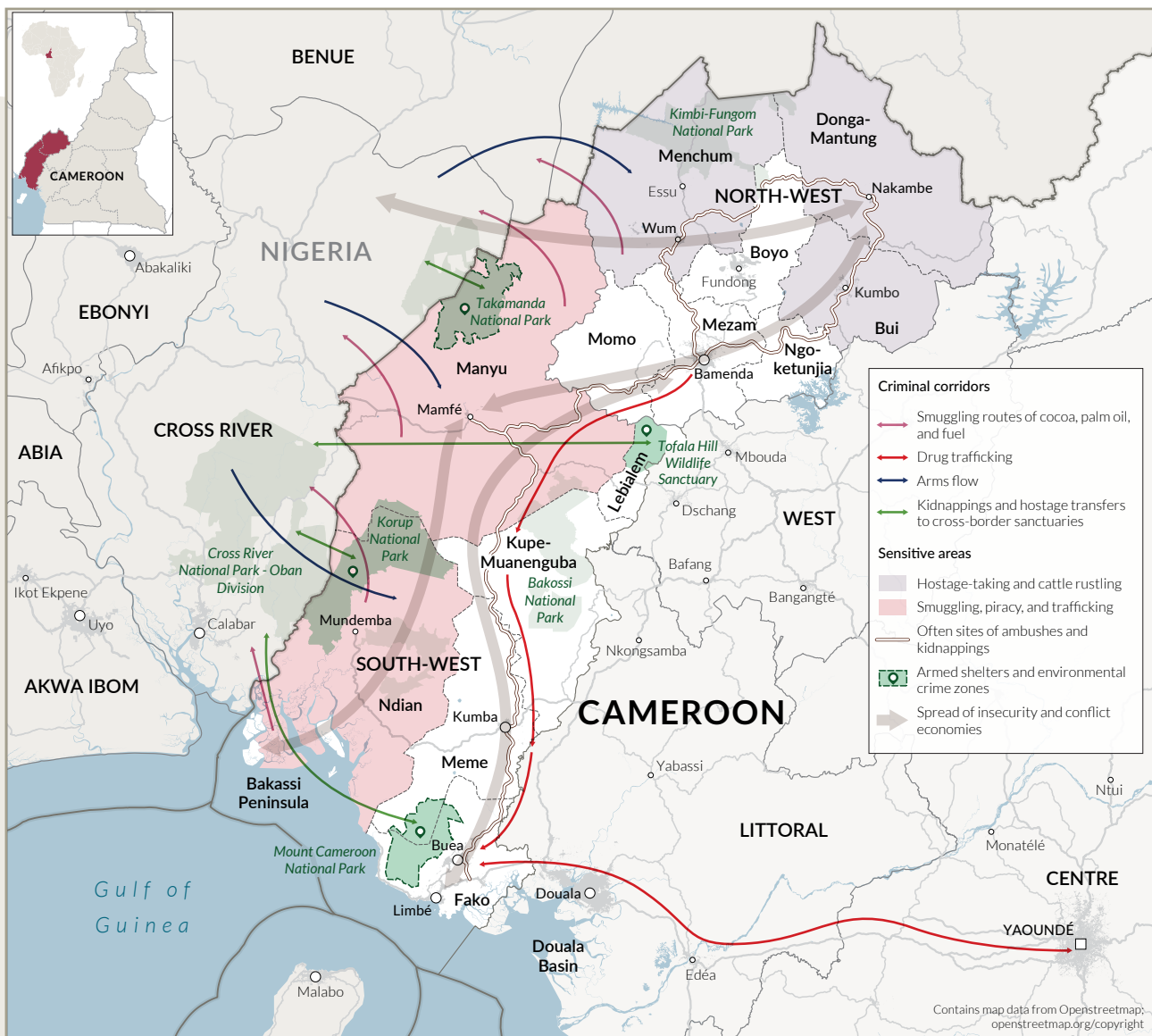


FIGURE 2 Criminal activity in the North-West and South-West regions of Cameroon.

Criminal groups and networks

In Cameroon's North-West and South-West regions, groups with a range of political affiliations pose an insurgent threat that has become increasingly intertwined with criminal activity. These groups are aligned with the self-proclaimed Ambazonian Interim Government of Sisiku Julius Ayuk Tabe, who is currently imprisoned at Kondengui Central Prison in Yaoundé; the Ambazonia Governing Council (AGC) led by Lucas Cho Ayaba; Ebenezer Akwanga's African People's Liberation Movement (APLM); Fontem Neba's Southern Cameroons Liberation Council; Elvis Kometa's Southern Cameroons National Council; and Deboh Herbert's Movement for the Restoration of Independent Southern Cameroon. A range of armed groups, from loosely organized militias to more structured forces, are linked to these different factions within the separatist movement. The Southern Cameroons Defense Forces (SOCADEF), for example, serve as the armed wing of the APLM. Similarly, the Ambazonia Defence Forces (ADF) are affiliated with the movement that was led by Lucas Cho Ayaba of the AGC until his arrest in Norway. The Anglophone Self-Defence Council and the Red Dragons are likewise aligned with the interim government. For many years, these armed groups operated independently, each fiercely guarding its territory from rival groups, which occasionally resulted in deadly clashes.⁷²

At the outset of the insurgency, there were seven armed militias, with an estimated strength of between 2 000 and 4 000 fighters.⁷³ By 2024, their number had risen to around 50.⁷⁴ Each group comprised roughly 30 fighters. In 2025, the South-West region was home to around 10 structured armed groups belonging to six major factions: Manyu Native Defense Forces, Red Dragons, SOCADEF, Expendable 100, Ribbons and Unity Warriors. These groups have divided the territory among themselves. The Manyu Native Defense Forces operate in the Mamfe area, while Expendable 100 is active around Mundemba.⁷⁵ In the North-West region, larger groups such as the ADF operate in the Wum area and around Bamenda. The ADF also operates alongside SOCADEF in the Bali area. Similarly, the Ambazonia Restoration Forces (ARF) are active around Nkambe, Kumbo, Ndop and Mbengwi. These groups also conduct incursions into neighbouring Francophone localities, especially in the departments of Noun (Bangourain, Magba and Kouoptamo), Bamboutos (Bameyang, Babadjou and Kombou) and Menoua (Ndento and Nshanwah). They also carry out operations in the Littoral region, notably around Mbanga, Njombé-Penja and Penda Mboko.

Armed groups are constantly reshaping through shifting alliances, defections and confrontations with the Cameroonian army. In Fako (capital: Limbe), a new group, the Unity Warriors, was formed in July 2025 through an alliance between the Mountain Lions and Asawana. Similarly, the Bui Warriors emerged from a split within the Bui Unity Warriors. This increasing fragmentation of the Anglophone separatist movement has further complicated the crisis. Many of these groups are led by commanders with colourful noms de guerre, including Lucifer, Fire, Baby Police, Boko Haram, Focus and Nyangono. Several of them, including Zabra, have recently been taken out of action by the Cameroonian army.⁷⁶

Alongside these structured organizations, there are numerous smaller armed factions, including the Southern Cameroons Restoration Forces, the Warriors of Nso, the White Tigers, the Menchum Fall Warriors, the Vipers and the Donga Mantung Self-Defense Group. These groups typically number no more than a few dozen members.⁷⁷ They are led by self-styled generals, some of whom, such as Nyambere, have joined the DDR programme put in place by the Cameroonian authorities.

The insurgents obtain weapons and ammunition from the Nigerian states of Rivers and Akwa Ibom. These neighbouring states also serve as safe havens for group leaders under pressure from the Cameroonian army. A number of Nigerian criminals joined the separatists at the outset of the



A man surveys the damage inside a restaurant destroyed by fire in Buea, South-West Cameroon, in 2019, following clashes between government forces and Anglophone separatists. © Giles Clarke/ UNOCHA via Getty Images

insurgency in order to evade the Nigerian military's Operation Delta Safe I.⁷⁸ One example is a Nigerian national from Oron, who was involved in criminal activities in the South-West region between 2017 and 2020, particularly in the Mukoko and Mbonguè areas, under the authority of a figure known as Commander Lovet. After his group was dismantled by the Cameroonian army in 2021, he relocated to the Bakassi peninsula to resume criminal activities. He was arrested in September 2024 and handed over to the Nigerian military in Ikang.⁷⁹

In addition to their interactions with Nigerian criminal groups, the insurgents have also established links with Nigerian pirate networks. In May 2025, for example, an armed-group leader known as Twelve O'clock publicly stated that he had entered into an alliance with separatist leaders to carry out attacks on the Bakassi peninsula.⁸⁰ This partnership has not only facilitated attacks against Cameroonian interests at sea, but also provided separatists with access to pirate logistical networks for the procurement of weapons and ammunition. Their links with groups such as the Indigenous People of Biafra and the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta have also given separatists access to weapons, particularly in Akwa Ibom and the Niger Delta, where they can procure AK-47 rifles and anti-tank rocket launchers.⁸¹

Criminal activities

A range of criminal activities enable armed groups to finance their operations. Kidnapping for ransom, cybercrime, cattle theft, arms trafficking and smuggling help finance armed groups, sustain armed conflict and perpetuate violence in areas under their influence, including neighbouring Francophone communities.

Kidnapping for ransom and cattle theft

Kidnapping for ransom

As funding from the Anglophone diaspora has declined,⁸² kidnapping for ransom has become the main source of financing for armed groups.⁸³ The latter abduct civil servants, teachers, humanitarian workers, military personnel, those opposed to separatist ideas, and residents originating from Francophone regions, who are sometimes disparagingly referred to as ‘black legs’.⁸⁴ Kidnapping serves both as a tool for political coercion and as a means of financing armed groups and sustaining opportunistic criminal gangs.⁸⁵ Armed groups also extort money from people travelling to villages to attend funeral ceremonies, often accompanying this with threats of abduction.

In the North-West region, 25 kidnappings were recorded between 9 and 15 June 2025. Teachers and pupils are among the groups most frequently targeted. In Bui alone, around 30 teachers were abducted in June 2025 by separatists or suspected separatists. On 10 June 2025, 21 pupils were abducted in Kumbo by the group led by self-appointed General Kapo. During the same month, a primary-school teacher was captured in Tobeh. Similarly, on 13 June 2025, a teacher was kidnapped and examination scripts for the First School Leaving Certificate, which he was transporting to Bamenda, were seized. He was released and the scripts returned after a ransom of CFAF 400 000 was paid.⁸⁶ The abduction of primary- and secondary-school teachers and pupils is now so commonplace that it has become a defining feature of the conflict. The grievances surrounding the education system, which initially helped fuel the crisis, remain closely linked to broader processes of criminalization.

In addition to school communities, Mbororo pastoralists are regularly targeted. When the crisis erupted in the North-West and South-West regions, the Mbororo faced a difficult choice: support the separatists and risk alienating the authorities, or refuse to do so and risk becoming targets themselves, along with their livestock. Against a backdrop of longstanding intercommunal tensions, the community ultimately sided with the authorities, while separatist fighters, under pressure from the Cameroonian army, sought to extort the Mbororo and take refuge in the mountain grazing areas.⁸⁷ Because they provide intelligence to the Cameroonian security forces and sometimes serve as auxiliary forces, the Mbororo have become particular targets for separatist groups.

Department	Number of victims	Ransom (in XAF)
Momo	67	124 393 000
Menchum	69	48 879 000
Donga Mantung	83	58 560 000
Bui	62	57 501 000
Boyo	42	36 641 000
Ngoketunjia	52	12 450 000
Mezam	128	128 350 000
Total	503	466 774 000

FIGURE 3 Mbororo kidnapping victims in the North-West region, 2017–2024.

SOURCE: Compiled from MBOSCUA data.

Between 2016 and 2022, 98 members of the Mbororo community were abducted for a total ransom amounting to CFAF 175 106 050.⁸⁸ Since 2022, such kidnappings have increased significantly. According to updated figures from the Mbororo Social and Cultural Development Association (MBOSCUDA), 503 Mbororo have been abducted since 2016, generating total ransom payments of CFAF 466 774 000. Mezam and Donga-Mantung are the hardest hit, where large Mbororo populations overlap with areas of strong separatist activity.

Kidnappers also target passenger buses in order to abduct travellers. In March 2025, for example, the group led by self-styled General Never Die abducted passengers from a bus in Bamessi. One of the hostages reported paying a ransom of CFAF 800 000.⁸⁹ Children are sometimes abducted from the homes of wealthy parents. In May 2025, for instance, a young girl was kidnapped in Kumbo and her captors demanded a ransom of CFAF 3 000 000. Local elected officials have also been targeted. The mayor of Njikwa was abducted on 21 May 2025 on the Njikwa–Njinikom road. More recently, Member of Parliament Abe Michael was taken hostage and subsequently executed by separatists after they had initially demanded a ransom of CFAF 15 000 000.⁹⁰

Methods vary depending on the perpetrators and their objectives. Armed units typically operate in small groups, conducting night-time ambushes, targeted village attacks and roadside kidnappings. Victims are transferred to camps or hideouts in forested areas, where private negotiations continue until a ransom is paid and release is granted, often subject to specific conditions.⁹¹

Kidnapping has numerous and far-reaching consequences. It provides a direct source of revenue for armed groups, causes profound individual and collective trauma, and imposes substantial direct and indirect financial costs on victims' families. In Cameroon, as elsewhere, it also has significant local economic repercussions, restricting movement, commerce and investment.⁹² Kidnapping forms part of a broader criminal ecosystem linked to arms trafficking, smuggling, illicit trade and money laundering.⁹³

Cattle theft

Cattle theft has become a key component of the conflict economy, serving as a source of food, income and status for those involved. This activity helps provide sustenance for fighters and a valuable source of income for separatists and vulnerable pastoralist households. Although cattle theft has long been associated with pastoral communities in the region, it has become far more prevalent since the outbreak of the armed conflict.⁹⁴

Most thefts occur at night, when communities may be off guard. Stolen animals are quickly moved to remote areas or natural hideouts before being taken to neighbouring markets for sale.⁹⁵ Criminal networks involved in cattle theft rely on the complicity of handlers to reintroduce stolen livestock through legitimate marketing channels, while other animals are slaughtered to supply the illicit meat trade. Mbororo pastoralists, who have been particularly affected, have lost thousands of cattle and have been forced to move their herds to safer areas, such as the Adamawa region (Mayo-Banyo), and the West region. At the same time, porous borders and weak livestock identification systems facilitate the movement of stolen animals into Nigeria.

Cattle theft has significant economic and social consequences, impoverishing pastoralist households and destroying their productive assets. According to MBOSCUDA, separatists are believed to have stolen or killed 3 681 cattle since the crisis began. Given that a single animal is worth between CFAF 450 000 and CFAF 800 000, total losses are estimated at CFAF 1 840 500 000,

based on an average value of CFAF 500 000 per head of cattle. These thefts exacerbate tensions between farming and pastoralist communities, fuel disputes over land, and contribute to internal displacement. In turn, this reinforces feelings of abandonment and encourages some young people to join criminal groups. Cattle theft also provides a source of funding for the conflict and contributes to the continuation of violence.

It is closely linked to other forms of organized crime, including arms trafficking and smuggling. The proceeds from this activity are sometimes used to finance kidnappings for ransom.

Drug trafficking

The conflict has created an environment conducive to the production, trafficking and consumption of illicit substances. The main drugs identified in the region include cannabis, marijuana, tramadol and a range of psychotropic substances that are either imported or produced locally. Certain rural areas, particularly Bui and Noun, are known for cannabis cultivation, while psychotropic substances are sourced mainly in Nigeria and major cities such as Douala.⁹⁶

Criminal networks involved in drug trafficking have adapted their supply chains by combining local production, importation and redistribution. Cannabis is cultivated in remote areas, where those involved exploit the prevailing insecurity. Separatist armed groups have turned cannabis cultivation into an important source of revenue, with former maize fields, for example, being converted into cannabis plantations.⁹⁷ As for transportation and distribution, traffickers exploit secondary roads and cross-border corridors, concealing consignments in passenger and freight vehicles. Trafficking often takes place at night and involves couriers, street vendors and internally displaced young people. According to field testimonies, cannabis trafficking is facilitated by the complicity of some state officials responsible for checkpoint inspections. The drug is sold locally in Bamenda, Buea, Kumba and Mamfé, but is also redistributed to other parts of Cameroon. The main trafficking corridor runs from Douala through Yaoundé, Bertoua and Ngaoundéré to N'Djamena. Supplies destined for the Central African Republic follow the same route, branching off at Garoua-Boulai. The trade is highly profitable, with individual transactions generating several hundred thousand CFA francs, which are subsequently invested in legitimate economic activities.

Beyond its public health impacts, this trade contributes to rising levels of addiction, mental health disorders and overdoses associated with tramadol and cannabis use. Among young people and internally displaced populations, consumption is often seen as a way of coping with trauma and economic hardship, further exacerbating social and health vulnerabilities. Drug trafficking also directly fuels armed violence, as members of armed groups consume these substances to steel themselves for combat. Drug trafficking in Cameroon's North-West and South-West regions forms part of an interconnected criminal system in which those involved launder illicit proceeds through informal transfer mechanisms and operate through smuggling networks.

Cybercrime

Cybercrime has emerged as a major threat to national security and digital governance in Cameroon. It encompasses a wide range of offences committed through information and communication technologies, such as data theft, online fraud, extortion, disinformation and fraudulent job offers. According to the National Agency for Information and Communication Technologies (ANTIC), these offences resulted in losses of more than CFAF 12 billion in 2021.⁹⁸ The conflict has also fuelled tensions

within the digital sphere, marked by the proliferation of hate speech, cyberharassment and ideological manipulation on social media. Members of the diaspora who support separatism, particularly those based in Europe and North America, use online platforms to raise funds and to coordinate and legitimize a form of cybernationalism, turning the internet into both a political battleground and an instrument of social control.

In Cameroon's North-West and South-West regions, cybercrime takes a variety of forms, including financial fraud, virtual-currency scams, separatist propaganda, extortion, sextortion and the impersonation of government agencies and other institutions. Young people who are unemployed and those displaced by the conflict, whose prospects have been undermined by the 2017–2018 school boycotts and the lack of economic opportunities, make up much of the workforce behind these activities, which many view as a means of livelihood.⁹⁹ At the same time, members of the diaspora use digital platforms to spread hate speech, finance the separatist movement and target opponents with online abuse, while sham NGOs serve as fronts for scams and digital money-laundering operations. This highlights the growing exploitation of the online environment for political and criminal purposes in these regions. Some armed groups also receive funding through cryptocurrencies,¹⁰⁰ including Ambacoin.¹⁰¹ In some cases, ransom payments are also made using cryptocurrency.¹⁰²

The consequences of cybercrime are wide-ranging. Economically, losses incurred by businesses, institutions and people undermine confidence in the digital economy. According to ANTIC, Cameroon is estimated to have lost CFAF 12.2 billion to cybercrime in 2021 alone.¹⁰³ In 2025, Cameroonian households reportedly lost more than CFAF 1 billion to online scams.¹⁰⁴ Socially and politically, disinformation and hate speech deepen mistrust of the state and fuel identity-based polarization. From a security perspective, cybercrime serves as an asymmetric tool used by armed groups and their supporters. It facilitates violent propaganda, illicit financing and the coordination of criminal activities. Cyberspace has become an arena of hybrid conflict, combining information warfare, financial crime and political subversion.¹⁰⁵

Cybercrime is closely related to other forms of organized crime, including those discussed above. Cybercriminal networks also sometimes collaborate with arms traffickers, smugglers and traffickers of illicit goods to facilitate the movement and laundering of funds.¹⁰⁶

In response to this threat, the authorities have introduced a range of measures, such as cybersecurity legislation (law no. 2010/012 of 21 December 2010), and training programmes led by ANTIC and INTERPOL's Central Africa Regional Bureau. However, efforts to curb the phenomenon continue to be hampered by limited technical and judicial capacity.

Smuggling

In an effort to secure funding, armed groups engage in the smuggling of cocoa, palm oil and fuel. The South-West region is Cameroon's leading cocoa-producing area. Cocoa beans have long been smuggled into Nigeria because of the low prices paid to local producers. Since the outbreak of the crisis, however, this illicit trade has intensified as armed groups have seized control of large plantations and exploited production for criminal purposes. The armed conflict has reinforced smuggling networks moving cocoa into neighbouring countries, particularly Nigeria, making it possible to circumvent tax obligations and quality-control requirements.¹⁰⁷

Cocoa smuggling is further driven by strong demand from Nigeria, estimated at CFAF 64.8 billion in 2024. According to the National Institute of Statistics' 2024 report on informal trade, cross-border cocoa bean transactions accounted for 63.9 per cent of unreported export earnings, equivalent to CFAF 41.4 billion. Trade in crude and refined palm oil ranked second, representing 9.2 per cent of unrecorded exports.¹⁰⁸

Some of the smuggled cocoa and palm oil originates from plantations seized by separatists from their lawful owners. Separatist groups operating these plantations sell the harvested products in Nigeria. The proceeds are then reinvested in military equipment or components used in improvised explosive devices.¹⁰⁹ Several interviewees consulted for this research also pointed to the risk of proceeds from smuggling being laundered in the country's Francophone regions, especially through investments in real estate and in sectors such as education and healthcare.

Armed groups also levy taxes on smuggled fuel.¹¹⁰ They impose informal taxes on the transport of goods and engage in extortion along certain roads, notably by imposing illegal levies on goods in transit.¹¹¹

Cocoa smuggling relies on a structured informal system. Informal buyers, known as intermediaries, purchase harvests from producers and resell them to smuggling networks. These networks transport cocoa beans into Nigeria, where they command higher prices,¹¹² using rural and forest tracks and light vehicles to avoid official checkpoints. Most smuggled goods transit through the Bakassi peninsula, where in 2024 the Rapid Intervention Battalion (BIR) alone seized 5 000 litres of palm oil, 1 719 500 litres of fuel and 203 sacks of smuggled cocoa.¹¹³

Cocoa smuggling is estimated to have cost Cameroon between 10% and 20% of its 2023 annual production, representing a direct loss of CFAF 70 billion.¹¹⁴ The illicit trade also disrupts the formal cocoa market. While producers may earn quick profits from smuggling, they also face price volatility, abuse by armed groups and limited access to social safety nets. This parallel economy deepens the economic dependence of rural populations on informal operators, fuels the conflict economy and contributes to the erosion of community cohesion in conflict-affected areas. The increase in cocoa prices observed up to 2023 further boosted the profitability of smuggling and contributed to a resurgence of the practice.

The smuggling of cocoa and palm oil is closely linked to other forms of economic crime and violence, particularly money laundering and the trafficking of small arms, which help finance separatist groups and local corruption. Institutional corruption and porous borders facilitate this illegal economic activity. Cocoa and palm oil have become strategic resources within local conflict economies.



A shipment of smuggled cocoa seized in the Bakassi peninsula.
Photo: Raoul Sumo Tayo

Arms trafficking

The militarization of the Anglophone conflict and the porous border with Nigeria have fuelled arms trafficking. Non-state actors obtain small arms and ammunition through informal trafficking corridors, fuelling both the continuation of the conflict and the expansion of local criminal economies.¹¹⁵ The networks involved are complex, relying on cross-border procurement, internal collusion and clandestine supply chains for the movement of weapons and ammunition. Weapons are often purchased in Nigeria, concealed within commercial cargo and transported to camps or assembly points inside Cameroon. Separatist armed groups acquire most of their AK-47-type assault rifles through these channels, supplementing their arsenals with locally manufactured weapons and components used in the fabrication of improvised explosive devices.¹¹⁶

In addition to weapons sourced from the Nigerian market, some are trafficked from the United States via Nigeria before reaching Cameroon. Typically, serial numbers are removed, after which the weapons are packed into sports bags, concealed inside air compressors and shipped to Nigeria. In 2022, three members of the Anglophone diaspora living in Maryland – Wilson Nuyila Tita, Fru Nji and Wilson Che Fonguh – were charged in the United States for trafficking weapons to Cameroon’s North-West and South-West regions.¹¹⁷ Edith Ngang, a Cameroonian-born US citizen, was also identified as a participant in the trafficking network.¹¹⁸

Arms trafficking increases the death toll associated with the conflict, prolongs hostilities and contributes to higher civilian casualties, while enabling more destructive operations. The illicit trade also strengthens the operational capabilities of armed groups, sustains predatory economies and complicates humanitarian protection efforts in affected areas. Weapons enhance the ability of armed groups to carry out kidnappings for ransom, engage in cross-border smuggling and maintain an economy of fear, with fighters openly displaying sophisticated weapons before local communities to intimidate them into silence and compliance. These interdependencies call for a comprehensive and coordinated response combining arms-control measures, cross-border cooperation, criminal prosecutions and socio-economic initiatives aimed at reducing sources of illicit financing.¹¹⁹

Environmental crime

The principal forms of environmental crime in Cameroon’s North-West and South-West regions include illegal logging, poaching, artisanal gold mining and the illicit production of charcoal, all of which cause lasting damage to local ecosystems. These activities are fuelled by insecurity, rural poverty and weak state oversight in areas rich in natural resources and connected by cross-border routes that facilitate illicit trade to regional and international markets. They constitute a major threat given that the North-West and South-West regions are home to 14 national parks, 18 wildlife reserves, 12 forest reserves and three protected areas for wild flora and fauna.¹²⁰

Several protected areas, including Mount Cameroon, Tofala, Takamanda and Korup, have become refuges for members of armed groups who, in order to feed themselves, kill endangered primates such as the Nigeria-Cameroon chimpanzee, (*Pan troglodytes ellioti*), the drill (*Mandrillus leucophaeus*) and Preuss’s monkey (*Allochrocebus preussi*).¹²¹ Many armed groups are also involved in the transnational bushmeat trade.¹²² Cross-border poachers enter protected areas, kill elephants and remove their tusks.¹²³

These activities are generally linked to criminal networks that use logistical corridors to move illicit products to national and international markets. Their consequences include deforestation, pollution and environmental degradation, as well as a deterioration in the security situation and an increase in violent confrontations¹²⁴ in regions already weakened by conflict.

The illegal exploitation of natural resources in Cameroon has devastating ecological, economic¹²⁵ and socio-political consequences, including biodiversity loss, land and water degradation, and negative impacts on human health and livelihoods. It also fuels local conflicts and illicit activities while depriving the state of tax revenues and undermining the formal economy.

The evolution of criminal markets in Cameroon's North-West and South-West regions illustrates how an armed conflict can transform into a war economy. These illicit activities, whether trafficking, smuggling or cybercrime, serve as mechanisms for both enrichment and territorial control. They undermine state authority, fuel violence and obstruct prospects for sustainable peace. Addressing these criminal economies requires an integrated approach combining security, governance, development and regional cooperation. Without such an approach, organized crime will continue to play a persistent role in the crisis affecting the North-West and South-West regions.



Logging trucks carry timber near Mbalmayo, south of Yaoundé. Illegal logging fuels criminal networks and drives environmental degradation. © Franco Origlia/Getty Images



Cameroon's eastern border regions: a crossroads for criminal movements and illicit trafficking

Over the past decade, the security situation along Cameroon's eastern border has deteriorated significantly. This decline forms part of a broader regional dynamic shaped by the chronic instability that has affected the Central African Republic (CAR) since 2013 and, more broadly, by severe institutional and state fragility. As a result of the partial collapse of the Central African state, the fragmentation of territory among armed groups and the proliferation of weapons, border areas have become conducive to violence and the development of informal and criminal economies.

This assessment is supported by several converging indicators. The World Bank¹²⁶ ranks the CAR among the most fragile states in the world, while the 2023 Fragile States Index gives it a score of more than 100 out of 120, placing it among the world's most unstable states. In terms of governance, Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index¹²⁷ gives the CAR a score of 24/100 and Cameroon 26/100, underscoring the scale of corruption in both countries. In addition, the 2025 Global Organized Crime Index¹²⁸ assigns the CAR a score of 7.08/10 and Cameroon 6.66/10, pointing to a significant illicit economy and limited institutional resilience. Against this backdrop, Cameroon's East, Adamawa and North regions have gradually become integrated into a structured transnational criminal space, where porous borders, weak territorial control and limited state regulatory capacity facilitate the cross-border movement of illicit goods, funds and criminal networks.

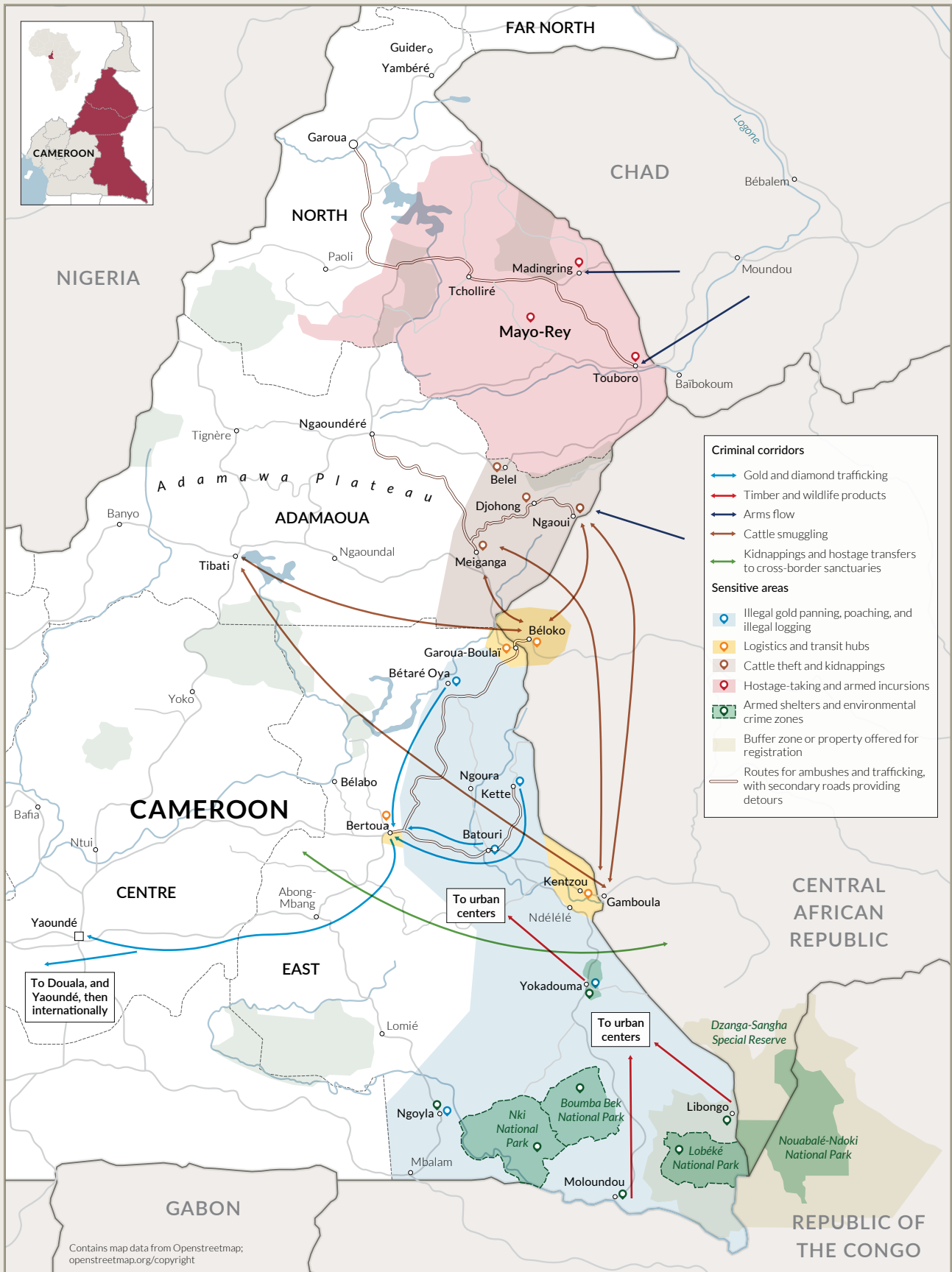


FIGURE 4 Criminal activity in the East, Adamawa and North regions of Cameroon.

Since 2020–2021, the Central African armed forces (FACA) have received increased support from external partners, notably Russia,¹²⁹ empowering them to regain control of certain strategic areas. This shift has pushed armed groups towards border regions, including those shared by the CAR and Cameroon. The United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic has also supported the FACA in securing these areas and helping to re-establish state control.¹³⁰ The redeployment of Central African forces has reduced the influence of armed groups in some regions, however the security situation remains fragile.¹³¹ This institutional weakness fosters the convergence of political violence and economic crime, facilitating the long-term entrenchment of illicit markets such as clandestine gold mining, kidnapping for ransom and cross-border trafficking. In this context, the Cameroon–CAR border has become a zone where criminal flows converge, linking the economic survival strategies of local populations with the dynamics of structured transnational networks and making regulation and stabilization efforts particularly complex.

The eastern strategic basin extends along the border between Cameroon and the Central African Republic. It connects the Adamawa, East and North regions to the principal cross-border criminal markets. Located at the intersection of the Sahelian and forest economic zones and characterized by highly porous borders, it has become an area of intense trafficking activity. This strategic basin is centred on a vulnerable cross-border space exploited by criminal networks. It plays a central and multifaceted role in the dynamics of illicit trade in Central Africa, linking production zones in the CAR to Cameroonian markets while providing access to regional and international outlets, notably Nigeria, the Gulf of Guinea, Asia and the United Arab Emirates.

This area also serves as a key source of supply, given the abundance of resources that can be exploited illegally, especially gold, diamonds, timber and livestock, in the border areas of Kadey,¹³² Lom-et-Djerem and Mambéré-Kadéï. In addition, local markets in the Cameroon–CAR border region provide an outlet for part of the illicit trade moving through the area (gold, stolen cattle, illicitly diverted fuel and smuggled goods). This contributes to the growth of a circular illicit economy that sustains criminal networks and normalizes such practices within border communities. The strategic basin also performs an essential logistical function, with towns and villages such as Garoua-Boulaï, Kentzou, Béloko and Yambéré serving as storage hubs, safe havens, negotiation venues and redistribution centres. These logistical platforms provide criminal networks with considerable strategic flexibility, enabling them to adapt routes and operating methods rapidly in response to enforcement operations.

Key groups and networks

Criminal economies in the eastern strategic basin are sustained by a diverse range of groups, including foreign armed groups, rural and cross-border bandits, as well as local and hybrid formations.

Cross-border incursions by Central African rebel groups

Several Central African armed groups are involved in criminal activities in Cameroon's East, Adamawa and North regions. Backed by Russian Wagner paramilitaries, the Central African armed forces have pushed most armed groups towards the country's borderlands. Since 2021, these groups have lost territory, along with the revenue streams that had previously been secured through their control of natural resources. As a result, UN and humanitarian vehicles operating near the Cameroonian border have been targeted in ambushes. These attacks on humanitarian

convoys by members of non-state armed groups have enabled them to obtain cash, medicines, mobile phones and other supplies.¹³³

The main groups conducting incursions into Cameroonian territory are Unité pour la paix en Centrafrique (Union for Peace in the Central African Republic - UPC), Retour, Réclamation et Réhabilitation (Return, Reclamation and Rehabilitation - 3R), and two factions associated with the anti-Balaka movement. UPC and 3R are Fulani-led armed groups operating in western CAR that periodically cross into Cameroon. Both groups were long associated with Baba Laddé, whose real name was Mahamat Abdoul Kadré Oumar. He founded the Front populaire pour le redressement (Popular Front for Recovery - FPR) and joined the Séléka coalition in 2013. Following the dissolution of that rebel coalition in 2014, one of Baba Laddé's former lieutenants, Ali Darassa, established the UPC and set up its headquarters in Bambari. At the same time, Baba Laddé's younger brother, self-acclaimed General Sembé Bobo, assumed leadership of 3R, taking over from Sidiki Abass.

UPC and 3R operate in areas bordering Cameroon and often coordinate their activities in the field, at times exchanging ammunition and sharing intelligence. Although their leaders joined the peace process in 2025 and agreed to dissolve their movements, splinter groups linked to both organizations continue to carry out cross-border incursions.¹³⁴

During these incursions into Cameroonian territory, members of these Central African armed groups engage in cattle rustling, using the livestock both to feed their fighters and to generate income.¹³⁵ In Cameroon's Adamawa region, cattle theft is attributed not only to rebel groups but also to armed militias from Chad and the Central African Republic operating along the border. In 2018, 27 incidents of cattle theft were recorded in the locality of Bélel, resulting in the loss of 513 cattle. In March 2019 alone, 90 cattle were reported stolen. These groups rely on deception, ambushes and raids on livestock enclosures. They also seize stray animals for subsistence purposes.

In addition to the Fulani-led armed groups, anti-Balaka factions also engage in criminal activities on Cameroonian territory. They also engage in cattle theft, apparently as part of their campaign against Muslim pastoralists. There have been repeated instances in which they killed herders and sold the looted livestock in border markets in Cameroon, including Ngaoui and even Tibati, as well as in the Equateur Province of the Democratic Republic of Congo.¹³⁶

Other groups, including the Mouvement pour la libération du Cameroun (Movement for the Liberation of Cameroon - MLC) and the Fulani Defense Force, also carry out incursions into the Adamawa region, particularly in Faro-et-Déou. Numbering several dozen members, these groups organize their criminal activities from neighbouring countries, one operating from the Central African Republic and the other from Nigeria.

Zarguinas: rural and cross-border bandit groups

Criminal activity in Cameroon's eastern strategic basin is also driven by cross-border bandit groups known locally as *zarguinas*.¹³⁷ These groups engage in both road banditry and cattle rustling. Some are based in the Central African Republic, where they have established permanent strongholds¹³⁸ from which they launch incursions into Cameroonian territory. Broadly speaking, they are heterogeneous groups made up of former soldiers who have turned to banditry, deserters from the Chadian army, demobilized personnel or soldiers dismissed for various offences, as well as former rebels, ex-herders and villagers who have become bandits.¹³⁹ Their networks also include informants who provide intelligence and traders responsible for selling stolen goods.¹⁴⁰

The *zarguin*s possess military expertise that enables them to make effective use of combat tactics and military-grade weapons. They also have a firm grasp of the regional environment, allowing them to select favourable locations for both their bases and operations.¹⁴¹ Their criminal activities are rooted in a broader context of limited economic opportunities, political instability in central Africa, the dispersal of armed men from conflict zones and porous borders. Other contributing factors include the proliferation of small arms, terrain that lends itself to ambushes, the low population density across these vast areas, the open-air nature of transactions in periodic markets, the itinerant character of regional trade, which relies on the mobility of traders and capital, limited subregional security cooperation and, importantly, extensive networks of accomplices.¹⁴²

The ambivalent role of Mbororo communities,¹⁴³ who are recurrent victims of crime but are at times also implicated in criminal activities such as kidnapping for ransom,¹⁴⁴ highlights the fact that criminality in the region is not simply driven by rivalries between external groups. The phenomenon is also rooted in internal fractures within these communities. In Djohong and Ngaoui, for example, there have been reports of economically marginalized people targeting wealthier members of their own community, abducting their children or relatives in order to obtain ransom payments. These acts are not driven solely by financial gain; they also reflect a quiet form of rebellion against a social order perceived as unequal from within the community itself.¹⁴⁵ In the absence of economic opportunities, social mobility or recognition, some young people come to view criminal activity as a means of redressing inequalities or even of social revenge. The relative wealth of certain community members can become a source of vulnerability when it is perceived as illegitimate or unattainable. What emerges is a form of localized criminality rooted in fragmented community dynamics and fuelled by intra-ethnic tensions that may be largely invisible at first glance yet have deeply damaging consequences.¹⁴⁶

Local, hybrid criminal groups

Testimonies collected during this research point to a troubling trend: cross-border criminality is becoming increasingly militarized as a result of the direct involvement of Central African armed groups. Made up of former members of the many rebel movements and militias that have operated in the Central African Republic for more than a decade, these groups have increasingly turned to lucrative activities such as kidnapping for ransom and providing protection for smuggling convoys.¹⁴⁷ Their experience in handling weapons, their relative discipline and their networks of contacts give them a significant advantage over more loosely organized local criminal groups. As a result, the boundary between political violence and economic crime is becoming increasingly blurred, illustrating a genuine hybridization of criminal practices.

This hybrid nature is reflected in the emergence of temporary alliances between Central African armed groups and criminal networks, whether from Cameroon or the CAR. These coalitions, often formed to escort convoys carrying smuggled goods, are not permanent cartels but rather partnerships of convenience. Members of rebel groups such as 3R and UPC, for example, occasionally provide protection for convoys transporting cattle, timber or other goods between the Central African Republic and Cameroon in exchange for payment in kind or a share of the profits. According to several interviewees, areas under the control of armed groups are perceived as safer and better governed than those under state authority: 'It is safer conducting business in areas controlled by the rebels [...] the rebels protect our interests more effectively than the state.'¹⁴⁸

As a result, many economic operators prefer to operate under the protection of these armed groups, and such temporary security arrangements have become an informal yet central pillar of illicit cross-border trade. In the livestock sector, criminal activities are closely intertwined with formal cattle-trading networks. Faced with persistent insecurity and recurring theft, some Fulani and Mbororo herders, who are particularly vulnerable, have entered into pragmatic relationships with armed groups, primarily to protect their herds.¹⁴⁹ Part of the region's economic activity also passes through Fulani traders who act as intermediaries between major urban markets, contributing to the gradual integration of informal practices into formal trading networks.¹⁵⁰ Similarly, in the field of environmental crime, artisanal loggers, poachers, traffickers and corrupt officials form flexible but closely interconnected networks.¹⁵¹ Those involved in natural resource extraction collaborate with armed groups to secure protection and access to protected areas, thereby fuelling the trafficking of ivory, bushmeat and precious timber.¹⁵²

In the mining sector, a highly structured chain of intermediaries has emerged around collectors commonly known as *alhajis*, who act as key economic brokers controlling pre-financing, logistics and the clandestine export of gold. They rely on local, Central African and west African miners, semi-mechanized foreign operators – particularly Chinese nationals – and Central African armed groups that levy taxes, protect supply routes and sometimes participate directly in extraction activities.¹⁵³ A similar web of criminal interconnections can be found in kidnapping for ransom and armed robbery along major transport corridors, where small Cameroonian gangs conduct their activities with the operational support of Central African armed factions,¹⁵⁴ such as 3R and UPC. Crime in this region is therefore not the preserve of homogeneous groups but rather the product of a constellation of interdependent networks that straddle the divide between legal and illegal activities. The blurred boundaries between economic, institutional and armed-group interests fosters a resilient criminal ecosystem capable of adapting to security pressures and sustaining illicit markets in a context of chronic instability. These groups often operate in complementary ways, despite occasional rivalries, and contribute to the emergence of a parallel order in which violence serves as a tool of economic regulation, territorial control and wealth accumulation.

Another important finding to emerge from the interviews is the presence of behind-the-scenes sponsors, often based in urban centres and shielded by a degree of social anonymity. These figures act as criminal investors, financing operations, providing logistical resources and overseeing the redistribution of profits. Their role is to give these activities a strategic dimension: while armed groups carry out operations, sponsors ensure their integration into broader systems for the movement of capital and goods. Field research suggests that these sponsors are drawn primarily from the middle and upper strata of society, including wealthy traders, influential transport operators, officials with privileged connections and even some local figures involved in cross-border commerce. Their economic position enables them to conceal illicit activities behind legitimate businesses, such as transport companies, central procurement services and wholesale trading firms. Documented examples were identified in places such as Garoua-Boulai and Kentzou.

Local perceptions of this collusion between economic elites and criminal networks are particularly telling. As one interviewee observes, 'Some of the market's most prominent figures are linked to these networks, but their economic influence shields them from scrutiny'.¹⁵⁵ This observation highlights a double paradox: on the one hand, the visibility of those involved, whose links to criminal networks

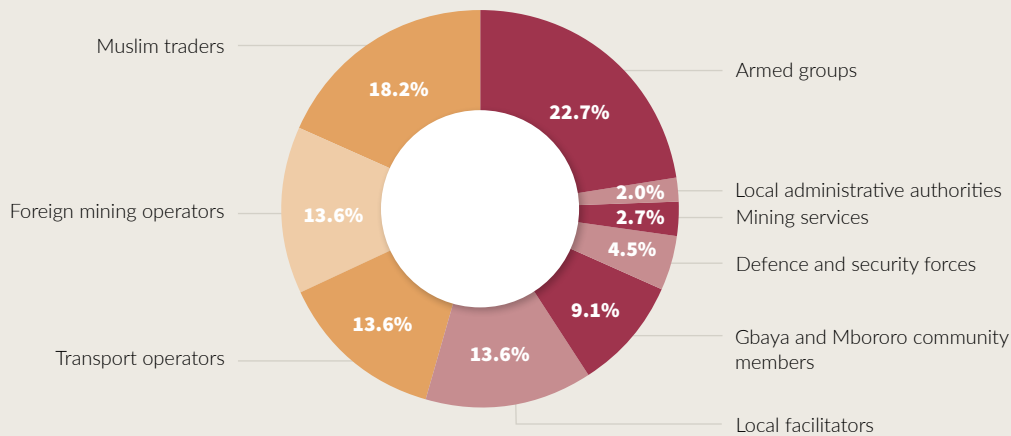


FIGURE 5 Estimated distribution of stakeholders involved in the illicit economies of the East and Adamawa regions.

SOURCE: Field data.

are widely known; and on the other, their impunity, secured by their social position and their ability to conceal illicit activities behind legitimate economic functions. In practice, this situation normalizes organized crime, making it increasingly intertwined with the local economy and further blurring the boundary between licit and illicit activities.

Figure 5 highlights the diversity and relative importance of the groups involved in the criminal economies of the border region: armed groups (22.7%), Muslim traders (18.2%), foreign mining operators, particularly Asian companies (13.6%), transport operators (13.6%), local facilitators (13.6%), Gbaya and Mbororo community members (9.1%), defence and security forces (4.5%), mining services (2.7%), and local administrative authorities (2.0%). This distribution reveals a highly fragmented structure in which each group performs a specific role while benefiting from its interdependence with the wider network.

Operating methods

In Cameroon's eastern strategic basin, criminal activities thrive in a context of insecurity and poverty, enabling foreign armed groups and cross-border criminal networks to finance their illicit activities. These criminal markets are diverse, interconnected and contribute to the persistence of violence and instability across the region. The main activities include roadside ambushes, cattle rustling, kidnapping for ransom, extortion, arms trafficking and environmental crime.

Roadside ambushes

Cameroon's eastern strategic basin faces persistent attacks by road bandits, known locally as *zarguinas*. Their methods include roadside ambushes and raids on villages. Their principal modus operandi – as the name suggests – consists of lying in wait along roads, typically near bends. The

bandits first bring all vehicles to a halt before robbing their occupants. They often cover their faces with turbans or *meetaledji*. As security-force escorts have become more common on major transport corridors, these attacks have increasingly shifted to back roads.

Road bends are particularly conducive to these ambushes, with bandits frequently erecting makeshift roadblocks using large stones or logs. Victims may be travelling by vehicle or on foot. According to local communities, these groups consist of criminals whose numbers vary depending on the scale of the operation, typically ranging from 15 to 20 members. Once they have robbed their victims, they quickly disappear into the bush and often cross the border. They exploit the difficulties associated with cross-border cooperation, as one police officer explained: ‘When local residents or law enforcement do set off in pursuit, they generally stop at the border, as crossing risks mistreatment at the hands of local populations or security forces in the neighbouring country’.¹⁵⁶ Road bandits carry out swift hit-and-run attacks, keeping operations short in order to avoid confrontation with either their victims or the security forces: ‘strike fast and vanish’.¹⁵⁷ Their primary targets are gold collectors, both when travelling with cash to purchase gold and when returning with the metal. Another common tactic involves raids by groups of 15 to 20 bandits on villages, where residents are ordered to hand over all their valuables.¹⁵⁸

Cattle theft

Cattle theft is primarily driven by the fact that livestock remains the principal store of wealth in the areas concerned. It may also be viewed as a consequence of the depletion of Mbororo cattle herds in the Central African Republic, brought about by the combined effects of armed violence and deepening social and economic divisions.¹⁵⁹

Several methods of cattle theft are employed in Cameroon, including deception, intercepting livestock in transit and the theft of animals from enclosures.¹⁶⁰ Armed groups rely on intimidation and regularly seize small but significant numbers of cattle, typically four to five head per operation. These animals may be slaughtered and sold locally, trafficked within Cameroon or moved across borders, especially into the Central African Republic.

Cattle thieves often target livestock at night, taking advantage of moments when herders are off guard to steal animals and move them across the border. In some cases, they are handed over to Nigerian accomplices. These groups also benefit from the close ties that exist among cross-border ethnic communities in border regions. This solidarity often contributes to local silence and a reluctance to cooperate with law enforcement, creating a form of collective protection that benefits the perpetrators.¹⁶¹ In most cases, the thieves do not belong to the same community as their victims. However, instances of intra-community cattle theft also occur and are associated with *fasiikaare*, a form of duplicity rooted in jealousy that can lead to criminal behaviour. In this context, Mbororo herders may be both perpetrators and victims of cattle theft and other forms of rural crime linked to pastoralism. Some thefts are reportedly the result of family-level rivalries within Mbororo communities.¹⁶²

Periods of seasonal livestock movements provide a window of opportunity for cattle thieves. Until October 2023, cattle theft by Central African rebel groups was commonplace during seasonal migration in Cameroon. However, the deployment of military escorts by the Cameroonian army has significantly reduced attacks along these routes. In response to these enhanced security measures, rebel groups have adapted their methods and now target herders’ camps directly. They

conduct raids, seizing a small number of animals at a time and, in some cases, kidnapping herders for ransom, particularly among Mbororo communities from Cameroon, the Central African Republic and Nigeria. The stolen livestock is subsequently sold on the black market. These operations occur at a sustained pace, with several raids reported each week, sometimes as many as two every three days.¹⁶³

Figure 6 shows the uneven geographical distribution of cattle theft, with the number of animals stolen ranging from 59 to 613. The areas most affected are Mbé (613), Ngan-Ha (419), Lagdo (372) and Kon Djeu Nay (313). Gamba (261), Martap (217) and Ngwambo (213) experience moderate levels of loss, while Guna (174), Waldé Salloré (69) and Yarang (59) record lower figures, highlighting areas that should be prioritized for security interventions.

Since October 2023, attacks along seasonal migration routes have declined considerably. The Cameroonian authorities have introduced a system of military escorts for herders and their livestock as they move along migration and transit routes. These escorts operate between military posts located approximately 30 to 50 kilometres apart, particularly along the main transport corridors of the Adamawa and East regions, such as the Ngaoundéré–Bétaré-Oya–Bertoua axis. Despite these enhanced security measures, the boundary between legal and illegal activities remains blurred. Cattle theft remains widespread, particularly through raids on herders’ camps, while stolen livestock is often ‘laundered’ through clandestine slaughterhouses or absorbed into formal commercial channels, making traceability extremely difficult.



FIGURE 6 Livestock losses resulting from cattle theft in the Adamawa and North regions of Cameroon, 2016–2018.

SOURCE: Source: Data from the Mbé, Martap and Gouna Zootechnical and Veterinary Centres; Sylvain Baizoumi, *Le vol de bétail dans la région de l’Adamaoua*, forthcoming.

Cattle theft in Cameroon, together with the handling of stolen livestock from the Central African Republic in Cameroonian markets, constitutes an important source of funding for armed groups and contributes to the continuation of violence. According to MBOSCUA, 1,060 head of cattle were stolen in Adamawa during the first half of 2020 alone, representing financial losses estimated at CFAF 265 million.¹⁶⁴

This criminal activity damages cross-border pastoral relations, restricts mobility, exacerbates tensions and weakens the socio-economic fabric of affected communities, thereby undermining food security and social cohesion.¹⁶⁵ One of the most significant consequences of pastoral insecurity in Cameroon's eastern strategic basin, however, has been the growing prevalence of weapons among herders. In a context marked by inadequate security along seasonal migration routes, herders increasingly carry daggers, bows, arrows and even firearms to protect themselves.¹⁶⁶ Over the past two decades, the carrying of weapons by cattle herders has become increasingly commonplace across central Africa. According to an International Crisis Group report, nearly 60 per cent of herders who migrate with their livestock between Cameroon, Chad and the Central African Republic possessed AK-47 or M14 rifles in 2021.¹⁶⁷ This growing militarization of herders fuels inter-communal conflicts and contributes to wider insecurity in pastoral regions. According to a report by Cameroon's Ministry of Territorial Administration, 60 per cent of road bandits operating in northern Cameroon originate from pastoral militias.¹⁶⁸

Kidnapping for ransom

Interviews¹⁶⁹ conducted for this research reveal that targeted kidnappings have become the most widespread and lucrative criminal activity along the Cameroon–CAR border. The phenomenon is characterized by the careful selection of victims, relatively low operating costs and the remarkable ability of armed groups and road bandits to adapt to local conditions. Herders with large cattle holdings, gold collectors and itinerant traders are among the preferred targets, as they are seen as having the means to raise substantial sums at short notice. Those involved in these kidnappings include non-state armed groups, road bandits and members of local or cross-border criminal networks. Kidnapping has therefore evolved into a structured criminal economy, based on a rational costs-benefit analysis.¹⁷⁰

Operationally, kidnappings primarily take place along minor roads, where state control is weakest and the terrain (rural tracks and wooded areas) provides ideal conditions for ambushes. Once abducted, victims are transferred to isolated camps, often located across the border in the Central African Republic, in order to complicate any intervention by national authorities and take advantage of legal limitations. The cross-border nature of the phenomenon is a major strategic advantage for kidnappers, allowing them to take advantage of limited coordination between the security services of neighbouring states. Touboro and Madingring are among the areas most affected. The vast size of the Mayo-Rey department complicates efforts by defence and security forces to maintain an effective presence. Kidnappings occur regularly, in some places almost every week. While Mbororo communities were initially the primary targets, kidnappers increasingly target anyone with a reliable source of income. They take advantage of the area's geography, particularly the porous nature of the borderlands. Dense vegetation facilitates both infiltration and the concealment of victims and their captors. In addition, the area stretching from Boubala Ndjida to the Chadian border is almost entirely uninhabited, with no villages at all. Similar conditions prevail on the Central African side of

the border, particularly around Mbaïboum. These sparsely populated areas provide kidnappers with considerable freedom of movement.¹⁷¹

Kidnapping for ransom constitutes a highly structured criminal economy.¹⁷² Mbororo communities, which are frequently targeted, often pay ransoms without notifying the authorities, either out of fear or mistrust, thereby perpetuating the cycle of criminality. Most kidnappings occur at night, and hostages are transferred to the Central African Republic to evade Cameroonian security forces. Ransoms are negotiated directly with the victims' families.¹⁷³

Underlying this economic logic is a clear division of criminal labour. Operations involve lookouts, assailants responsible for seizing victims, guards tasked with holding them and, in some cases, separate negotiators in order to compartmentalize information. Although informal, this organization reflects the growing professionalization of the groups involved. Cross-border mobility also provides both safe havens for kidnappers and opportunities to diversify money-laundering channels. Ransom proceeds are reinvested in livestock, artisanal gold, or smuggled fuel;¹⁷⁴ all informal markets that help embed organized crime within local economies.

The impact on communities is particularly severe. For Mbororo populations, who are frequently targeted, kidnapping acts as a recurring financial drain that weakens pastoral livelihoods and engenders significant social costs. Ransom payments divert resources that could otherwise be invested in livestock production or children's education, increasing collective vulnerability. Moreover, the reluctance to alert the authorities reflects a broader loss of confidence in the state, which is often perceived as either incapable of responding or tacitly complicit. Persistent insecurity fosters a form of political disengagement, as communities gradually withdraw from state institutions viewed as ineffective or compromised. The search for protection consequently shifts towards informal mechanisms based on community solidarity, contributing to the fragmentation of local governance and the emergence of alternative systems of regulation. According to a report by MBOSCUA,¹⁷⁵ more than 300 members of the Mbororo community were kidnapped in the Adamawa region between 2015 and 2019. Of these, 70 were killed and around 30 were freed by the army, while the remainder secured their release only after the payment of ransoms estimated at more than CFAF 2 billion.¹⁷⁶

Ultimately, targeted kidnapping in this border region has become a lucrative predatory enterprise sustained by a favourable environment of economic opportunity and political fragility. This criminal model thrives because of a favourable cost-benefit ratio, the availability of cross-border safe havens and the rational calculations of victims, who often prioritize immediate survival over collective resistance. The ransom economy perpetuates a vicious cycle in which insecurity fuels kidnapping and kidnapping, in turn, deepens insecurity, illustrating both the fragility of state institutions and the resilience of criminal networks in border regions.

Environmental crime

Environmental crime takes the form of illegal logging, the poaching of protected species and unregulated mining activities. The forested areas of Yokadouma,¹⁷⁷ Lobéké and Libongo/Mobilong constitute major hotspots for illicit exploitation. Poaching, illegal logging of high-value timber and mining activities coexist in multinational camps.¹⁷⁸ The areas around Kette, Mboy and Mobilong are key poaching hubs, where specialized networks engage in the trafficking of ivory, bushmeat and protected species. These networks specialise in the trafficking of valuable timber (*azobé* and *sapelli*),

as well as the poaching of protected wildlife (elephants, pangolins and great apes). Such practices constitute forms of transnational environmental crime recognized by the UNODC.¹⁷⁹

These criminal networks illegally exploit valuable timber and wildlife-derived products with the help of complicit officials and corrupt networks that facilitate the movement of illicit goods. Their operations extend across borders and are connected to national and international urban markets, particularly in Asia and the Middle East. The networks benefit from areas where state authority is weak and government oversight limited.¹⁸⁰

Environmental crime has devastating consequences for the environment, the economy and security. It contributes to large-scale deforestation, biodiversity loss and the local extinction of protected species, while also depriving the state of substantial tax revenues, estimated at approximately CFAF 165 billion in 2023.¹⁸¹ These illegal activities also contribute to regional instability by financing armed groups, undermining state authority, marginalizing local communities and strengthening the criminal informal economy. Profits from wildlife and timber trafficking help finance mining activities, while bushmeat is used to supply mining and pastoral camps, creating strong interdependencies with other illicit markets.

Illegal mining and the smuggling of gold and diamonds

In the mining sector, the illegal extraction of gold and diamonds is embedded within a largely informal but highly efficient value chain. Conducted without legal authorization and outside any environmental or fiscal regulatory framework, these activities rely primarily on artisanal mining, semi-mechanized gold mining driven by foreign operators – particularly from Asia – and the trafficking of precious stones, making the sector especially lucrative. At mining sites, local and west African miners, notably from Mali and Burkina Faso, extract precious minerals, which are then directly purchased by collectors often linked to Muslim traders commonly known as *alhadjis* (from *El Hadj*, referring to a Muslim who has completed the pilgrimage to Mecca). These collectors then supply buying offices in Bertoua, Garoua-Boulai and Bétaré-Oya. Commercial operators play a central role in this system: providing upfront financing for mining sites, supplying equipment and fuel, and connecting production areas to international markets, especially Dubai.¹⁸² Their strength lies in their substantial capital, close ties to local communities and high degree of mobility, enabling them to continually adapt collection points and transport routes in response to changing security and regulatory risks. Some 90 per cent¹⁸³ of these strategic resources, which have long been at the heart of regional trade, are now diverted by transnational networks towards international markets, particularly Dubai.

The main business centres are Zamboé, Kentzou, Kette and Bétaré-Oya, as well as numerous sites scattered throughout remote bush areas.¹⁸⁴ These mining sites operate through an informal yet effective system. Extraction is carried out manually or using imported machinery, after which the material is sold to traders. Minerals are transported along back roads to avoid controls, and Central African armed groups levy taxes within the CAR. At the transnational level, gold is exported to markets in the Middle East. Taxation, which many businesses deem excessive, encourages clandestine exports and deprives Cameroon of a significant share of potential revenue. As a result, there is a strong case for reviewing taxation in high-risk sectors to make compliance more appealing and better reflect economic realities, while at the same time strengthening oversight and transparency mechanisms.



Artisanal miners work at a mining site in Betaré-Oya. Illegal gold mining in this largely informal sector fuels transnational criminal networks and operates largely beyond the reach of the state. © Reinnier Kaze/AFP via Getty Images

Reports also point to illicit practices, including the use of mercury, semi-mechanized mining operations run by Chinese teams and the mixing of human remains with gold to increase its weight, a practice driven by both occult beliefs and the pursuit of profit.¹⁸⁵ The consequences are far-reaching: substantial losses in state revenue (estimated at approximately CFAF 165 billion in 2023¹⁸⁶), environmental degradation caused by mercury pollution, insecurity along transport routes due to attacks on collectors, and the concentration of wealth in the hands of cross-border criminal networks. The gold trade also fuels other illicit economies. Ransom payments are reinvested in gold, while mining profits help finance the cattle and timber trades, creating a resilient criminal ecosystem.

Although produced locally, much of Cameroon's gold escapes national oversight. It is frequently absorbed into opaque transnational supply chains, transiting through third countries such as Benin, Mali and Guinea before being exported to markets such as Dubai. This dynamic is reinforced by endemic corruption within regulatory systems, particularly at strategic exit points such as Douala and Yaoundé airports.

Mining products, particularly gold and diamonds, constitute the most strategic component of this illicit trade. Artisanal mining in the Central African Republic¹⁸⁷ and in remote areas of Cameroon feeds a parallel supply chain that largely escapes national regulation. Precious stones are discreetly removed from mining sites and quickly enter cross-border trading networks, which channel them to regional urban markets and international destinations through brokers operating from Nigeria, Sudan and even more distant commercial hubs.¹⁸⁸ The diversion of these flows deprives states of substantial revenue while directly financing armed groups that rely on mining rents as a stable source of income to sustain their activities.

Taken together, these practices illustrate a central paradox: by channelling essential flows of goods and resources, illicit routes contribute to local economies and enable many households to access basic goods at a lower cost, while at the same time reinforcing an underground economy that fuels instability and funds armed violence. These parallel markets are often perceived as a response to the state's inability to ensure adequate supply chains and regulate trade effectively.

The social consequences of this diffuse criminality are equally severe. Recurrent violence, kidnappings for ransom, armed robberies and dispossession create a pervasive climate of insecurity that undermines community cohesion and erodes the legitimacy of the state. At the same time, the criminal economy generates its own systems of governance that compete directly with those of the state. It produces informal elites, redistributes wealth through patronage networks and imposes its own rules, often based on fear, tribal loyalties and violence. This situation is particularly concerning in border and peripheral areas where government control remains limited. Such areas risk gradually falling under systems of parallel governance and slipping further beyond national control, serving as rear bases for trafficking operations, sanctuaries for armed groups and platforms for community mobilization in support of violent activities.

Arms trafficking

Connecting Cameroon with Chad and the Central African Republic, this border region has become a key transit corridor for illicit flows of small arms and light weapons.¹⁸⁹ Cycles of conflict in the Central African Republic, instability in Chad and wider regional tensions continue to feed the black market with significant quantities of weapons, allowing trafficking networks to evolve and endure.

Arms trafficking networks rely on forest tracks, pastoral corridors and poorly governed areas to bypass official checkpoints. During the dry season, the proliferation of these routes further complicates state monitoring and enforcement efforts. Weapons are transported in cross-border convoys escorted by armed groups in exchange for payment, and concealed in trucks, motorcycles and other cargo vehicles. In some cases, they are also moved with the assistance of transporters with links in cross-border communities.¹⁹⁰

The proliferation of illicit firearms contributes to an increase in armed robberies along major transport routes, making such attacks both more lethal and more profitable. Arms trafficking also underpins other criminal economies. Weapons are used, for example, to secure illicit flows of livestock, timber and mineral resources. In this way, the trade further undermines state authority, as the protection it offers is often perceived as less effective than that provided by non-state armed groups.¹⁹¹

The arms market is closely linked to artisanal mining, with weapons used to protect mining sites and trading networks. It is also connected to roadside banditry, where perpetrators rely on the threat of armed force to coerce victims. In addition, weapons facilitate poaching and the trafficking of environmental resources by enabling traffickers to gain access to protected areas.

Figure 7 highlights how the cross-border criminal economy is structured. Illegal gold and diamond mining dominates the landscape, accounting for approximately 35 per cent of criminal trade. The sector plays a central financial role and helps sustain other illicit markets. Cattle trafficking (20%) and environmental crime (15%) rely on mobile resources and porous borders, blurring the boundaries

Criminal market	Percentage of criminal trade
Illegal mining (gold and diamonds)	35%
Cattle trafficking	20%
Environmental crime (timber and wildlife)	15%
Kidnapping for ransom	10%
Fuel smuggling	8%
Arms trafficking	7%
Drug trafficking	5%

FIGURE 7 Estimated distribution of criminal markets in the Cameroon–CAR border region.

SOURCE: Field data.

between legal and illegal activities. Kidnapping for ransom (10%), fuel smuggling (8%), arms trafficking (7%) and drug trafficking (5%) play a cross-cutting role by strengthening the overall resilience of criminal networks. Together, these sectors form an integrated and adaptable system that requires a coordinated response based on cross-border cooperation and greater economic traceability.

Interviews conducted for this research highlight the complex interaction of security, economic and social factors whose cumulative effects weaken state institutions and deepen local vulnerabilities. From a security perspective, organized crime acts as a catalyst for regional instability by facilitating the uncontrolled circulation of weapons, the recruitment of marginalized young people, and the financing of violent groups, including rebel factions, separatist movements and religious extremists. In the Central African Republic, Chad and several regions of Cameroon – notably the North-West, South-West and Far North – porous borders, weak institutional oversight and limited regional security coordination have paved the way for the resurgence and persistence of armed conflict. As a result, illicit economies provide an alternative source of income for groups that operate beyond the reach of the state, exploiting its weaknesses to consolidate local power.



Conclusion

This report examines the criminal networks, conflict dynamics and security implications of violence and organized crime in Cameroon. It identifies both established and emerging trends, with a particular focus on regions affected by armed conflict and violent extremism. Three principal crisis zones emerge: the Far North region, where Boko Haram and its splinter factions continue to operate; the Adamawa, North and East regions, which are affected by incursions from armed groups based in the Central African Republic; and the North-West and South-West regions, where the Anglophone separatist insurgency persists. The analysis also underscores the importance of cross-border and transnational dynamics in shaping criminal activity across the country.

The main challenge is no longer simply to understand the current manifestations of organized crime, but to anticipate how they may evolve and what their medium- and long-term implications may be. Over the past decade, criminal economies have become increasingly embedded in local social, economic and territorial structures, becoming increasingly accepted as part of everyday life in some areas.

In the Far North, the convergence of banditry and violent extremism is likely to drive a further diversification and urbanization of criminal activity, while the range of groups involved, targets and methods will continue to expand unless the ongoing strengthening of military deployments is matched by greater human and material capacity within law enforcement agencies. Shortcomings in regional security cooperation through the Lake Chad Basin Commission could further fuel insecurity, benefiting criminal groups emerging from, or appropriating the label and reputation of, terrorist organizations. Likewise, low securitization of cattle theft by the Cameroonian authorities could accelerate the arming of herders, a trend identified throughout this report. The continued spread of small arms and light weapons may also increase the severity of intercommunal conflicts and the number of casualties.

In the North-West and South-West regions, international action against separatist leaders, including arrests in the United States, Belgium and Norway, together with growing international efforts to criminalize the financing of armed groups, are likely to further reduce financial support from the Anglophone diaspora. As a result, armed groups may increasingly rely on criminal activities for funding, particularly if local authorities continue, whether through complacency or self-interest, to tolerate activities such as fuel smuggling. At the same time, the police cooperation agreement currently being negotiated between the Central African Police Chiefs Committee and its West African counterpart could help reduce operational and logistical links between armed groups in Cameroon's Anglophone regions and Nigerian criminal, separatist and pirate networks.

In the East and Adamawa regions, environmental crime linked to illegal mining could become an increasingly significant driver of instability if extraction activities remain poorly regulated. Other potential sources of instability include violent disputes over the allocation of mining contracts to Chinese companies, the limited presence of law enforcement and the large number of foreign nationals in these areas.

Across all strategic zones, the versatility of criminals, the hybrid nature of activities and the cross-border dimension of networks are likely to become more pronounced unless bilateral and multilateral police cooperation is revived, including through ICDO (INTERPOL) and CAPCCO. This could be supported by the development of direct cross-border police cooperation at the operational level. More broadly, the longer socio-political crises persist, the more opportunities criminal networks will have to exploit them, making those crises increasingly difficult to resolve.

One of the clearest trends identified in this report is the ability of criminal groups to adapt and continually diversify their methods. This trend may accelerate if the authorities continue to respond reactively, rather than adopting a preventative approach. Rising juvenile delinquency and the growing normalization of drug use offer important indicators of how criminality may evolve in the future and highlight the need for a more proactive approach by the authorities.

If these trends are not contained, Cameroon could face a growing concentration of hybrid criminal systems capable of adapting to changing security conditions and becoming deeply integrated into local and transnational economic networks. Such developments would strengthen the resilience of criminal networks while reshaping local governance by coexisting with, and in some cases becoming integrated into, both formal authorities and informal systems of regulation. Over time, this could further weaken the state's ability to exercise sovereignty and increase the vulnerability of affected communities. More broadly, these developments are inextricably linked to wider regional transformations. Cameroon sits within a region characterized by intensifying cross-border flows, the movement of armed groups and the growing interconnection of illicit markets. The country is therefore not only affected by these changes but also serves as a key link in certain regional criminal networks, connecting production, transit and consumer markets. This underlines the need for a transnational perspective that goes beyond purely national approaches.

At a deeper level, the expansion of criminal economies points to the emergence of competing systems of governance in which non-state actors pragmatically assume economic, social and, at times, security functions. This trend highlights the subtle transformations reshaping relationships between the state, local communities and the spaces they inhabit, while raising questions about the ability of existing mechanisms to address increasingly diffuse, adaptive and interconnected forms of criminality.

In this regard, Cameroon offers an important case study of contemporary organized crime in central Africa, situated at the intersection of local, regional and global dynamics. Examining these developments at a critical juncture helps shed light on their underlying logic and anticipate future forms of violence and illicit economic activity across the region.

The challenge, therefore, is no longer simply how to respond to the current manifestations of organized crime, but how to rethink analytical and policy frameworks so that they reflect the scale and complexity of these transformations. Only then will it be possible to develop lasting responses that address not only the symptoms of criminality, but also the structural conditions that sustain and expand criminal economies.

Important questions nevertheless remain. The laundering of proceeds derived from organized crime warrants closer examination, as does the mapping of criminal groups, which should be refined and updated regularly.

Recommendations

In light of the above, it is essential that the Cameroonian government and its partners adapt their responses to more effectively curb criminal economies, while ensuring that the needs of local populations remain central to security policy and priorities. The following recommendations are directed at the main security governance stakeholders in Cameroon.

Cameroonian authorities:

- Extend the reach of security and law enforcement agencies, particularly in border areas and other poorly governed spaces beyond effective state control;
- Enhance cross-border cooperation against armed groups and trafficking networks (livestock, weapons, drug, gold);
- Intensify efforts to combat corruption and restore trust between citizens and public institutions;
- Improve operational responsiveness through the integration of surveillance technologies (drones, geolocation systems, shared databases);
- Systematically seize criminal assets and introduce institutional incentive mechanisms, including performance-based bonuses for officials involved in anti-crime operations, in order to reduce the financial appeal of criminal activities, deter corruption among law enforcement personnel and help fund specialized operations;
- Provide training and capacity building to specialized units responsible for combating cybercrime and money laundering through digital investigative capabilities and international cooperation;
- Mainstream crime prevention and enforcement priorities across relevant ministries, including those responsible for justice, mining, the environment, finance, wildlife, livestock, fisheries and animal industries. For example, the Ministry of Livestock, Fisheries and Animal Industries could introduce an electronic livestock identification system (RFID tags) to improve traceability and reduce the laundering of stolen cattle. Similarly, the Ministry of Justice should further strengthen its technical and judicial capacity to address cybercrime and environmental crime;
- Strengthen governance in border areas and strategic sectors through regular audits and forward-looking intelligence analysis;
- Promote an integrated approach combining security, governance, development and regional cooperation to address criminal economies;
- Urgently develop a national strategy to combat kidnapping for ransom.

Members of Parliament:

- Introduce, either on their own initiative or at the request of the government, legislation addressing emerging forms of crime (cyber fraud, informal financial transfers and illegal mining), particularly measures relating to gold traceability and the disruption of illicit supply chains;
- Review taxation in strategic sectors to reduce fiscal burdens that encourage clandestine exports and the capture of mining revenues by criminal networks, while strengthening democratic oversight and accountability mechanisms within relevant public institutions;
- Establish a parliamentary commission on illicit financial flows tasked with monitoring informal money-transfer systems and proposing corrective measures.

Decentralized local authorities:

- Strengthen governance in border areas by improving business registration procedures, the issuance of legal artisanal mining permits and the monitoring of cross-border markets;
- Develop local infrastructure, including pastoral corridors, supply routes and digital connectivity, to reduce the poorly governed spaces exploited by criminal networks and armed groups.

Civil society organizations and community leaders:

- Strengthen the role of civil society in community-based prevention efforts, particularly through the establishment of secure reporting mechanisms;
- Mobilize business associations and mobile network operators to help finance specialized, cross-border operations targeting specific forms of criminality;
- Raise awareness of local trafficking activities and offer support to young people and other vulnerable groups.

International partners and regional organizations:

- Expand technical assistance to improve the monitoring of criminal trade (gold, diamonds, wildlife, drugs, weapons);
- Conduct joint investigations, improve mineral traceability through modern analytical tools and coordinated action against networks operating along Cameroon's borders;
- Increase support for economic resilience programmes in conflict-affected areas to reduce communities' dependence on illicit economies.

DDR centres:

- Improve socio-economic reintegration programmes for those in DDR centres in the Far North, North-West and South-West regions in order to encourage further defections and prevent former combatants from rejoining separatist, terrorist or criminal groups;
- Incorporate measures to prevent former fighters from returning to armed or criminal activity into the national DDR strategy currently under development.



Notes

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