



Transit Niger: migrants, rebels and traffickers

by Cristina Barrios

Over 100,000 refugees and migrants have arrived in Europe in the first half of 2015, according to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), with the central and eastern Mediterranean most often being used for illegal maritime crossings. The EU has recently launched the EUNAVFOR Med CSDP mission to counter the exponential rise in human trafficking across the Mediterranean – but the mission is just one of many options that the EU is developing as part of its broader Agenda on Migration.

According to the Libyan authorities, some 7,000 sub-Saharan Africans are currently residing in detention centres on their coast, waiting for a chance to cross the Mediterranean. Many have travelled through Niger – a ‘country of transit’ from the European perspective. It is mostly citizens from Nigeria, Mali, Ghana, Senegal and Burkina Faso who have undertaken the journey, sheltered by visa-free travel provisions for citizens within the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). The city of Agadez, whose authorities have encountered migrants from around 60 countries, is now, more than ever, a major hub for drugs and arms smuggling in the region – as well as for clandestine migration across the desert and into Libya.

The country is afflicted by a range of problems that might make tackling illegal migration difficult. Niger is one of the most important countries in fighting Islamist armed groups in the Sahel, which have their roots in neighbouring Mali and Nigeria.

Yet, despite the strongman-image cultivated by President Issoufou, political instability is brewing in a country marked by limited state capacity, widespread corruption and popular discontent. So can Niger halt irregular migration to Europe – and if so, will it?

Structural challenges

The EU plans to hold a conference on migration alongside African partners in Malta later this year but, despite their regret over the tragic loss of human lives in the Mediterranean, African governments lack the incentives to stem the flow of migrants. Niger is the poorest country in the world, and its main challenges still centre on its stalled economic development and explosive demography (the fertility rate is 7.6 children per woman).

Several elements seemed to hold out the possibility of a democratic transition in Niger in recent years: the peaceful return of power to civilian authorities after the 2010 military coup, decentralisation (including devolution for Tuaregs), elections in which the opposition triumphed, and a relatively diverse political scene. Yet that transition is under threat. The executive is exerting unjustified pressure on the legislature and the judiciary, while media and opposition groups find themselves increasingly isolated and prone to radical rhetoric. The polarisation of political debate is likely to alienate and radicalise youths in the run up to the elections of 2016 – Issoufou’s overriding concern.

Still, the international community plays an integral role in Niger's development and security, and all parties are, at least in theory, interested in curbing irregular migration and people trafficking. EUCAP Sahel Niger is adding this objective to its training and strategic advice for local security forces and intends to build up its position in Agadez.

In cooperation with the International Organisation for Migration and the UNHCR, the EU may also establish a centre offering information and alternatives to potential migrants. It would also be useful to foster greater debate about migration among members of the G5 (Mauritania, Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso and Chad): Mauritania, for example, had a mixed experience with running a retention centre. ECOWAS could also increase controls but its main objective is still to encourage freedom of movement – and the Sahel's 'natural' inter-connectivity (for people and the economy) is bound to prevail anyway.

Regional crossroads

The immense Agadez region constitutes 52% of Niger's territory but hosts only 3% of the population. It is home to many of the Tuareg, Berber and Toubou communities in Niger, including some nomadic populations – and the history and sociology of these Sahel peoples (including their relationship with the central administration) calls for special attention.

The city of Agadez is the staging post of choice for most groups of migrants coming from West Africa, who are hosted – often by nationality – in houses and neighbourhoods that are well-known to the local authorities. Migrants wait there for a matter of days or weeks until their trip to the border with Algeria or Libya can be paid for and organised; 85% of them currently opt for Libya, according to the government of Niger. Drivers who can take 30-40 people in pickup trucks make about €4,000 per month. They cooperate with traffickers on the Libyan side of the border and often act in collusion with local security forces.

Only a few years ago this region was a tourist destination, with direct flights linking it to Europe, but the terrorist threat now makes it a no-go zone for Westerners. The uranium-mining industry has contracted sharply, with French and Chinese partners reconsidering their investments and companies sacking employees. News has also spread in the past few months that gold is to be found in many places, prompting 50,000

people to go there and try their luck after buying metal detectors.

Mafias from Chad and Sudan have already positioned themselves to channel the metal into regional markets. Far from being a blessing, this gold rush creates additional problems for Niger, because economic opportunities are arising in places where there is no rule of law.

Capacity matters

Trying to dismantle the current system of informal economy (including trafficking) in northern Niger through repression would create unrest and unmanageable problems for the authorities in Niamey. Moreover, Niger's own ability to guarantee national security is now in question. The military is relatively strong and disciplined, but it is overstretched.

The current force of 15,000 – gendarmes, police officers and soldiers will hardly suffice to contain the ongoing destabilisation in the Sahel, despite plans to recruit an additional 4,000 men. Boko Haram attacked Niger military positions on the Karama Island in Lake Chad last April, resulting in over 150 casualties. Recruitment amongst the country's youth for the jihadist quests is also rising to dangerous levels. The Malian city of Gao – a stronghold of unrest and terrorism – is closely connected to Tillabéri in Niger, which is only 200km away on a paved road.

Partners, both within the region and beyond (France, the wider EU and the US), are supporting Niger with equipment, training and strategy, but more help is needed. Yet the armed forces are highly politicised (notably at officer level), corruption is pervasive, and illiteracy hampers progress on capacity-building. Economically, the state has already drained the budget for health, education and justice to pump up defence expenditure.

The political authorities in Niger and in the rest of the Sahel will no doubt listen politely to European calls to strengthen the fight against irregular migration – but their political will and sheer capability to engage will be limited, because their most imminent challenges are avoiding new attacks by Boko Haram and preventing political destabilisation.

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