

# Desert of rights

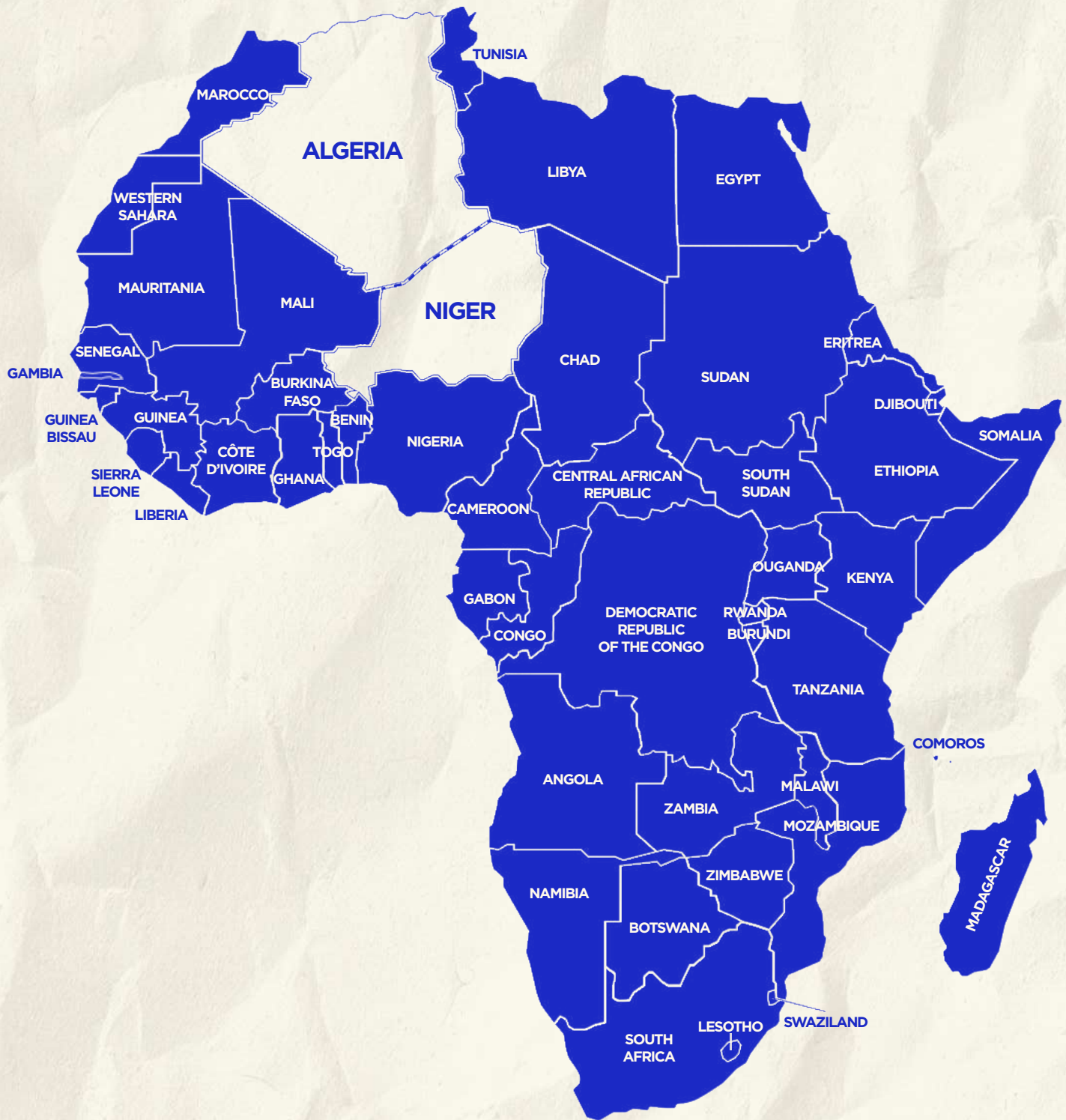
DEADLY PUSHBACKS AT THE  
ALGERIA-NIGERIA BORDER





This report examines the dynamics of migration between Algeria and Niger. While recent decades have seen an intensification of control and pushback policies, migrants crossing the Sahara desert are all too often deprived of their fundamental right to migrate in complete safety. Through an in-depth analysis of the pushback mechanisms put in place by the Algerian authorities and the obstacles to movement that exist in the region, this report explores the human, social, and economic consequences of these policies. Drawing on testimonies, NGO data, and international legal frameworks, the report argues for an approach to migration that is more respectful of human rights and international conventions in the Algeria-Nigeria border region.

The methodology of this report is based on in-depth documentary research of available and reliable sources (academic, journalistic, and humanitarian), supplemented by testimonies from migrants who have been turned back at the Algerian-Nigerian border. Interviews with experts in the field were also conducted to strengthen the analysis and ensure the reliability of the information gathered.



« Talking about this border is essential. After 2015, all the spotlight was on the Mediterranean Sea, but there's ignorance about what's happening in the Sahara. »

**Moctar Dan Yaya - Alarm Phone Sahara**

« We were a group of 13 people. We spent three days in the desert in a pick-up truck. At the border, we were intercepted by the Niger authorities. They sat us down and asked us questions. Those who refused to pay were whipped, then released. In Algeria, I spent three months on the streets, trying to find a job in construction. But the Algerian police arrested me and deported me here. I arrived in Assamaka on September 26, 2024. I accept the conditions here because I have no choice. »

**Kamal - Cameroun**

# A crucial border in the heart of the Sahara

In the middle of the Sahara desert, Algeria and Niger share an international border stretching 951 km. Since the 1990s, this shared border has become an important crossing point for seasonal migrant workers. While Nigerien authorities had previously shown relative tolerance toward exiles from sub-Saharan Africa, the 2010s saw Algeria securing the border, putting an end to Niger's leniency. Today, migration movements in the region remain predominantly intra-regional. According to the IOM, in 2023, nearly 69% of the people in Niger had North Africa as their final destination, while only 1% intended to reach Europe<sup>1</sup>. Although some plan to continue their journey to Algeria or Libya, those aiming to reach Europe remain a minority.

In the 2010s, the region experienced significant political destabilization, triggered by the fall of Gaddafi's regime, followed by the civil war in Libya and the outbreak of unrest in northern Mali with the Tuareg rebellion. This context led to a strengthened security-focused approach to regional border management. Amid a "general tightening of Saharan borders"<sup>2</sup> in 2013, Algeria announced the closure of its borders with Mali, Libya, and Niger, erecting a sand wall 2 to 4 meters high to prevent any illegal crossings of its southern border.

To ensure the impermeability of its Saharan border, Algeria also bolstered its defense and security forces (FDS) deployed in the region, mobilizing nearly 50,000 border guards, increasing the number of border posts, and installing sophisticated surveillance systems. As a result, smugglers began dropping migrants off at night, 1 to 5 km from the Algerian border, using 4x4 vehicles along secondary routes. The individuals must then climb the 2-to-4-meter-high sand wall and proceed on foot to reach the first Algerian town, In Guezzam<sup>3</sup>.

All these policies restricting migration have led to changes in routes and pathways, resulting in increased mortality. To avoid border checkpoints, exiled individuals are forced to take more remote and hazardous routes. While deaths in the Mediterranean are more thoroughly documented, little data is available on mortality in the Sahara. The vastness of the desert, the limited presence of

<sup>1</sup> International Organization for Migration (IOM), DTM Niger — [Rapport sur les enquêtes individuelles des flux de populations R16](#) (Avril - Juin 2024). IOM, Niger, Sep 27 2024.

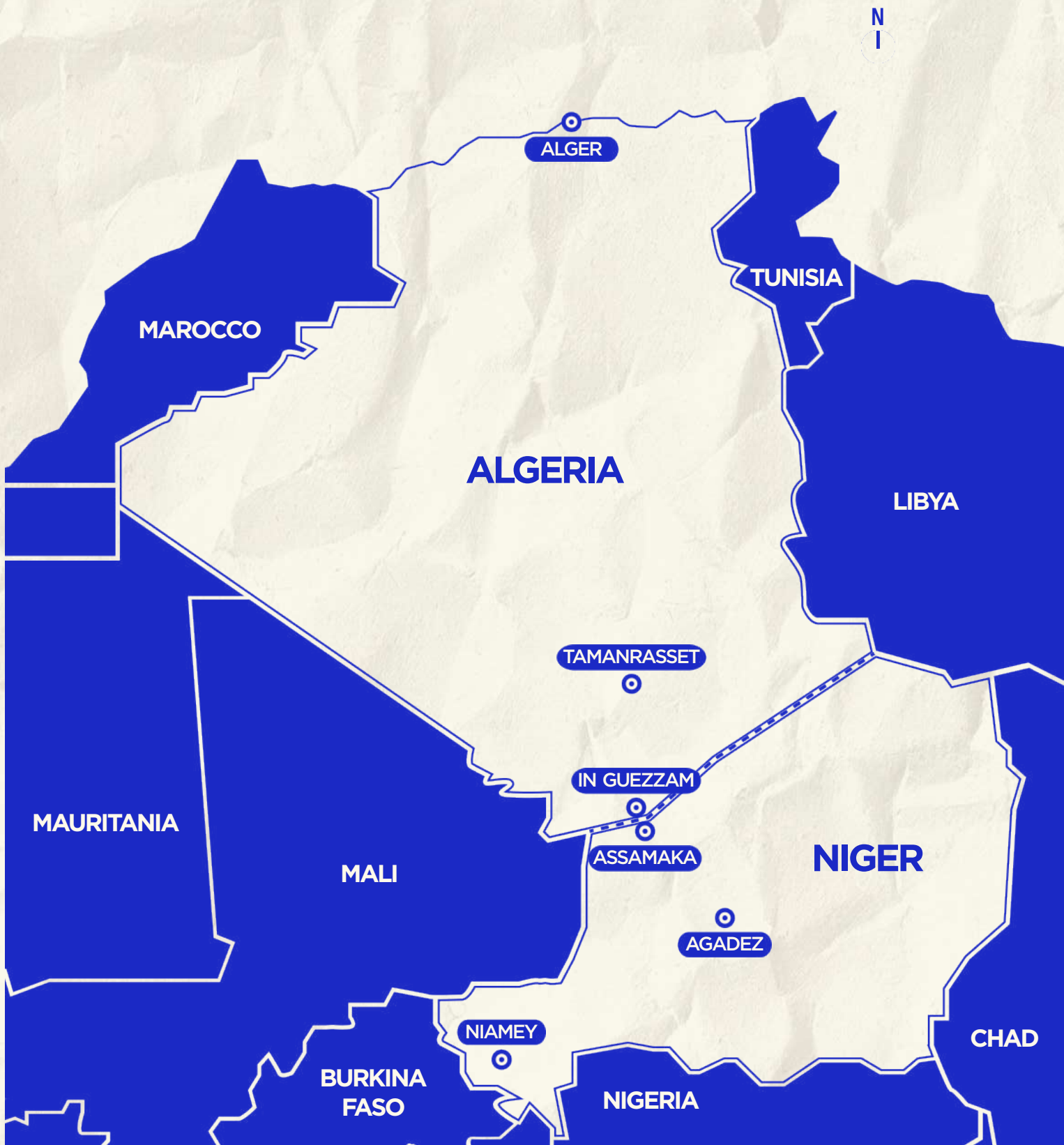
<sup>2</sup> Laurent Gagnol, « [Géohistoire des frontières sahariennes. L'héritage nomade enseveli sous les murs de sable](#) », July 01, 2022.

<sup>3</sup> Raouf Farrah, [Algeria's migration dilemma](#), Global Initiative against transnational organized crime, December, 2020.

organizations on the ground, and the disappearance of bodies swallowed by the sand make it difficult to establish reliable mortality rates.

The IOM estimates that for every person who dies in the Mediterranean, nearly two lose their lives in the Sahara Desert<sup>4</sup>. Between January 2020 and May 2024, the IOM reported that 1,180 migrants had died attempting to cross the Sahara. It is important to note that, due to a lack of comprehensive data, these figures are likely significantly underestimated.

<sup>4</sup>UN/IOM/Mixed Migration Center Report, « [On this journey, no one cares if you live or die. Abuse, Protection and Justice along Routes between East and West Africa and Africa's Mediterranean Coast](#) », 2024.



**Southern Algeria :**  
A Backdrop for Deportations to Niger



# The Legal Framework of Algeria-Niger Cooperation : A Driver of Increased pushbacks

The adoption of Law No. 08-11 by Algeria in 2008 introduced new provisions governing the entry, stay, and movement of foreign nationals without legal status on its territory. In addition to criminalizing so-called irregular entry, this law authorizes the pushback and deportation of individuals in irregular situations within Algeria.

While the first pushbacks of Nigerien nationals by Algeria dates back to the 1990s - resulting from a 1997 readmission agreement aimed at strengthening cooperation on combating irregular migration and securing borders - real migration cooperation between Algeria and Niger only took shape in 2014. A new readmission agreement, which was never made public, was signed to facilitate the return of Nigeriens without legal residency rights in Algeria.

That same year, 1,345 Nigerien nationals were expelled by Algerian authorities. These pushbacks primarily targeted women and children, most of whom were from the Zinder region and engaged in begging activities. Nigerien workers were also deported during these operations.

In 2016, Algeria intensified its repressive migration policies, launching a large-scale pushback campaign<sup>5</sup>. That year alone, nearly 9,000 individuals were expelled at Algeria's southern border. Algerian authorities began organizing mass pushbacks of Nigerien nationals, as well as nationals from other sub-Saharan African countries, outside any legal frameworks. This practice violated the 1997 readmission agreement, which only authorized the return of Nigerien nationals without legal residency in Algeria.



By conducting these collective pushbacks of non-Nigerien nationals, Algeria contravened the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families, as well as Article 12 of the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights. Despite having ratified these international and regional agreements, Algeria disregarded them in its deportation practices.

<sup>5</sup> To a lesser extent, Algeria is also accused of arbitrarily expelling exiles from African countries to Mali. See : Human Rights Watch, "[Algeria: Migrants Expelled to Mali, Then Ransomed](#)," March, 2018.

In 2018, Niger's Minister of the Interior formally requested Algerian authorities to halt all pushbacks to Niger. Although these demands met little response at the time, the current Nigerien government recently summoned the Algerian ambassador to protest what it described as "violent"<sup>6</sup> pushbacks. Despite objections from Niger and NGOs operating at the Algeria-Niger border, mass pushbacks of migrants from sub-Saharan Africa continue unabated.

According to Alarm Phone Sahara, one of the few local NGOs operating in the region and denouncing these collective pushbacks for several years, no fewer than 19,798 people were expelled by Algeria to Niger between January and August 2024.

	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
AMNESTY	1 345		9 000							
APS								22 127	24 250	26 031
MSF						29 888	23 175	27 208	36 083	
OIM	1 345	5 986	9 290	6 800 2 575	14 919 9 031	10 772 15 547				

 Official convoys  
 Unofficial convoys

<sup>6</sup> Jeune Afrique, « [The Niger Ambassador in Algeria Summoned Following a Similar Measure by Niamey](#) », April 7, 2014.

« **T**he Algerian Defense and Security Forces (FDS) subject migrants to abuse from the moment of their arrest. Migrants are systematically stripped of their phones. The lack of information documenting these pushbacks is due to the confiscation of these devices, which prevents any recording or visual testimony. »

**Moctar Dan Yaya - Alarm phone Sahara**

# Modus Operandi of pushbacks : Raids in the Nigerien Village of Assamakka

Although the limited access to Algerian civil society actors and the opacity surrounding the implementation of pushbacks on the Algerian side prevent a precise detailing of these processes, interviews with deported individuals and the NGO Alarm Phone Sahara (APS) have allowed us to reconstruct, in greater detail, the procedures and methods employed by Algerian Defense and Security Forces (FDS) during these pushbacks.

Arrested during raids orchestrated by Algerian authorities across the country, individuals are detained at their workplaces, homes, or even directly in the streets, following a logic that appears to be based on racial profiling. Without verification of their nationality, legal status, family situation, or any potential vulnerabilities, they are caught up in a violent deportation process. As a result, some individuals who had been granted refugee status by the UNHCR in Algeria or who were in possession of asylum application certificates were still deported to Niger following these raids.

The pushback of these individuals to Niger, despite their protection under the UNHCR's Algerian office<sup>7</sup>, violates the fundamental principle of "non-refoulement" enshrined in the 1951 Refugee Convention, which Algeria ratified in 1963. By denying their need for protection, Algerian authorities directly expose them to the risk of persecution in a country where their rights and security cannot be guaranteed.

Once arrested, individuals are often stripped of their personal belongings and taken to police stations, where they await deportation to detention centers located in the southern part of the country. Most pushbacks converge at the largest center in Tamanrasset, from which convoys are organized. Thousands of people are arbitrarily crammed into this facility.

According to Doctors Without Borders (MSF), nearly 80% of migrants recently deported by Algeria have been victims of theft of their personal belongings, including money and identity documents, by the authorities<sup>8</sup>. Since 2017, Algeria's Defense and Security Forces have systematized these practices, preventing detainees from

<sup>7</sup> Although a signatory to the 1951 Convention and the 1967 New York Protocol, Algeria does not have a national legislative framework on asylum. In the absence of efficient asylum management, the UNHCR is responsible for registering and assessing asylum applications in Algeria.

<sup>8</sup> Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung, « [Ruthless, Illegal, and Dangerous](#) », March 29, 2023.

recording or documenting the conditions of detention and the violence endured during arrests and transfers, as well as from notifying their families.

The information held on living conditions in these centers remains highly opaque, making it difficult to accurately document the care provided by the Algerian authorities and the events that actually took place there.

« I left Guinea in January 2024. After crossing Mali, I passed through Timbuktu. I had to fight to make it to Algeria. From there, I went to Morocco, but I was sent back to Algeria. Then, the Algerian authorities deported me to Niger, to Assamaka. If the Algerians catch you, they rob you, beat you, harm you, and they assault women. »

**Ibrahima - Guinée**

« We were a group of 12 people. I suffered a lot in the desert. We had nothing: no water, no food. While walking, I turned around and saw my friend die. Eventually, I managed to make it back into Algeria, near Tébessa, but I was caught and deported again to Niger. »

**Ahmed - Guinée**

**Arlit, behind the wall of IOM transit center**  
Source Alarm Phone Sahara 10.10.2024



**Walk to Assamaka, Source Alarm Phone Sahara 10.10.2024**

The imprisoned people are then crammed into cargo trucks and abandoned in the middle of the night at “point zero”, located in the Sahara desert some ten kilometers from the Niger border. It is estimated that, on average, for one “official convoy” making the journey from Tamanrasset each week, two “unofficial convoys” also take place. It is necessary to distinguish between two types of convoy, depending on the modus operandi chosen by the Algerian authorities. The “official convoys” are part of the agreement signed between the two countries in 2014 and concern only the repatriation of Niger nationals present on Algerian soil, who are brought to the village of Assamaka by the Algerian authorities. On the other hand, “unofficial convoys”, though illegal, are more numerous and carry migrants of several nationalities. According to data provided by APS, those deported come from Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Senegal, Gambia, Guinea Bissau, Guinea Conakry, Chad, Sudan, Nigeria, Ethiopia, etc. Hindered by the illegal nature of these convoys, the Algerian authorities are obliged to exploit cross-border trade and call on goods carriers preparing to cross the border to expel the non-Nigerian exiles. A military escort is then organized to ensure that the driver, forced to take part in the pushbacks, unloads all the people at the indicated point, and that none of them get off the truck. These third-country nationals are then unloaded at “point zero”, located near the border with Niger, where they are forced to disembark in this no-man’s-land. According to APS, several of the exiles have attested to the use of gunfire and other forms of violence inflicted by the FDS to force people off the trucks. It’s a violent and dangerous mechanism, carefully thought out by the Algerian authorities to dissuade and prevent any attempt to return to Algeria. Those in better physical condition are then forced to walk to the dune market of Assamaka, where they can warn the whistle-blowers of the arrival of a new convoy, thus triggering the search mechanism set up by APS<sup>9</sup>.

The state of exhaustion of people turned back after spending several days, even weeks, in detention centers, as well as the inhumane and degrading treatment to which they are subjected, directly endanger their lives. “Nearly 70% of the people treated by MSF testify to having suffered violence and abuse at the Algerian and Libyan borders”<sup>10</sup>. Those deported are left to fend for themselves without food or water, in an environment where temperatures can reach 45 degrees celsius.

<sup>9</sup> APS members are sent on tricycles as soon as they receive information that an unofficial convoy has arrived at point zero, in order to facilitate the transport of the most vulnerable people and to ensure that migrants do not get lost in the desert. Recently, a road sign indicating the direction to take to reach the village of Assamaka was also installed at point zero, thus minimizing the risks of getting lost in the desert.

<sup>10</sup> MSF denounces inhumane treatment of migrants refouled from Algeria and Libya | Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), 2022 [online]. Available at: <https://www.msf.ch/nos-actualites/communiqués-presse/msf-denonce-traitements-inhumains-infligés-aux-migrants-refoules> [accessed December 10, 2024]



These extreme conditions, and the lack of coordination with the Niger authorities, regularly lead to cases of extreme dehydration, and in the most tragic cases, death.

While Assamaka is the first village over the Algerian border, it is also the location of the IOM transit center. The number of people requiring care far exceeds the capacity of the Assamaka transit center, making arrival conditions all the more difficult for people who have just been deported. Once they arrive in the village, exiles are obliged to register at the police station so that they can be taken care of for the first few days by the COOPI transit center<sup>11</sup>, before being able to move on to the IOM transit center. This assistance, which provides access to essential resources (water, food, sanitation), is nevertheless conditional on the number of places available, which depends on the frequency of “waves of arrivals” and evacuations to the Arlit center organized by IOM.

Intensified pushbacks by the Algerian authorities and long waiting times in the centers have led to overcrowding at the IOM centers. The number of people arriving at Assamaka now far exceeds the capacity of the transit center, which has only 1,500 places. The precarious, overcrowded shelter offered by the IOM, unsuited to the extreme climatic conditions of the desert, is driving people back to the COOPI center in search of decent conditions.

<sup>11</sup> Italian NGO present in Assamaka since April 2023 and which allows 3,500 people to benefit from assistance.



**Assamaka,** Source Alarm Phone Sahara 10.10.2024

**Arlit, behind the wall of IOM transit center**  
Source Alarm Phone Sahara 10.10.2024



**Assamaka Transit Center,** Source Alarm Phone Sahara 10.10.2024

« They rounded us up yesterday in Tamanrasset. They arrested us, put us on buses, and sent us to the border. We arrived there at 6 a.m., and they made us get off. Then we reached Assamaka around noon. My foot hurts a lot because a dog bit me. »

**Abdoulaye - Mali**

« I went through Mali, then stayed in Algeria for over a year and a half. When the police catch you, they take everything: your papers, your belongings, even your clothes. Now I'm waiting for a convoy to take me home, because I'm too tired. »

**Sandy - Côte d'ivoire**

# Externalization of Migration Control in Niger : The Case of the IOM and AVRR

As early as 2015, Niger was targeted by the outsourcing strategy of European migration policies. At the EU's instigation and in the wake of the 2015 Valletta Summit<sup>12</sup>, the Nigerien government passed Law "2015-36 on the smuggling of migrants" that same year. By criminalizing the transport of people and tightening security control over migratory movements in the region, this law, along with the EU's all-consuming fight against migrant smuggling, has not only undermined the travel economy developed in northern Niger and threatened the space for regional free movement, but has also led to an increase in mortality on Niger's Saharan borders. According to Rhoumour Tchilouta, a researcher specializing in migration policies in Niger, European funding of millions of euros for Niger has encouraged the Algerian authorities to expulse more people, particularly from sub-Saharan Africa. However, when the military junta came to power in 2023, EU action in the country and its cooperation with Niger on migration issues came to a halt.

Although Law 2015-36 was repealed in November 2023 - a symbol of the security rationale introduced/imposed by the European Union - the IOM remains present in the country, taking on the role of operator of the European externalization strategy for migration policies, thanks to funding from the FTUA (Emergency Trust Fund for Africa)<sup>13</sup>, of which Niger is one of the main beneficiaries. Funding for this type of program comes under the return and reintegration of migrants and the fight against irregular immigration component of the UTF, making IOM an operator of migration control and the outsourcing of European migration policies.

Launched in 2017 and financed by European funds as part of the "EU-IOM Initiative", Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration (AVRR) is presented as "administrative, logistical and financial support, provided to migrants who are unable or unwilling to remain in the host or transit country where they are and who wish to return voluntarily to their country of origin". However, the strategic positioning of the IOM center in Assamaka is not based on a simple humanitarian rationale. In reality, these re are akin to forced and concealed returns, since their so-called "voluntary" nature is open to question. For Felipe González Morales, former Special Rapporteur on the human rights of migrants, "the voluntary nature of these returns is

<sup>12</sup> Euro-African Summit bringing together 35 African leaders and representatives and leaders of the EU. The negotiations resulted in the establishment of the FFUA which provides an envelope of 1.8 billion euros to fight against so-called irregular migration in exchange for development aid.

<sup>13</sup> It was recently replaced by the Instrument de Voisinage, de Coopération au Développement et de Coopération Internationale - Europe dans le monde (IVCDCI) and funded for the period 2021-2027. However, since the change of regime, technical support and direct funding from the EU to the State of Niger have been suspended, raising doubts about the future of cooperation and this fund in the country.

questionable when these migrants have no other assistance or alternative to return. Many migrants have told me of their intention to take the migration route again<sup>14</sup>. The fear of being deported again, the need for immediate assistance (food, shelter) and the absence of other alternatives lead the majority of migrants to accept the AVRR<sup>15</sup>. Those turned back by the Algerian authorities, often in psychological and physical distress, then have no choice but to agree to enter this program to benefit from IOM's support and assistance.

For those who refuse, no other alternative is offered, and they are condemned to sleep on the streets or in the slums of Niamey and Agadez. Between 2015 and 2021, according to the IOM, almost 50,000 migrants were repatriated to their countries of origin via the AVRR, Niger being the country that makes most use of AVRRs worldwide. Today, IOM centers are saturated, and it takes time to set up these returns; several months can pass before migrants are offered a return flight to their country of origin. However, some people who have nevertheless accepted the AVRR program are also denied access to transit centers, due to lack of space, and therefore do not benefit from the IOM assistance program.

Although AVRR is seen as a way of keeping “undesirables” in Southern countries, many migrants who have benefited from this program have left their countries of origin again. The \$300 contribution, supposed to ensure reintegration in the country of origin, is not enough. The AVRR is then used by migrants as a way to recharge their batteries. Some return to their home countries to see their loved ones and rest before setting off again on the roads of exile, for want of anything better to do.

<sup>14</sup> Press release from the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, “[Niger : Protection of human rights must be at the heart of migration policies, says expert at the end of his mission](#)”, October 11, 2018.

<sup>15</sup> De Blasis, Fabio & Pitzalis, Silvia. “[Externalising Migration Control in Niger: The Humanitarian-Security Nexus and the International Organization for Migration \(IOM\)](#).” *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 61, no. 3, 2023.

« **T**he Moroccan military caught us and handed us over to the Algerian military. They searched us and took everything: money, phone, everything. They left nothing. Then they too arrested us and locked us up in a prison where we stayed for two days. Then they abandoned us in the desert. »

**Arthur - Guinée-Conakry**

At a time when the EU is increasingly locking down control of migration routes in North Africa, its cooperation with countries such as Tunisia, Morocco, and Mauritania has provided financial and material support, notably via the FFUA, to serve their repressive and racially motivated logic of pushbacks. A consortium of journalists revealed in May 2024 that money from this European fund was used by these North African countries to abandon exiles from sub-Saharan African countries present on their territory in the middle of the desert<sup>16</sup>. This collaboration legitimized and led to the direct involvement of the EU in human rights violations at the borders of these countries, particularly in the cascade of pushbacks. Many migrants have testified to having been expelled by Moroccan or Tunisian authorities to Algeria, only to be turned back again to Niger.

Although no similar migration agreement has been concluded between the EU and Algeria, and despite Algeria's traditional reluctance to cooperate with the European Union on migration policies, new trilateral meetings between the EU, Algeria, and the IOM took place in December 2023 and June 2024, with a view to stepping up AVRR operations directly from Algeria and thus reaching 10,000 voluntary returns per year, compared with 2,000 at present<sup>17</sup>.

<sup>16</sup> Le Monde, "[How thousands of migrants were abandoned in the middle of the desert with the support of Europe](#)", May 21, 2024.

<sup>17</sup> Council of the European Union, "[Update on external migration cooperation](#)". Document 11374/2, 15 July 2024.

- The EU should **make its cooperation with Algeria conditional on respect for human rights**, in accordance with European treaties, and ensure that an impact study is carried out before any new cooperation framework is put in place. In line with the democratic principle of transparency, the European Union must **make public and accessible the real state of its migration cooperation with Algeria**.
- In line with its commitments under the Geneva Convention, the African Convention on Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, and the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families, the Algerian authorities must **put an end to the collective and arbitrary pushback of non-Nigerian African nationals**.
- The Algerian authorities must ensure that the pushback of non-Nigerian nationals complies with the framework set out in the 2014 readmission agreement and with international standards. Any pushback must be **conditional on an individual examination of the person's situation, provide for a right of appeal, and must be carried out with respect for the rights and dignity of the persons concerned**.





AUTHOR :  
Améla Secretin

AUTHOR :  
Théo Dupard

COMMUNICATIONS  
OFFICER :  
Zoé Mazeyrac

ILLUSTRATOR /  
GRAPHIC DESIGNER :  
Flore Jallot



**SPECTRUM** MÉDIA, an independent online platform committed to documenting migration issues and human rights, is taking a major step forward in its mission by launching an **Advocacy Unit**.

This initiative aims **to document and expose human rights violations** in border areas while proposing concrete actions to drive lasting change.

ARTISTIC  
DIRECTION :

Amandine Beghoul

MANAGING DIRECTOR :  
Eléonore Plé

AUTHOR :

Hassane Abdoulaye

AUTHOR :

Maëlle Parfait

TRANSLATION :

Isobel Cohen





PRESS CONTACT :

Eléonore Plé  
+33 6 66 61 42 56  
[contactspecto@gmail.com](mailto:contactspecto@gmail.com)