

bicc policy brief

The Regional Threat of Kidnappings in South-west Chad

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Kidnappings have risen drastically since 2015 in Mayo-Kebbi West, a border region between Chad and Cameroon. High ransom demands are placing a heavy burden on the communities, particularly young people, and are fostering a climate of fear and mistrust that fuels violent inter- and intra-community conflicts. The governments of Chad, Cameroon and the Central African Republic must act now to reverse this devastating trend.

Project ●●●
Armed Groups
in the Sahel

Recommendations

1 Establish a joint Chad–Cameroon–Central African Republic cross-border force

To respond effectively to the rising trend of kidnappings in Mayo-Kebbi West, the governments of Chad, Cameroon and the Central African Republic (CAR) should establish bi- or trilateral agreements authorising a joint cross-border force to pursue kidnappers in neighbouring territories and to exchange security information between their respective national security forces.

2 Ensure a zero-tolerance policy for complicity with kidnappers by security forces

Civilian populations frequently report cases of abuse of authority by state security forces against civilians, as well as their alleged complicity with kidnappers, in the affected areas. The governments of Chad, Cameroon and the Central African Republic must implement and ensure a zero-tolerance policy regarding these abuses and actions. Beyond legal action in cases of non-compliance, training for the state security forces in human rights protection and civil–military dialogue can further support trust-building.

3 Set up new mobile security checkpoints around cross-border biosphere reserves

Cross-border biosphere reserves such as the Sena Oura (in Chad) and Bouba Ndjida (in Cameroon) Natural Parks are sanctuaries for kidnappers. Setting up new mobile security checkpoints on both sides will prevent criminal activity and allow the free movement of people and goods in the area. This will require close collaboration between the security forces in Chad and Cameroon.

4 Stop forcing those affected to become the next generation of kidnappers

The governments of the region must urgently support those affected by kidnappings—primarily herder and farming communities—to help them sustain their livelihoods. The loss of income and assets due to high ransom payments has been specifically detrimental to young people. Without alternatives, many are likely to join the criminals, further exacerbating the issue. States must provide subsidy payments for theft and address structural issues by reviewing transhumance-related legal frameworks and continuing regional dialogue with key stakeholders.

Background

Since the 2010s, kidnappings for ransom by armed groups, notably those designated as terrorist organisations (AGDTO), have grown in scale worldwide. In 2023, approximately 4,000 people were kidnapped in connection with terrorist acts worldwide. Organisations such as Al-Qaeda and its branches in various countries, the Islamic State and Boko Haram¹ have generated millions of US dollars from kidnappings for ransom, a lucrative practice requiring relatively little investment.

Although not in the context of AGDTO, kidnappings for ransom in Chad's province of Mayo-Kebbi West, which borders Cameroon, have had—and continue to have—a significant impact on the population, notably the youth, both physically and economically.

While precise figures are difficult to find, the Chadian civil society organisation Organisation in Support of Development Initiatives (OAI) (2024), estimates that more than 1,500 people have been kidnapped in the area over the last 20 years (see Map 1 for an estimate of kidnappings between 2015 and 2022). Estimates of the ransom paid in Chad vary and can exceed 40 million CFA francs (approximately 71,000 US dollars). In Cameroon, the total ransom paid per year is estimated at one billion CFA francs (around 1.7 million US dollars).

To better understand the problem, bicc and the Centre for Research in Anthropology and Human Sciences (CRASH) in N'Djamena, Chad, conducted research in Pala, Lagon, Lamé and Gagat in the province of Mayo-Kebbi West in late 2024.² This research is part of a two-year project entitled 'Regional Approaches to Dealing with Armed Groups in the Sahel', which is led by bicc.

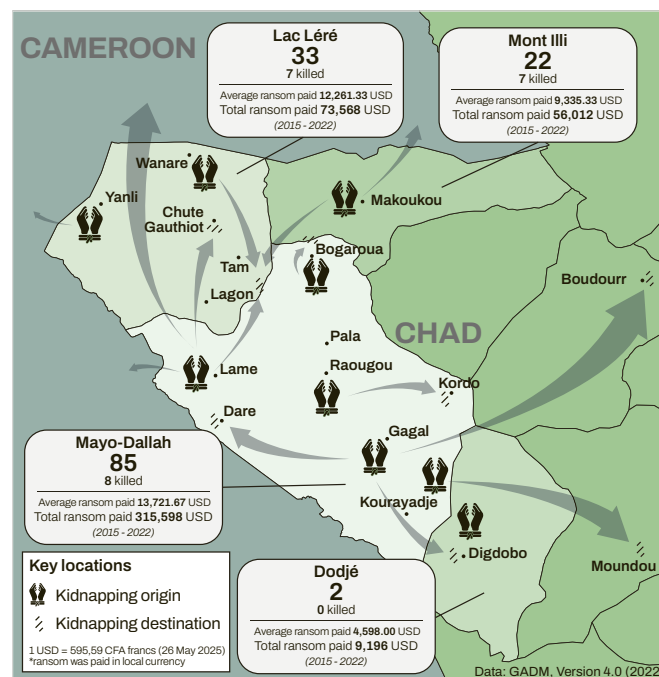
ESTIMATES OF THE RANSOM PAID IN CHAD VARY AND CAN EXCEED 40 MILLION CFA FRANCS (APPROXIMATELY 71,000 US DOLLARS). IN CAMEROON, THE TOTAL RANSOM PAID PER YEAR IS ESTIMATED AT ONE BILLION CFA FRANCS (AROUND 1.7 MILLION US DOLLARS).

The research highlights that the phenomenon is expanding and has a significant impact on local populations. The kidnapers operate in small armed groups and gather information from accomplices within the communities, promising them a percentage of the profits. Our field data shows a change in the

types of people targeted for kidnapping: "(Before) it was the nomadic Fulani herders who were their targets. And now they are targeting sedentary farmers," a traditional chief in Gagat told us. However, the alleged identities of the perpetrators of these actions vary. According to the testimonies collected, the kidnapers would speak "Hausa, Arabic, Fulani". As for the Fulani, interviewees from the area say that they are not local, but rather from Nigeria or Niger. Young people in Gagat told us, "the kidnapers always wear turbans (...) and are armed, sometimes dressed in military uniforms." The 'Ouda' herders are frequently blamed, linking the phenomenon of kidnapping for ransom closely to the issues related to transhumance, which we will explain further in this *bicc* brief.

In terms of their modus operandi, the kidnapers often ambush and abduct relatives of their targets, such as wives or children, typically during nighttime operations. They then use intimidation and blackmail, sending messages demanding that their targets pay large sums of money to a specific address.

MAP 1: KIDNAPPINGS IN MAYO-KEBBI WEST BETWEEN 2015 AND 2022³



Nature reserves and national parks—in this case, Sena Oura and Bouba Ndjida—serve as a refuge for the kidnapers and as transit points to neighbouring Cameroon and vice versa. The advantage for the kidnapers is that the Chadian Defence and Security Forces (FDS) are not authorised to pursue them beyond Chadian territory. Furthermore, there are no coordination mechanisms between the FDS of the two countries in this area. The regional nature of the phenomenon becomes evident, as does the geographical/topographical importance of the nature reserves. Once the kidnapers have secured their hostages, the ransom negotiation phase begins, which is typically

conducted over the phone. The location where the ransom will be deposited is communicated to the hostages' relatives once an agreement has been reached. Meanwhile, as we were told by our interviewees in all locations, the kidnappers formally forbid the victims' relatives from alerting the FDS, threatening reprisals.

In both Chad and Cameroon, the alleged involvement of local security forces is considered a key factor in the increase in kidnappings since 2020 (GI-TOC, 2021). Some parts of the population denounce the allegedly deliberate inaction of the security forces, while others suspect 'invisible hands from N'Djamena', alluding to possible complicity of the political authorities. Several factors contribute to these perceptions: For example, an 'anti-gang' measure deployed in 2007 was officially revoked due to a "lack of resources," and the battalion deployed by the presidency to combat the phenomenon was withdrawn in 2018. However, a force comprising various security services remains in the region. Though with little effect.

1 To counter kidnapping effectively, a joint cross-border security response is needed

Kidnapping for ransom has been occurring in Mayo-Kebbi West for three decades now, and it continues to grow. It is now considered a regional security crisis due to its manifold consequences for cross-border communities. While not the sole or main reason, the geography of south-western Chad plays a central role in the increase of kidnappings: The area is covered in dense forest and is difficult to access, especially during the rainy season. Large parts of the area have no phone network coverage. In addition, it is a humid area suitable for agriculture and livestock farming. The Sena Oura (in Chad) and Bouba Ndjida (in Cameroon) biosphere reserves allow for uncontrolled cross-border activities. Kidnappers move from one country to the other with relative ease, thus evading pursuit by the defence and security forces on either side of the border.

PEOPLE IN THE AFFECTED AREAS FEEL THAT THE KEY PLAYERS, PARTICULARLY THE POLITICAL AND SECURITY ACTORS IN THE CHADIAN, CAMEROONIAN AND CENTRAL AFRICAN GOVERNMENTS, ARE NOT REALLY INTERESTED IN THE PROBLEM.

The absence of bilateral or trilateral agreements on the right of pursuit by the countries concerned exacerbates the crisis. Local populations' living conditions are gradually deteriorating, instilling a feeling of abandonment by the authorities. People in the

affected areas feel that the key players, particularly the political and security actors in the Chadian, Cameroonian and Central African governments, are not really interested in the problem. The fact that only a few national and international media outlets report on the issue further exacerbates this feeling.

So far, only a few isolated and uncoordinated actions and interventions have been implemented, with limited results. Eradicating this phenomenon requires collaboration between the two, or even three, states, and joint action on both sides of the border. An urgent step is to establish bilateral or trilateral agreements between Chad, the CAR and Cameroon, aimed at setting up a joint cross-border force in the area. This would enable faster, more coordinated action and information sharing along the borders. Consider the Chad–Sudan joint border force, which was effective in managing the border and exchanging information, but is currently not in place due to the war in Sudan. Information exchange with other regional joint forces, such as the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF), which has a specific mandate to combat terrorism in the Lake Chad Basin, is also key to countering kidnapping in border areas.

2 The ambiguous role of the defence and security forces requires a zero-tolerance policy for complicity with kidnappers

In response to the rising trend of kidnappings for ransom in Mayo-Kebbi West, the Chadian government has deployed defence and security forces (FDS) to the most affected localities. These defence and security forces comprise personnel from the national army (ANT), elements of the national and nomadic guard of Chad (GNNT), legions of the national gendarmerie (GN), and members of the national police (PN), among others. Alongside these various military personnel, there is also a strong presence of intelligence agents from the General Directorate of Intelligence and Investigations (DGRI) and the National State Security Agency (ANS). This massive deployment aims to put an end to kidnappings for ransom, but also to combat crime in the region.

However, many of our interlocutors have noticed an ambiguity in the role played by the security forces deployed in the field. The local populations we spoke to not only accuse some military personnel of being accomplices of the abductors but also make more serious allegations of recurrent abuses of authority against the population. These include, for example, illegal taxation, racketeering and arbitrary detentions. Some agents are suspected of providing weapons and information to the abductors in exchange for large sums of money. The FDS deny any complicity with the kidnappers, instead accusing the local

communities of being their accomplices. This situation reflects, to say the least, a lack of trust between the defence and security forces and the local populations. Each side accuses the other, rightly or wrongly, of complicity with the kidnapers.

A key first step is to stress the transparency, professionalism and integrity among uniformed personnel, backed by a zero-tolerance policy and legal consequences for complicity with kidnapers by law enforcement in cases of non-compliance with these fundamental aspects. Transparency should begin with the recruitment and training of defence and security forces, focusing on the ethics of their mission and the profession and respect for human rights at all times. This is not always observed during interactions between the defence and security forces and local populations. Indeed, military personnel are often not well imbued with local cultures in deployment areas. Our interlocutors within the communities accuse law enforcement of "brutalising them," as well as of taking too long to act in cases of kidnapping, leaving them to their fate. This creates a de facto trust deficit between the FDS and the civilian population.

A KEY FIRST STEP IS TO STRESS THE TRANSPARENCY, PROFESSIONALISM AND INTEGRITY AMONG UNIFORMED PERSONNEL, BACKED BY A ZERO-TOLERANCE POLICY AND LEGAL CONSEQUENCES FOR COMPLICITY WITH KIDNAPPERS BY LAW ENFORCEMENT IN CASES OF NON-COMPLIANCE WITH THESE FUNDAMENTAL ASPECTS.

There are insufficient means to intervene, and organised frameworks for civil–military dialogue do not exist. It is therefore important to first provide human rights training in Chadian dialectal Arabic, a language spoken and understood by most Chadian soldiers, to ensure respectful interactions with local populations. Furthermore, strengthening accountability mechanisms within the various bodies through complaint mechanisms and judicial action in cases of abuse by security forces against the civilian population will also be crucial. In our interviews, the authorities also emphasised the need to provide the necessary equipment and regular salaries are required to meet the needs of the forces on the ground. Additionally, the duration of security forces' deployment in the field is also an important factor. According to our interviewees, this period should not exceed two years to ensure a certain continuity while also preventing drift in clientelist practices through regular change.

Another important measure would be to establish regular community dialogues with the security forces to strengthen trust between them. In view of the current climate of generalised insecurity, combined with the absence of law enforcement and the distrust of their presence, affected villages have formed vigilante groups to protect themselves (Berks et al.).

3 The key geo-position of the natural parks for kidnapers and communities requires flexible security measures

As outlined before, Sena Oura National Park in Chad and Sena Oura National Park in Chad and Bouba Ndjida National Park in Cameroon—both forming a transboundary biosphere reserve—are strategically important in addressing the kidnapping crisis, given their role in cross-border security and wildlife protection. Currently, these two parks are the hideouts of kidnapers. In both countries, dedicated services oversee the parks, with forest agents responsible for site security. Given their size (735.2 km² in Chad and 2,200 km² in Cameroon), this challenging task requires specific equipment, including surveillance drones, wildlife cameras, vehicles and manned checkpoints. None of these exist, or they only exist in part. Providing the necessary resources and training to ensure proper oversight would make it more difficult for kidnapers to use the parks as a sanctuary and would ultimately impede their activities. Mobile security checkpoints could ensure security while enabling the free movement of people, goods and animals.

Cameroon, Chad and CAR need to pool their security efforts in and around the parks to enhance the security of the parks, people and animals. The Lake Chad Basin Commission (LCBC), of which all three countries are members, is mandated to manage Lake Chad and its surrounding ecosystems sustainably. It represents a suitable platform for addressing these issues at a political level.

MOBILE SECURITY CHECKPOINTS COULD ENSURE SECURITY WHILE ENABLING THE FREE MOVEMENT OF PEOPLE, GOODS AND ANIMALS.

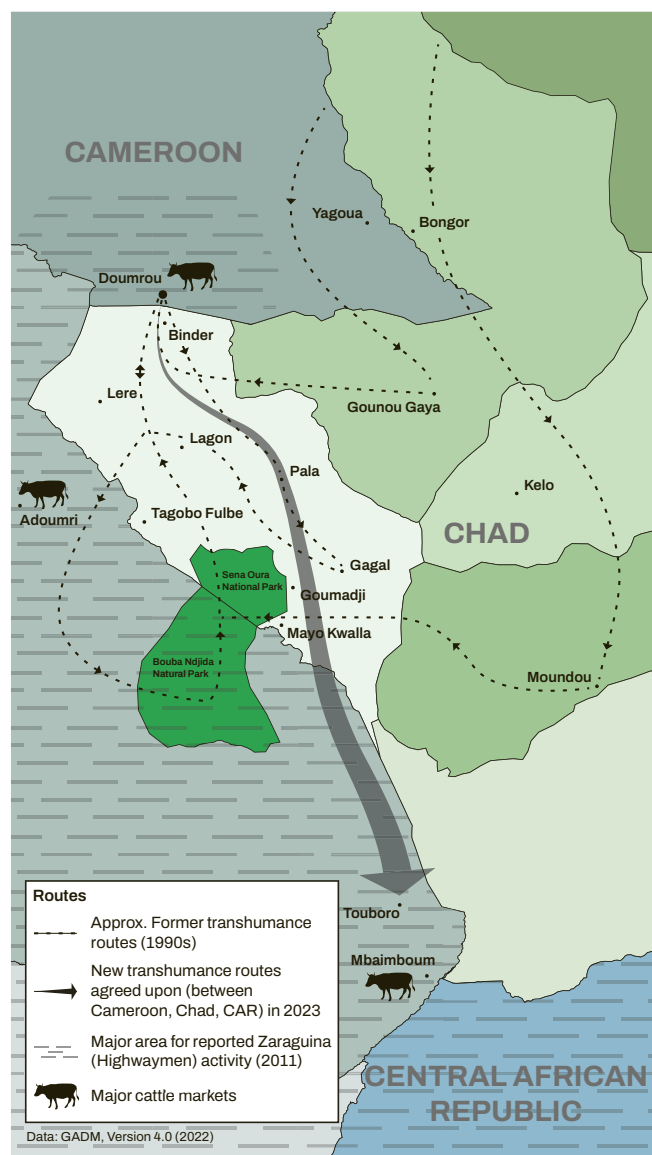
The current kidnapping trend dates back to the 1980s, when gang violence on a large scale, locally known as "Zaraguina" took root in the border region between Chad, Cameroon and the CAR (see Map 1). These armed gangs consisted of army deserters, demobilised soldiers and local rebels, but also a specific type of Mbororo herder, known as the Uuda'en⁴. They robbed and pillaged, but also increasingly used kidnapping tactics (Seignobos 2011).

As many of our interviewees pointed out, "First the kidnappings targeted the herder communities, then the farmers once the others were out of business". The kidnapping of Mbororo children led to the rapid "decapitalisation of Mbororo herds" in CAR until the communities could no longer sustain themselves (Seignobos, 2011). In that regard, herder communities such

as the Mbororo were initially victims, but some later became perpetrators—as they needed to survive (Seignobos, 2011). Today, kidnapers mainly target farmers, who in turn suspect the herders of acting in revenge.

Therefore, sustainably addressing the kidnapping issue means addressing the herder–farmer conflicts in the region. The governments of CAR, Cameroon and Chad must support herders and farmers in affected areas to help them maintain their economic activities by providing increased protection and livelihood support, including subsidy payments for theft. They must also review transhumance-related legal frameworks and continue regional dialogue with key stakeholders, such as the EGGOU-GOL platform.⁵

MAP 2: THE ROLE OF THE NATIONAL PARKS SENA OURA AND BOUBA NDJIDA FOR TRANSHUMANCE AND CRIMINAL ACTIVITIES IN CHAD AND CAMEROON



4 Failing to support those affected will create the next generation of kidnapers

The Mayo-Kebbi Ouest region is one of the richest in Chad, often referred to as the “granary of Chad”, mainly due to its thriving agriculture and livestock farming. It has played a major role in stabilising Chad as it represents the junction point between the northern and southern areas.

The quantities of bags of cereals that come out of here to feed other provinces of the country can attest to this. And this is what attracts the covetousness of others towards this region. Since the harvests are always good, people think that we have a lot of money, so they come to take advantage of that (traditional chief in Gagal).

These characteristics are key to understanding kidnapping in the region. The increase in abductions corresponds with the harvest and selling period of agricultural and livestock products in local markets. This explains why farmers’ and herders’ relatives or associates are almost always the targets of kidnappings. Moreover, the kidnappings always occur when the victims have the proceeds of their sales to hand. Herders are gradually leaving the region for this reason, and several farmers we spoke to make this clear: “What’s the point of continuing to cultivate, if in the end, criminals can seize the fruits of our labour?”

If cultivation were to cease in this region, it would impact many parts of Chad, as people who rely on these products would be at risk of impoverishment and, more dramatically, food insecurity. Populations, particularly young people, would fall into severe economic hardship and idleness. In several regions of the Sahel, idleness and a lack of prospects for young people are among the key factors that push them to join various armed groups or engage in various criminal activities. To avoid another large-scale humanitarian crisis, the Chadian authorities must do everything possible to prevent Mayo-Kebbi West from facing such a scenario, which would be devastating for the region, especially due to its economic implications and regional security concerns.

To this end, the Chadian state must adopt a holistic security approach that ensures the protection of citizens, allowing them to pursue their economic activities, while also supporting inter- and intra-community dialogue related to land conflicts and transhumance. Governments should support initiatives such as the EGGOU-GOL platform, which brings together Chad, Cameroon, Nigeria and the Central African Republic to improve the resilience of households and cross-border agro-pastoral systems in terms of the economy and conflict prevention. It also focuses on public health, value chains and governance, addressing key stakeholders including traditional authorities, farmers, herders, as well as political and administrative representatives.

Endnotes

- 1 Boko Haram was founded in 2002 by Mohammed Yusuf in Maiduguri, Nigeria. Following Yusuf's death in 2009, Abubakar Shekau became the new leader. In 2015, Boko Haram pledged allegiance to the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) leading to the rebranding of Boko Haram as the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) (International Crisis Group, 2020; Foucher, 2024). This prompted internal rivalries and led to the creation of a new faction called Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lid-da'adati wal-Jihad (JAS) led by Shekau. In this *bicc policy brief*, we use Boko Haram as an umbrella term for all factions formed since 2002. The group and its splinter groups have been designated as terrorist organisations by the United Nations Security Council. The terminology of armed groups designated as terrorist organisations (AGDTO) will also be used throughout this *policy brief*.
- 2 The team conducted 15 semi-structured interviews and five focus group discussions with diverse stakeholders, including traditional and state authorities, NGO workers, journalists, youth and women groups, religious authorities, herder and farming communities, as well as representatives of international and national organisations.
- 3 The data on the cases presented here was collected by research partners at CRASH, N'Djamena, as part of several other studies on the issue. The number remains approximate due to the lack of information from local administrations (cases were not systematically recorded) as well as the difficulty in obtaining exact figures from the affected populations due to their fear of retaliation from the kidnapers.
- 4 In Chad, they are known to be from Dourbali (a strong finding of our interviews), and to speak Arabic and Fulfulde. Other Mbororo refer to them as *haaluu'be* (the bad ones)" (Seignobos, 2011). In our interviews in Dourbali, representatives of the herder associations underlined that they would not be subject to their oversight, unlike other herder communities. In contrast to other herders, the Uuda'en are Sahel sheep herders, which puts them at the relative bottom of the herder hierarchy. A severe drought in 1973 forced them to divert their transhumance routes to the south.
- 5 The EGGOU-GOL platform is a sub-regional forum of traditional chieftaincies and local cross-border actors, including the countries Cameroon, Nigeria and Chad on transhumance, bringing together all the authorities and traditional chieftaincies and representatives of transhumant groups (Lamidat, Mbororos, rural actors, etc.) supported through the German Development Cooperation and other partners.

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