

NIGER

Niger's government says it has ended large-scale migrant smuggling. Migrants, smugglers and officials tell a different story

Despite deaths, crackdown, Sahara migrant trail thrives

STORY BY DAVID LEWIS
PHOTOS BY JOE PENNEY

FAST TRACK: Returning West African migrants arrive in Agadez from Libya in March. Niger has tried to close the migrant routes, but thousands of people are still leaving for North Africa and beyond.



NIGER SAHARA MIGRANT TRAIL THRIVES

AGADEZ, MAY 15, 2014

After 92 people died of thirst attempting to cross the Sahara in late September, the government of Niger moved to shut down its decades-old desert migrant routes.

"We cannot remain indifferent in the face of this tragedy," Colonel Garba Maikido, the governor of the country's main northern town of Agadez told national radio. "We must take measures so that this type of tragedy never happens again on our territory."

Police raided dozens of transit houses, where would-be emigrants stay until heading off across the desert for North Africa and Europe beyond, and arrested a handful of smugglers and officials. About 50 policemen in the region around Agadez were replaced. Niger's government says large-scale migrant smuggling, which in effect was officially tolerated for years, has now ended.

But interviews with migrants, smugglers and officials in Agadez and in the capital Niamey tell a different story. The crackdown initially stemmed the flow of migrants. But the people smugglers have opened up new, more dangerous routes, and begun charging people more than ever to make the journey. The crackdown has ended the spectacular mass departures of the past, but migrants are still leaving the ancient trading town, often in small groups at night to meet up with 4x4s waiting in the desert. At least 13 migrants died this month after being abandoned by smugglers near the Niger-Algeria border, officials in northern Niger said.

The measures have also pushed the multi-million dollar business further into the hands of smuggling gangs, dominated by the Sahara's nomadic Toubou tribe.

The speed with which the trade has sprung back into life shows how hard it is for nations such as Niger to stop illegal emigrants from leaving. The experience of the past few months in Agadez also highlights the problem of official collusion in the trade. Often, the very people meant to police the



CRACKDOWN: Maikido, governor of Agadez, said corruption had turned the migrant networks into a "well-oiled" machine.

immigrant routes are involved in the business themselves, say migrants, diplomats and an internal government report seen by Reuters. So far, no one in a senior position has been charged with involvement in the trade.

Immigration has re-emerged as a hot topic in Europe as the continent recovers from years of economic hardship. Fringe parties are likely to score strongly in elections to the EU parliament later this month, many demanding that borders be shut to new migrants or numbers be strictly rationed. But if Agadez is anything to go by, the flow of migrants to Europe from West Africa is set to continue.

"The corruption will never end," said Mohamed Anacko, a former Tuareg rebel leader who is now president of Agadez's regional council. "These networks are reorganizing themselves and becoming stronger."

SHIFTING ROUTES

Agadez is a maze of sandy streets and low-slung mud brick houses perched on the southern rim of the Sahara. For years it has served as a hub in the networks that smuggle people, guns, drugs and food across the desert.

Although home to some of the continent's fastest growing economies, West Africa is struggling to generate enough jobs for its mushrooming young population. As a result, migrants from countries as diverse as oil-rich and democratic Ghana to Gambia, a relatively poor police state, are still taking their chances by heading north to Europe, often through Agadez.

"They talk about economic growth but we don't see it," said Emmanuel Apiah, a Ghanaian from the southern gold mining and cocoa growing region of Ashanti, as he waited for a bus from Niamey to Agadez from where he planned to cross the Sahara.

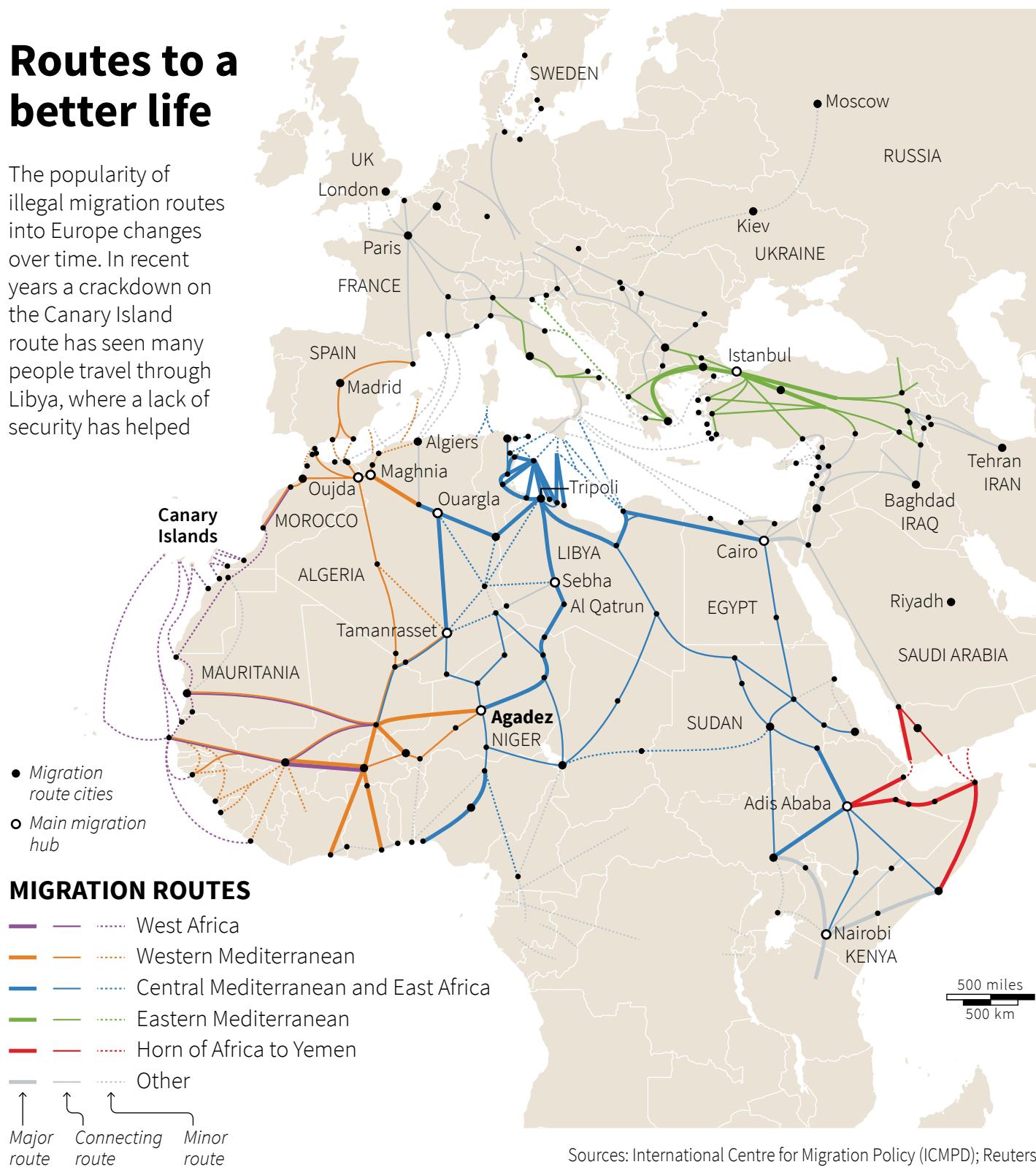
According to Frontex, the European Union's border management agency, the single biggest route for migrants entering the EU is by air, and most of those illegally in Europe first entered with valid documents and then overstayed.

But tens of thousands also pay smugglers to make the dangerous journey across central Asia and the Middle East, from the Horn of Africa through Sudan, or from West Africa across the Sahara to the Mediterranean.

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Routes to a better life

The popularity of illegal migration routes into Europe changes over time. In recent years a crackdown on the Canary Island route has seen many people travel through Libya, where a lack of security has helped



The trade took off in the mid 1990s, when countries like Spain and Italy imposed stricter visa requirements. Africans began making the dash across the Strait of Gibraltar, slipped into Spain's North African enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla, or attempted treacherous boat trips to the Canary Islands in the Atlantic or the Italian island of Lampedusa in the Mediterranean.

The popularity of routes changes as authorities adapt. A crackdown by Spanish and African authorities on the Canary Island route over recent years has meant more traffic through the Sahara, where the violence and chaos of post-Gaddafi Libya has made things easier.

Given the nature of the trade, statistics on the numbers of those who try to cross the Sahara are sketchy.

At least 34,800 people have made the treacherous crossing from North Africa to Europe so far this year, compared to 43,000 in all of 2013, according to figures from the U.N. refugee agency, UNHCR.

Hundreds of those are likely to have come via Agadez. Maikido, the Agadez governor, estimates that some 3,000 migrants a week headed to Libya before the crackdown. A Niamey-based diplomat put the weekly number at 3,000 to 5,000.

Reseau Exodus, a project that worked with police in Niger to collect data on registered migrant flows towards Libya, recorded just over 40,000 people leaving Agadez travelling north over nine months in 2013. About half of these were from Niger, so some may have been heading to remote towns in the northeast.

Most of the migrants from Niger said they intended to work in Libya. But nearly half of those from elsewhere in West Africa told the researchers they saw the North African nation as a stepping stone for Europe.

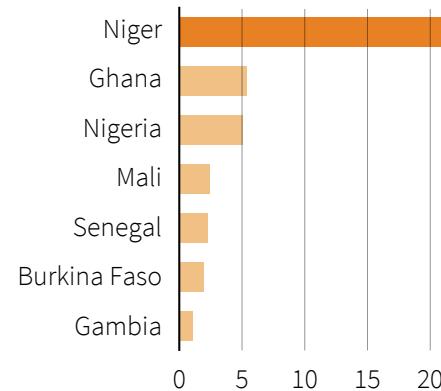
"PHENOMENON DEFEATED"

For years, the Agadez route operated largely in the open. Most people left in trucks

Out of Niger

Total migrants registered on the Agadez-Dirkou route from March to December 2013*.

By origin, in thousands of people



*Data for November not available.

Data not available for route to Algeria. Includes people from Niger who may have travelled north but not left country.

Source: Reseau Exodus organisation

and benefited from weekly escorts provided by Niger's military.

That changed with last year's deaths. Most of the 92 were women and children who had been abandoned in the desert when the trucks they were in broke down. Marou Amadou, Niger's justice minister and the official government spokesman, said the incident galvanised public opinion and helped end a culture of denial.

"The large scale nature of the phenomenon has been defeated. We cannot end 100 percent of the fraud but we think the government had recorded a big victory," he told Reuters. "We were able to dismantle the camps. We were able to go after the chain of corruption that operated the business."

At the entrance to one Agadez transit house a gate now sits padlocked. Next door, the "Restaurant African", previously a favourite of migrants, has been abandoned.

The weekly, convoy of dozens of migrant-filled vehicles has been reduced to a handful of trucks ferrying locals, sheep and some hay north. Hawkers peddling plastic sachets of water, toothbrushes and packets of medicines for travellers lament the drop in customers.

"NOTHING HAS CHANGED"

Quietly, though, the migrant trade continues.

At a bus depot in downtown Niamey each evening, a steady flow of migrants arrive from across West Africa ahead of the 3 a.m. bus for Agadez. They gather in groups, resting on mats laid out in the open to catch the occasional breeze during the intense night heat.

"Nothing has changed," said Bachir Amadou, who works as a guide for Ghanaians headed for Libya. Amadou collects passports and cash from his eight charges for the next trip. Briefing them on what to expect, he tells them that on top of the 17,000 CFA (\$36) bus ticket, they will have to pay 43,000 CFA in bribes to get through the police checkpoints between the capital and Agadez. For anyone without correct documents it will be double, he says.

An official at a regional bus company said that following a dip in numbers after the crackdown, "the flow (in migrants) is up again."

Behind a corrugated iron gate in one Agadez neighbourhood a few weeks ago, a dozen migrants from Senegal, Mali and Guinea sat on the floor of a single-roomed house.

A 20 year-old Guinean who gave his name as Amadou said he hoped to reach Libya. "My family tells me I that I should not do it but I am going to try in any case. I am scared of the desert but I will go and get a job."

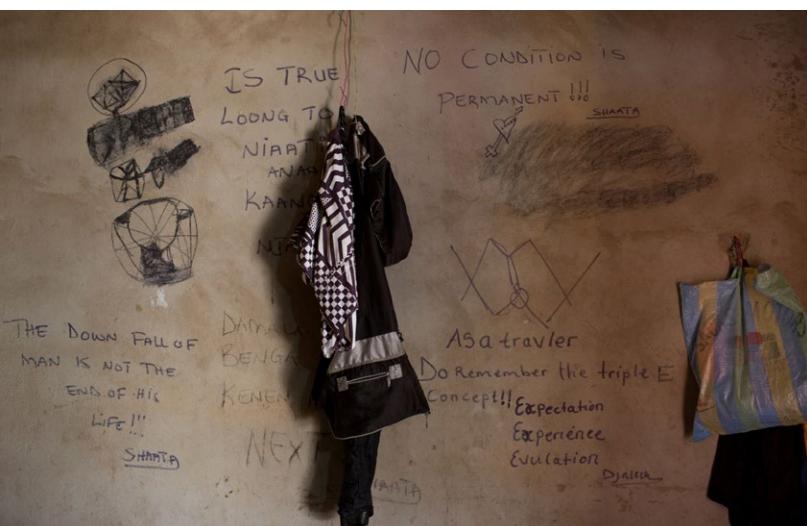
In the centre of town, a line of people waiting to receive money via Western Union transfer curled round the corner from a bank. Migrants say they often travel

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TRADE IMBALANCE: Senegalese and Guinean migrants (above) gather in a centre run by the Red Cross and the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) in Agadez, in March. Militia groups in southern Libya regularly deport migrants, but that does not stop others, such as those scrambling into a truck (below right), from heading north. Some would-be migrants leave messages on the walls of Agadez; these were written by Gambians.



to Agadez with little money to make sure they are not robbed. Once there, they get a relative or friend to wire them cash.

RISING COSTS AND RISKS

The Reseau Exodus project ended in January after funding from the Italian government and non profits ran out. In the first two weeks of this year, the organisation recorded nearly 500 foreigners arriving in Agadez, down by about two thirds on the levels of earlier last year, but up again after the November crackdown.

"People are still coming in. This means they must be going out," said Mohamed Andando, a member of an Agadez-based organisation called Gage that carried out much of Reseau Exodus's research.

Aboubacar Issaka Oumarou, Agadez's new police commissioner, said migrants were being ferried out at night to waiting Toyota Hilux pick-ups. Vehicles, often packed with 25-30 migrants at a time, have carved out fresh tracks through the desert to skirt around towns like Agadez.

"This puts the lives of the migrants in even more danger. But they (the smugglers) are not worried about this," Police Commissioner Oumarou said.

Migrants and local officials say the cost of a space in a pickup from Agadez to Al Qatrur, the first main town inside Libya, has risen to around 150,000 CFA from 115,000 CFA last year.

Maikido, the Agadez governor, said corruption had turned the networks into a "well-oiled" machine. A report issued by his office in July last year, and seen by Reuters, highlights how previous efforts to curb people smuggling had failed. The memo, to regional security forces, states that the flow of illegal migrants to Libya continued despite the governor ordering officials to seize vehicles and passengers whose papers were not in order.

"The level of tolerance of this issue in



CROSSROADS: The northern Niger town of Agadez is a major staging post for migrants headed north, despite a government crackdown that followed the deaths of 92 migrants in the Sahara late last year.

society is very high. This has led to a high level of impunity. People think that it is just a normal job," said Hamza Bayere, president of Niger's national commission tasked with fighting against people trafficking.

An internal 2013 report by Niger's anti-corruption body HALCIA, seen by Reuters, details the amounts migrants and their smugglers paid to police, soldiers and gendarmes at each checkpoint between Agadez and the Libyan border on one trip in early 2013. Drivers had to pay about \$500 in bribes to get to the border and another \$400 to get back. Foreign migrants paid around \$35 each, it said.

Even using the most conservative estimate of the pre-crackdown numbers, that means the Agadez-to-Libya route generated millions of dollars a year before the crackdown.

Among the beneficiaries of that trade are the Toubou, who are a semi nomadic group living in northeast Niger, northwest Chad and southern Libya which dominates the people smuggling routes. The Toubous have long been marginalised in Libya, and many

regional experts suspect the cash they are earning from the trade could allow them to arm themselves.

"You have to worry what the impact will be there and maybe even here afterwards," Maikido, the governor, said. "People could seriously arm themselves with this money."

Barka al Qatrur, a Toubou, has been ferrying migrants to Libya for seven years. He and seven fellow drivers continue to work the trade. "Now we just pay more" to security officials, he said.

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