

# Going South

*Even faster than the desert itself, EU border protection operations are spreading in the Sahel. For years, they have been penetrating further and further into the regions of transit and origin*

*by Christian Jakob, journalist and author*

What the EU's border control offensive in Niger, West Africa's most important transit state to date, would mean for the Touareg was foreseeable early on. By October 2016, the regional council of Agadez, the hub of the trans-Saharan route, had already prepared a study. This showed the loss that the new policy brought to the region: according to the study, each migrant left the equivalent of 295 euros in the city for accommodation, food, provisions, exit tax and the journey to Libya. The International Organization for Migration (IOM) estimates that a total of 330,000 people traveled through Agadez in 2016. If they were to stay away, the regional council calculated that there would be a loss of approximately 100 million euros per year.

And they stayed away. Since 2016, the previously legal transport of migrants in the direction of Libya has been classified as „people smuggling“ and thus punishable. In 2019, only 50,000 people moved from Niger to Libya. As a result, the number of arrivals of West Africans in Italy dropped by more than 90 percent. For the Touaregs in central Niger, this meant that their main source of income, which had been legal until then, no longer existed. The government in Niamey, however, has received well over one billion euros in additional development aid from Europe since 2016. That is significantly more than the grants received by countries comparable to Niger.

The new policy was correspondingly unpopular in Agadez. So Niger's President Mahammadou Issoufo had to send an outsider to the region as governor: Sadou Soloke, a native of western Niger. He will be a guest speaker at the World Border Security Congress in Athens next June. There, he will most likely say something similar to what he said in 2017: „We are not doing this because the Europeans say so, even if many people say so.“

Soloke freely rejects the accusation that Niger, in an unprecedented legislative maneuver, has suspended ECOWAS freedom of movement in half of its territory.

„Of course people are free to move,“ Soloke says. „Just not if they want to go to Libya.“ For that matter, he says, the authorities’ actions are not directed at the migrants. „We don’t touch them. We only punish the traffickers.“ That has had an effect, he said: „The numbers have dropped drastically.“ The migrants who are apprehended today are sent to an open camp run by the UN migration agency IOM in Agadez. From there, IOM organizes their return to their alleged home country.

It is true, Soloke says, that many people in Agadez today have no income because of this change in classification. „We are aware of that,“ Soloke says. „They have to change their activities completely. We are working on that.“

He says the whole process is to fight traffickers, who „we feel are inhumane and endanger the youth.“ Traffickers, for Soloke, manipulate youth so that they put themselves in mortal danger. „It’s a dishonorable business. How can we tolerate it?“ Why authorities only noticed this „moral obligation“ when the EU was leaving millions on the table, Soloke did not say.

He is aware that the new routes are more dangerous. „We are monitoring that. And then we will close those routes as well. They always find other routes, so we can’t stop working.“

Probably the most far-reaching step Niger has taken on this path since then is the establishment of the Compagnie Mobile de Contrôle des Frontières (CMCF). The CMCF currently consists of 245 men and 7 women. Germany and the Netherlands have given tens of millions of dollars to the CMCF. Its headquarters in the small town of Birnin Konni on the border with Nigeria should have been inaugurated in October 2020. However, the ceremony was postponed until January as the security situation in the area was too bad.

Niger, one of the poorest countries in the world, has a national police force, a gendarmerie, a national guard and an army. All are involved in border protection and, since 2016, in the fight against traffickers. Nevertheless, as of 2018, the EU has established yet another border protection force, the CMCF. Germany has deployed police officers to Niger for this purpose. „One focus of their activities was the planning of a project, largely financed by Germany, to set up mobile border control companies,“ the German government announced in June 2020. Police officers from Belgium, Germany and the Netherlands trained the CMCF.

What role human rights issues play in this is unclear. The fact is that UNHCR's research, „On this journey, no one cares if you live or die,“ published in July 2020, found that men traveling along the West African route toward Libya who were victims of physical violence were mistreated by security forces, police or military in 70 percent of all cases. For women, these groups were responsible for 51 percent of all assaults.

„The main task of our force is to secure the borders,“ says CMCF commander Haro Ammani. „Combating illegal immigration is an essential part of that.“

To this day, the borders in the deserts of West Africa are mostly unmarked. In the past, local people could cross them without having to show passports. That's about to change. „Our force consists of mobile units, because many phenomena escape the control of police stations at official border crossings,“ says the commander. „Our patrols should also pursue and arrest the traffickers and smugglers beyond.“

A lot has „already been delivered“ by „partners,“ the EU „and especially Germany and the Netherlands,“ Ammani says. „There will be a modern building for the company, with a modern kitchen, communications equipment, but also a lot of personal equipment, footwear, rescue equipment for combat operations, ambulances.“

Formally, the CMCF is responsible for all of Niger. Yet the fact that its headquarters are on the border with Nigeria is no accident. About 20,000 Nigerians apply for asylum in Europe each year - more than from any other African country. By 2050, Nigeria will be the third largest country in the world in terms of population. The EU expects an increasing number of people to make their way to Europe from there. As such, Nigeria was the first country in Africa with which the EU border protection agency Frontex concluded a cooperation agreement in 2011.

Because migrant drivers in Niger are now prosecuted as criminals, the only way through the desert is by winding roads. The UN estimates that twice as many people could die in the desert today than in the Mediterranean. „The fact that the UN is lamenting this humanitarian tragedy is completely legitimate,“ says Commander Ammani in this regard. But he says it has nothing to do with a lack of legal routes for the migrants. „Those who send others through the desert where

they can die should be punished.“

This is the same equation of irregular migration assistance with human trafficking as advocated by Governor Soloke, Frontex and the EU: Migration is primarily negotiated as a violation of the law. From there, it is not far to Islamism.

„We are also an instrument against terrorism,“ says Haro Ammani. His unit shows the extent to which security, migration and development policies are now intermingled in the Sahel. That’s because the border guard units are supposed to stop irregular migration while preventing terrorists from crossing the borders. The border with Niger, where the CMCF is headquartered, is also one of the gateways for Islamist militants.

In the last twelve months, the number of Nigeriens fleeing terror within their own country has increased by over a third to nearly 270,000 people currently. States such as Mali and Niger are relying on support from the EU, among others, to combat terrorism. This helps to make the military and police more effective. These states later fight against Islamic extremists and traffickers. In this way, the EU takes advantage of regional interests to promote its own.

This will likely continue in the future. Because the only thing the EU can easily agree on when it comes to migration is to stop migrants before they reach the external borders. This is also one of the central plans of the new EU Migration Agenda, which the Commission presented in September. Margaritis Schinas, the Greek commissioner for „promoting the European way of life,“ described the pact as a „house with three floors.“ „The first floor means a very strong external dimension. The focus is on strengthened partnerships with countries of origin and transit.“

In its remarks on the pact, the Commission points to having agreed at the July 2020 ministerial conference between the EU and „African partners“ to address the problem of smuggling. Third countries are to be supported through „targeted partnerships to combat migrant smuggling.“ This includes capacity building „both in terms of law enforcement frameworks and operational capacities.“ Translated, this means that the EU gives money to ensure that the judiciary and police take action against anyone involved in irregular migration - just as in Niger. In a „comprehensive partnership,“ migration should be „anchored as a core issue based on the assessment of the interests of the EU and partner countries,“ the

Agenda continues. The EU is aware that this may meet resistance in transit and countries of origin, where migration and freedom of movement are original self-interests. „Migration issues such as border management“ could be „politically sensitive for partners,“ the Agenda therefore states.

Cover Picture: The new Nigerien border police centre in the capital Niamey, which opened in September 2020, was funded by the US and equipped by the EU with electronic equipment, software and hardware for detection technology and databases.