

# TRANSMIGRATION OF CRIMINAL GANGS AND PROLIFERATION OF ILLICIT ACTIVITIES AND THEIR IMPACT ON SECURITY IN EAST CAMEROON

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**Abstract:** *This article highlights the phenomenon of cross-border crime, which is illustrated by the persistence of acute illicit trafficking across borders. Thus, illicit trafficking is seen from the outset as illegal and clandestine trade (Koffi Annan, 2000). With the cavalcade of recurrent cross-border movements along Cameroon's eastern border since the 1990s, illicit trafficking infiltrates and breaks down borders to inexorably infiltrate Cameroonian societies and infect their political, economic and cultural functioning. From then on, the perpetrators of these acts put all their intelligence to work in the service of crime and delinquent acts to create confusion and disorder in order to accumulate large advantages by operating on the fringes of the law while respecting those of their illicit universe. Also, this contribution analyses the consequences of transmigration mobilities (hostage takers, coupeurs de route, terrorist acts) on the peace and security of the eastern fringe.*

**Keywords:** East Cameroon, transmigration, criminal gangs, illicit activities, insecurity.

## 1. Introduction

The phenomenon of hostage-taking for ransom has unquestionably grown in Cameroon (CNDHL, 2018: 174). This criminal activity is now prevalent in the eastern facade. Indeed, since the major global upheavals of the early 1990s, there has been an upsurge in crises in Africa in general and in the Central African sub-region in particular. Bordering Cameroon, Chad and the Central African Republic have been the scene of these various crises. This socio-political situation has prompted several foreign nationals and rebel gangs to penetrate Cameroon's eastern borders, taking advantage of the porous nature of the latter. East Cameroon, on the border with the Central African Republic, receives several types of cross-border migratory flows. These include seasonal, animal, forced and criminal migration. The central argument is that cross-border mobility is a source of insecurity in East Cameroon. In other words, using a systemic approach, the aim is to show that migratory flows are accompanied by serious security problems. This obliges the Cameroonian government and international and local institutions to take alternative measures to avoid the risk of deportation, the importation of Central African socio-political disputes and cross-border insecurity onto its territory. Despite all the measures taken, the flow of immigrants, refugees and criminal gangs is at the root of the proliferation of illicit trafficking, transnationalization and the systematization of violence and cross-border crime. All in all, it is clear that the various forms of mobility mentioned above have socio-political, socio-economic, environmental, diplomatic and security implications for East Cameroon. Since 1990, and even more so between 2012 and 2021, the high number of Cameroonians kidnapped and released after financial negotiations at the border between the two countries is proof enough that the phenomenon has become a lucrative business, maintained by shadowy players and sometimes with the complicity of hostages. The business is also a consequence of the many political crises in the Central African Republic, which have led to the emergence of armed gangs who scour the border towns and increase the number of kidnappings for ransom. We take a closer look at a lucrative business that continues to sow terror in the region of the rising sun.

Using a diachronic approach based on empirical documentation in the form of books, articles, press clippings and newspapers, direct and semi-directive interviews, and field observations of various actors and protagonists, this contribution shows how mobility has

transformed the eastern part of Cameroon into a space for the transnationalization of illicit activities and the systematization of violence through the mutualization of criminal organizations. It also analyses the impact of these illicit activities and the transmigration of criminal gangs on security and social cohesion in the East.

## **2. The proliferation of small arms and light weapons**

The focus is on the factors, characteristics and modes of acquisition of small arms and light weapons, in order to highlight the real impact of their proliferation on security in East Cameroon.

### **2.1 Factors and characteristics of small arms and light weapons**

According to the United Nations, small arms and light weapons include bladed weapons (truncheons, cutlasses or machetes) and weapons of calibers immediately below those listed in the UN Register of Conventional Arms, such as mortars of less than 100 millimeters (UN, 1999:10). Specifically, light weapons include heavy machine guns, portable grenade launchers, portable anti-aircraft guns, portable anti-tank guns, missile launchers and rocket launchers, etc., while small-calibre weapons include revolvers and self-loading pistols, rifles and carbines, submachine guns, assault rifles and light machine guns. In the 2000s, it was estimated that over 900 million small arms were in circulation worldwide, of which 5 to 6% were in Central Africa, including Cameroon (Owona Alima Kisito, 2007: 213). According to the United Nations, in 1997 these weapons accounted for 10% of the world's illicit market (Diplomatie n°05, 2011: 57). What's special about the plethora of these weapons is that they are easier to operate, transport and cheap. But what explains the proliferation of such weapons?

Looking at African society, several factors are behind the exponential proliferation of weapons. Alongside historical and socio-political factors, there are institutional factors. The latter are the focus of our attention, especially since until 1990, there was little or no international legal instrument to regulate the production and marketing of conventional weapons (Njimambou Aliou, 2009: 52). Unfortunately, it was not until 1991 that the United Nations created the Register of Conventional Arms, the aim of which was to guarantee transparency in arms transfers (Dicod, 2005: 85). In practice, this provision does not translate into adequate regulation, since it does not refer to all types of weapons. The register therefore remains restrictive.

With this in mind, the AK-47<sup>1</sup> invaded Africa like a gust of wind, as it was not subject to rigorous coercive regulations<sup>138</sup>. The notable absence of rigorous international standards regulating the transfer and marketing of the AK-47, and the ease with which it can be handled, facilitate the spread of this weapon around the world (Njimambou Aliyou, 2009: 56; Owana Alima Kisito, 2007). This is how it finds its way into the hands of robbers, and fuels many African civil wars through armed militias and other criminal gangs. What's more, another factor that facilitates the proliferation of these weapons is the lack of a reliable instrument for tracing and marking them (Sali, 2022: 244).

It's worth noting in passing that this glaring lack of legislation to regulate its circulation has prompted the United Nations to think about a legal framework. As indicated in the 2001 United Nations Programme of Action, the international community has begun to draw up an international instrument on these issues (ISS, 2004). In this case, a text on traceability and marking has been put in place, which indicates that tracing enables the control of the various circuits taken by the weapon, from the manufacturing plant to the final use, via intermediaries and other transfers. As far as marking is concerned, the text helps to trace the weapon in a register. However, while it is true that the UN General Assembly adopted the International Instrument on the Traceability of Small Arms and Light Weapons in December 2005, it still

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<sup>1</sup> The AK-47 is commonly known as the Kalashnikov. It was invented in 1945 and manufactured in 1947 by General Mikhail Kalashnikov.

contains significant gaps. Traffickers take advantage of these loopholes to orchestrate insecurity. All of which makes controls difficult and encourages the rapid and easy proliferation and circulation of SALW.

In Cameroon, the law governing small arms and light weapons dates back to 1973, in the form of Decree no. 73/658 of October 22, 1973, amending the Decree of December 20, 1920 on firearms and Ordinance no. 7 of 1958 on firearms. The situation was made even more delicate by the adoption in September 1997 by the National Assembly of Law 623/PJL/AN on private security companies, whose implementing decree specifies that firearms and ammunition are weapons in the second and third categories, including revolvers, pistols and shotguns.

In order to effectively combat the proliferation of small arms and light weapons in Cameroon, the 1973 legislative and regulatory framework needs to be reformed, especially as the existing framework was paving the way for such proliferation. Such a reform should define the contours of a national policy on the subject, which will enable statistics to be kept on the circulation of small arms and light weapons, as well as related crimes and offences (ISS, 2004).

As a result, the proliferation of these weapons is fuelling conflict zones. In these areas, a Kalashnikov is sold for around 10,000 CFA francs (Onana Mfegue, 2004), which can inevitably fall into the hands of criminals of all kinds. And the "coupeurs de routes" (road cutters) who operate in every corner of Cameroon, with a strong presence in the North and East of the country, use these weapons. They have weapons galore, as demonstrated by this Cameroon Tribune investigation: in 1999, gendarmerie units seized from "coupeurs de route" a stock of 322 weapons of war comprising 85 Kalashnikov rifles, PM7.62mm short version, 37 MAT 49 9mm machine pistols, 45 MAS 36 37.5mm rifles, 23 standard 7.62mm FALs, rocket launchers, grenade launchers and ammunition (Cameroon Tribune, n°6781, 1999: 45; *Cameroon Tribune*, n°6795, 1999, 8-9). These weapons therefore take different directions. These include: the hands of children (child soldiers), as in the Democratic Republic of Congo in 1998 and Rwanda in 1994; the hands of religious extremists such as Shebbabs (Somalia), Boko Haram (Nigeria), the "coupeurs de route" in Cameroon; the hands of highwaymen, as in the case of hostage-takers and Central African rebels. All things considered, if these weapons are proliferating exponentially around the world, how do these brokers get from one country to another? To answer this question, we need to explain how they are acquired.

## **1.2. Methods of acquiring small arms and light weapons**

Studies carried out on small arms and light weapons around the world indicate several modes of acquisition. However, we focus on official and illicit acquisition methods, before presenting the various transfer techniques used by users.

From the official point of view, these are supplies made by internationally recognized governments. Thus, state acquisitions can be both legal and illegal (Owona Alima Kisito, 2007). Each state has its own regulations for acquiring weapons within its territory. African states in general, and those of Central Africa in particular, modulate and shape their legislation as they see fit. It is with this in mind that the regulations governing arms transfer controls and the laws on various subjects in this field, such as possession, arms registration, sales and so on, vary and differ from one country to another (Njimboue Aliyou, 2009: 58). In line with international standards, the state concerned buys arms in reasonable quantities to ensure its defense and security. The aim is therefore to ensure the internal security of the state. In the present case, this is not a cause for concern. However, the state may make irresponsible or "grey market" purchases (Owana Kisito Alima, 2007). These types of purchases are, in many respects, authorized by the United Nations. But they are sometimes of dubious legality because they often take unorthodox routes, since from the point of view of International Law, weapons purchased in this way are prone to certain risks. These include the significant risk of misuse, for example in the repression of populations; and the significant risk of detour to unauthorized recipients.

Even today, it is commonplace in Africa for the state to import large quantities of weapons, but ultimately lack the means to control or guard stocks. Large quantities of weapons disappear into the hands of criminal gangs, causing suffering and sometimes even death. Cases of irresponsible procurement are numerous in Africa, especially in countries affected by armed conflict (Adam, 1997: 105). There are also cases of arms purchases made by the state, but in total disregard of international legislation or restrictive measures imposed by the United Nations. In other words, black-market procurement. Examples of illegal procurement also abound on the African continent, particularly in the Central African sub-region.

On the other side of the acquisition spectrum, there's the illicit route. This is the most decried and widespread form of acquisition in all countries. "Illicit arms acquisitions are carried out by non-state structures (militias, armed gangs, rebellions, insurgents, etc.) or simply by unauthorized individuals. These traffickers and criminal gangs use various means to obtain weapons" (Owona Kisito Alima, 2007:33). Brigands use a variety of means to acquire weapons. By way of illustration, brigands launch surprise assaults on police stations, gendarmerie posts or any other place where weapons are kept (armories) and collect the entire arsenal, including ammunition (Feukouo, 2009:20).

In addition to break-ins at security posts, there are also attacks on these forces of order by brigands (Ayissi, 2001). These assaults occur either in cabs or in homes. There are also various accusations of complicity by the forces of law and order in the rental or sale of weapons. These weapons feed criminal networks. These networks can also obtain their supplies directly from local manufacturers (artisans), including production is clearly on the rise and responding perfectly to strong demand.

## **2. Arms transfer techniques in eastern Cameroon**

Taking advantage of porous borders and geographical proximity to Eastern Cameroon, arms traffickers use a variety of means and techniques to conceal and smuggle weapons across borders. The first technique used by traffickers is decomposition and concealment (Owona Alima Kisito, 2007). As the name suggests, this technique consists of breaking down and dismantling the weapon, then handing over the components to friends or collaborators in the criminal trade who are making a journey, concealing the parts in their luggage. Once at the destination, the components are reshaped and the weapon is reconstituted and can now be used for robbery or murder (Njimboue Aliyou, 2009: 60). As for the technique of concealment, it involves hiding weapons and/or their components, as well as ammunition, in merchandise (flour or rice sacks) intended for sale to the public.

Crises and wars are undoubtedly at the root of refugee movements around the world. With the Central African crises, East Cameroon has not been spared. These refugees, considered as vulnerable people, are cared for by state and non-state institutions. However, in many respects, they are transmission belts for arms trafficking.

All things considered, civil wars in Africa always end up producing large numbers of refugees who, more often than not, if not all the time, take with them light weapons that are easy to transport and conceal because of their lightness (Nkoulak, 2009). These weapons, which, as we said earlier, escape customs and police controls, can be passed from one country to another as the refugees move. Because of the large number of refugees it hosts, Cameroon is affected by the phenomenon of arms dissemination, with regrettable consequences in East Cameroon. The eastern customs sector is constantly recording huge seizures.

### **2.1. Small arms and light weapons: a lever for security and social peace**

The truth is that the weapon is a lever for security, insofar as it is with it that the forces of law and order and defense ensure security in the country. They are also a leaven in the sense that they sow the seeds of violent passions and insecurity when bandits use them to spread terror. The proliferation of small arms and light weapons has always had a negative impact on

human security and development (UN, 1999). The widespread availability of these firearms plays a direct role in exacerbating the spiral of violence and hostilities.

As a general rule, the legal use of weapons is a means of self-defense. But its primary role has given way to other roles with criminal ends. Such is the case with its proliferation in East Cameroon, where hard-to-identify individuals are casting a shadow over the population's security. In short, the trade in small arms and light weapons is not controlled upstream, leading to transnational crime. According to the United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research (UNIDIR), efforts to curb the illicit circulation of small arms and light weapons are hampered by the lack of effective tools within countries to determine their origin and trace their supply chains. Especially at a time when the world is experiencing waves of revolutions in certain countries, this would have multiplied once again the various networks of illicit arms trafficking (Gambo, 2014: 51).

He was a former "Séléka" rebel clandestinely in possession of his own weapon. In fact, this "Séléka" militant was a Central African refugee living in Cameroon at the Garoua-Boulai site. On December 28, 2013, he was 13 km from the town when rocket fire was fired at the "anti-balaka", which was later turned against him for false handling. Transported by his fellow soldiers, he died in the Garoua-Boulai district hospital (Gambo, 2014: 52). The proliferation of illicit weapons thus ensures sub-regional instability in general and the eastern part of Cameroon in particular. Illegal possession of weapons by Central African nationals is recurrent in the eastern part, complicating social peace as it is with these weapons that they engage in assassinations, trafficking and other activities.

## **2.2. The expansion of other illegal trades: a threat to societal security in East Cameroon**

Illegal trafficking is not just about arms, but also about drugs and medicines, people and human bones, poaching and smuggling.

Drugs and counterfeit medicines are absolute products, i.e. prohibited by law, whereas relative products are legal. Here, we first highlight the types and circuits of drugs in circulation, and then discuss their devastating effects.

The most popular types of drug in eastern Cameroon are Indian hemp and Tramadol. In fact, Indian hemp is a substance that causes changes in states of consciousness (Oyono, 2001: 8). Known by the scientific name of "*cannabis sativa indica*", Indian hemp, according to the scientific classification of plants, belongs to the *cannabaceae* family (*Larousse Dictionary*, 2006: 337). According to the Larousse dictionary, Indian hemp or cannabis is an annual herbaceous plant of rudimentary appearance with a stem bristling with solid, rigid hairs. It can grow from 1.5 to 5 metres high, depending on climate and soil type (Gasprini, 1996).

Since 1997, in Cameroon in general and in the eastern part in particular, a hectare of cannabis has provided an income 12 times greater than a hectare of maize, and a day devoted to cannabis cultivation has generated an income 4 to 26 times greater in the context of associated cultivation (OGD, 1997). Cannabis cultivation is amplified by cross-border mobility between Cameroon and CAR. As a result, there is a growing number of entrepreneurs dealing in these illicit products.

As Jean-François Bayart has pointed out (Bayart, 1997), the illicit trade that has been rife in the towns of eastern Cameroon for decades, with its crime-inducing effects, is tending inevitably towards the "narcotization" of Cameroon's eastern fringe. The growth of this illicit trade in the eastern part of Cameroon is due to its proximity to the border areas of neighboring countries such as the Central African Republic, which are hotbeds for the production, consumption and transition of psychotropic products. Among narcotic substances, cannabis is the most popular in the Central African sub-region (Oyono, 2001: 9 and Sali, 2022: 261).

Drug trafficking in eastern Cameroon is not without consequences. The trade and illicit circulation of drugs fuel cross-border crime (CNLD, 2016). Indeed, drug trafficking has always been a factor that undermines security. With the hyper-structured organization of traffickers,

it is now becoming more than just criminal networks or organized crime. This suggests "transnational criminal systems" (Brun, 2019).

In East Cameroon, even banned drugs are a commodity for "narcotraffickers" in the economic sense. They are produced, traded and consumed by individuals of various nationalities. As a result, drug use is on the increase, taking advantage of a number of factors, including the emergence of alliances between drug traffickers and members of Central African armed groups. This factor aggravates the rebellions of criminal gangs or terrorist groups who form "grey zones" to succeed in their evil deeds (Labrousse, 1996: 3). It is therefore easy to see that most robberies are due to the consumption of drugs, specifically Indian hemp and Tramol.

### **2.3. Poaching: a threat to protected species and a breach of peace and security**

The recurrence of illicit trafficking in ivory and pangolin scales, their intermingling and their negative impact on the protection of the wildlife environment continue to fuel debates around the world (UN, 2000).

Eradicating this phenomenon requires substantial resources and concerted action on the part of the international community, all the more so as the use of ultra-powerful weapons and sophisticated tactical equipment by certain poachers demonstrates the capabilities and financial resources of these groups and the danger they represent for the Central African sub-region and for Cameroon in particular<sup>1</sup>. The trafficking of drugs, weapons, ivory, people and human bones in the eastern part of Cameroon has become a worrying security problem.

In eastern Cameroon, cross-border crime is the result of an upsurge in organized crime involving the trafficking of people and human bones (UNODC, 2011). This is, in fact, a global phenomenon that is constantly flaring up across state borders. According to UN and Council of Europe statistics, human trafficking generates some \$32 billion in annual sales, and is the third most widespread form of trafficking in the world, after drugs and arms (UN, 2000). This illicit and criminal traffic is characterized by inhumane practices that render borders vulnerable and violate established legal and regulatory standards.

In addition, smuggling involves the illegal transport of goods or people, particularly across borders, in order to avoid paying taxes or to bring prohibited products into a country, or conversely, to bring them out despite the ban (Verna, 1993: 2). This makes trafficking easy. Human trafficking involves the use of violence and threats to get hold of a person and torture them in order to gain possession of their organs. Progressively, the networks have taken on considerable proportions, which is why the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) reports that at least 22,000 people were victims of inhumane treatment worldwide in 2006 (*Diplomatie* n°05,2011 : 56).

In this transnational criminal enterprise, it should be noted that 2/3 of the victims are women, as 79% of these people are victims of sexual exploitation (*Diplomatie* n°05, 2011). These criminal acts are not accidental for the perpetrators, as they are a weapon of war to terrorize the population, exploit them, humiliate them and undermine their morale, in order to defy States and the international legal framework that governs vulnerable people. This, at least, is what happens at border crossings, where vulnerable people are once again the first victims at every checkpoint. Similarly, women are sometimes robbed by smugglers and forced into prostitution in order to pay off their tormentors. They are also forced into prostitution, a repressed illicit trade that turns women into a commodity for everyone to have and do with as they please. This leaves the way wide open for transnational sexual predators (Nebeu, 2015: 34). Once these women arrive in the host cities, they are subjected to rape and other forms of sexual exploitation, domestic work and other criminal or non-criminal labor activities (Dusch, 2002).

In general, the persistent phenomenon in the eastern part of Cameroon is, far from being these human exploitations, a problem of organ trafficking. Indeed, since the socio-political

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<sup>1</sup> Order No. 082/PM of October 21, 1999 creating a national anti-poaching committee.

upheavals in the Central African Republic, caused by the return of refugees who are difficult to capture and identify, the recurrence of information in the national media has not ceased to highlight the eminence of the phenomenon in the various localities of Eastern Cameroon. Trafficking in people, organs and human bones is becoming commonplace. This criminal but lucrative trade is favored by criminal groups.

All in all, the insecurity observed in the various localities of East Cameroon is also consubstantial with the trafficking of organs and human bones, which the media report daily in tandem with its recurrence. In these circumstances, the desecration of graves appears to be both an unseemly and degrading act. An unseemly act insofar as it does not conform to respect for the sacred, or to the rules and customs of society. It is in this sense that the sacred is trivialized. It is degrading in that it morally debases the image of the deceased. It is committed in defiance of a society's customs towards its dead. It is an illicit act dangerous to the security and social peace of individuals, insofar as it can inevitably target an individual, but also a community. The target is the healthy individual, especially children and women. The idea is to sneak up on a healthy person and kill him or her, in order to gain possession of the bones. The man is transformed into wood, burned or incinerated to obtain the bones, which are presented as charcoal. Here, the man represents the wood and the bones are the charcoal. This can involve an entire community (Esquere, 2007).

The highly prized trade in human bones is taking on considerable proportions in the eastern part of the region. Hardly a month goes by without the police and security forces catching the grave robbers. Both nationals and foreigners are involved in this disastrous business. The money made from this criminal enterprise is used to bribe, counterfeit and launder, while creating new platforms to multiply their activities. In essence, the insecurity generated by trafficking in "white gold 185" feeds on war, porous borders and the weakening of states, in the sense that these factors make trafficking transactions fertile. And, "as long as border controls are not properly enforced, as long as there is mobility of people and goods, and poverty, there will always be foreigners with multiple identities, and it will be difficult to remedy this effectively" (Sali, 2022: 283). This exacerbates cross-border banditry driven by criminal mobility, leading to hostage-taking and terrorist acts on the eastern borders.

### **3. Transmigration of armed gangs and the emergence of cross - border crime in the eastern fringe**

The transmigration of armed gangs between Cameroon and the Central African Republic has been accompanied by a range of criminal activities (Nana Ngassam, 2014: 8) in the eastern part of Cameroon. These include transnational and cross - border crime. Transnational and cross-border crime involves fairly stable organized criminal gangs of international scope, whose actors are of various nationalities and whose crimes are perpetrated in a given state or have repercussions in one or more states adjacent to the state under attack. The latter, on the other hand, is a phenomenon encompassing a range of criminal acts whose perpetrators and repercussions extend beyond the borders of contiguous states (Mve Ebang, 2009). In essence, from the 1990s to the beginning of 2022, these mobilities have inevitably given rise to acute cross-border insecurity, manifested in acts of cross-border banditry, hostage-taking and road-cutting.

#### **3.1. Exacerbation of hostage-taking and terrorist acts**

The phenomenon of hostage-taking in the world in general, and in Central Africa in particular, has a long and varied history. Indeed, since the 1990s, the kidnapping of people by criminal gangs has become and is becoming a veritable industry with highly lucrative revenues (Fiorina, 2013: 1). Hostage-taking is the arrest and detention of an innocent person in response to the execution, by third parties, of an order or condition set by the kidnappers (Encyclopédia Universalis, 1990). She is considered a hostage, a pledge to obtain what one wants. An ancient phenomenon, hostage-taking has evolved over the course of history, taking on considerable

proportions depending on the stakes involved for criminal gangs. By the way: "In ancient times, hostage-taking was an institution designed to guarantee the execution of military or political treaties. Unlike today, hostages were not taken, but handed over" (Fiorina, 2013: 15).

So, far from being a prisoner, the hostage is a captive who must not suffer any torture or ill-treatment. They must simply be held by the hostage-takers (Saïbou Issa, 2007: 13) until further notice, at the risk of seeing them escape. The Central African crises have spawned a multitude of criminal gangs. The chances of a world of peace in the eastern part of Cameroon have dwindled with the presence of facets of crime characterized by acute hostage-taking. They are developing a culture of blackmail, ransom, moral coercion and physical violence as a means of putting pressure on families and states, with child abductions and the like. To achieve this, hostage-takers establish a relationship of terror in which they create a certain triangularity between themselves, the victims and the politicians or non-politicians, so that the latter can agree to dialogue or ransom (Sali, 2022: 285).

With political instability on the rise, and the authority of neighboring states disrupted by ever-increasing crises, the "Kidnapping business" is making a comeback. Kidnapping is a criminal industry that has gained ground in these parts of the country by Central African rebels whose only hope is terror.

In this context, kidnapping is motivated by several factors, both political and financial. In fact, it's a whole interweaving of motivations, insofar as a kidnapping can pursue both political and economic objectives. Politically, it can be seen as a challenge to the powers that be, with the aim of destabilizing them by undermining the population's well-being. This will lead to challenges to the government's management of the city. In economic terms, kidnapping helps cross-border bandits to finance the rebellion (Saïbou Isaa, 2006: 134). This is how Central African politico-criminal groups feed their coffers through kidnapping, in addition to the other criminal activities already mentioned. The targeted kidnappings of Cameroonian fellow citizens by CAR rebel factions from 2014 to 2015 are legion, and this reinforces the analysis of the prevalence of the kidnapping business. In addition to these hostage-takings, there was another type of criminality such as "coupeur de route", which was prevalent in the eastern part of Cameroon.

### **3.2. The proliferation of criminal groups known as "coupeurs de route" and their impact on security**

The phenomenon of "coupeurs de route" in Cameroon in general, and in the northern and eastern parts in particular, goes back a long way. In fact, these criminal hordes have been present in these parts of Cameroon since colonial times, with the aim of creating panic and fear in order to control the social life of wealthy populations and gain possession of their property. During the pre-colonial period of Peuhl domination, the vastness of the Adamaoua Emirate and the continuous conquests inevitably gave rise to a culture of ransom and violent appropriation of wealth. Clearly, conflict situations, like jihad, were accompanied during this period by systematic and uncontrolled pillaging (Onana Mfegue, 2004: 144). It was against this backdrop that the development of the informal economy gradually took shape within the lamidale structures, whose chiefs sought to make their fortunes through levies, raids and captures.

The operation of road cutters rhymes almost naturally with acts of brigandage, if indeed history records that bands of robbers and pillaging soldiers scoured the roads of the Kingdom of France (Tourelle, 2006), committing acts of crime with violence and armed robbery by criminals assembled in troops on the roads. These were bandits who practiced highway robbery. They are thus called "coupeurs de route" (road cutters) because of their method of ambush on the roadway, which most often characterizes their mode of operation (Saïbou Issa, 2004). This method consisted in obstructing the road by throwing cut tree trunks onto the road, to prevent the movement of passengers.

Criminal groups have formed in the Central African Republic, and it is these groups with links to East Cameroon that are infiltrating the borders. In the localities of Paouo, Bozoum and



Bouar, there is a large base of coupeurs de route, Zarguina, which formed between 2000 and 2008. Alongside this large base, there is that of Baaba Laddé, Zarguina-Rebelle which formed from the period 2008 to 2012 in the localities of Berbari, Okabo (Chauvin and Seignobos, 2013: 121). These two groups are, in fact, a real lead in the wing for the eastern part in view of the contiguity that characterizes these bases with the border towns of Garoua-Boulai through which a plethora of these highwaymen enter. This is the case of the unidentified armed rebels in the Central African Republic who burst into the town of Garoua-Boulai on the night of October 24 to 25, 2014 in the village of Yokosiré (Sali, 2022: 296).

Their modus operandi was to block the road. Two trucks fell into the trap: one from the far north and the other from the coast (Belomo Essono, 2007). The truck from the coast was carrying mineral water for the Minusca troops in CAR. The two truck drivers and their motorcycles were taken hostage (Sali, 2022: 296). The recurrence of such a phenomenon on the roads of the East led the administrative authorities to set up a security system in the travel agencies. This consisted in providing each coach with elements of the Bataillon d'Intervention Rapide (B.I.R) to accompany travellers. In other words, the situation was as complex as it gets. This lack of road safety inexorably leads to capital flight, as investors have no desire to move to insecure areas (Lamine Cissé, 2007 : 26) for any kind of investment.

All things considered, and based on the above ideas, it is reasonable to argue that the logging phenomenon has had major consequences (Lamine Cisse, 2007). In addition to the aforementioned consequences, we note the destruction of basic infrastructures, wildlife and protected species. The terror of the coupeurs de route is a heavy burden on the population. The negative actions of these criminal gangs have had a negative impact on economic exchanges, on the movement of goods and people, and consequently on social peace (Fogue Tedom, 2007: 34) in Cameroon in general and in its eastern part in particular, with attacks by Central African criminogenic groups that have formed in areas close to the eastern borders.

These groups have profoundly disrupted social peace, insofar as they have created a climate of fear among traders and the general population living in areas where coupeurs de route are active. In some mining areas of eastern Cameroon, the road cutters ambush gold miners. The landlocked nature of these gold mining sites makes it easier for the assailants to operate, as the roads and tracks used by artisanal miners serve as traps for the road cutters. The vulnerability of artisanal miners, who are obliged to possess either raw gold if they have not been able to sell it, or cash, makes them veritable prey (Jowe Yamo, 2016).

#### 4. Conclusion

Moreover, cross-border mobility between Cameroon and its neighbors disrupted by various crises and conflicts has, in the eastern part, led to cross-border crime with multiple consequences. They have inevitably led to various forms of trafficking. Thus, taking advantage of porous borders that are difficult to secure, criminal gangs are infiltrating the eastern part of Cameroon, impacting on the peace and security of the population. It is in this context that the various illicit trades and crimes are most often carried out by criminal groups operating on different spatial scales. As we have illustrated, the latter are referred to as transnational or cross-border crime. But if you think about it, alongside highwaymen such as "coupeurs de route" and hostage-takers whose targets have been wealthy individuals, there are also acts of criminality whose effects are perceptible at political, socio-economic, physical and environmental levels. The variable-geometry criminality observed in East Cameroon is the result of the mobility or migration that has taken place in its eastern facade since the outbreak of socio-political upheavals in Central Africa.

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