

Death in the desert: bodies lie in the sand in Niger while Europe

pours millions into blocking migration route

A drive to stop people fleeing northwards has forced migrants to even riskier routes. No one knows the death toll, but one survivor tells how five people died of thirst next to him

In a heavily guarded prison in the city of Agadez, in the north of Niger, convicted people smuggler Sade Yaya* sits on a stool in the yard. For several years, he drove migrants through the desert from this region, usually to the Libyan border.

The passage through the Agadez region – once a thoroughfare for people migrating north to work in Libya or Algeria, or trying to make it to Europe – was criminalised for most travellers in 2015 by an anti-people-smuggling law, brought in by Niger's government with the support of EU authorities.

Yaya was one of those convicted under the law, formulated at the height of the European refugee crisis to target flows to Europe and create a buffer zone, with previous migration routes north now heavily patrolled.

Agadez, a city of ancient trade routes and sometimes called “gateway to the desert”, was the mouth to a perilous migration route. Now, years after the law's introduction, stories persist of people taking even more dangerous routes through the desert and disappearing. Yaya himself says that, after the law took force, he “often” saw dead bodies in the sand during his illegal journeys northwards.

Researchers and human rights organisations, including the UN rapporteur on human rights, have raised concerns that the law is pushing people to make riskier migration journeys and putting an end to the region's enshrined right to freedom of movement.

There have also been documented cases, since the ban, of smugglers abandoning people in the desert for fear of prosecution. Yaya, sentenced to 18 months under the law, says it pushed him and others to drive deeper into the desert, avoiding watering holes where Nigerien soldiers patrol.

The Sahara region includes 400,000 sq km that form the Ténéré desert, stretching from northeastern Niger into western Chad, making search and rescue missions highly complex, coupled with the threat from armed bandits or terrorist groups.

Julia Black from the Missing Migrants project, which documents disappeared migrants, says the true number of deaths in the desert remains unknown. “The 212 deaths we recorded in the Sahara last year are only the tip of the iceberg. Deaths during trans-Saharan migration remain largely invisible, as documenting deaths in an

area as vast and inhospitable as the Sahara is inherently a huge challenge.”

Niger, one of the world’s poorest countries, has received some of the largest donations from the European Union, totalling more than €1.3bn (£1.1bn) from 2014-2020 in aid projects, with large chunks going to migration management. Between 2015 and 2022, 13 out of 19 EU-funded projects in the country were on border controls and law enforcement. Over the same period, Germany spent over €166m (£142m) on 14 migration-related projects according to the German NGO Misereor.

Privacy International has said that Niger has become an “externalised European border”. Its research has noted that money given for the EU Trust Fund for Africa, a €5bn (£4.3bn) fund created to address “root causes of irregular migration”, included €11.5m (£10m) of allocations for migration control, including drones, software and cameras.

Behind the seven-figure sums invested in the region are people such as Ralan Abi*, from Senegal, who was abandoned on the desert route. Abi was part of a group of about 75 people in 2021 headed towards Libya. Two days into their journey, near Séguédine, an oasis in the middle of the Sahara, they were abandoned by their smugglers, who feared prosecution.

Some of the group went to look for water, and Abi says five died of thirst next to him. He was eventually rescued by Nigerien soldiers who later went to look for more survivors. “They found nine people (dead),” he says. “Out of about 75 people, 28 were left.”

Back in a courtyard in Agadez, Merkam Linou*, 35, from Cameroon, sits with a baby in her lap and tells of an ordeal in the desert 18 months ago, after migrants took a more dangerous route north. She says it took days for them to be found, but all survived.

A recent report by investigative group Border Forensics has concluded that the impact of the anti-smuggling law has pushed people into increasingly perilous paths. The “true scale of migrant deaths across the desert is unknown”, the group’s report states.

MSF Niger, which operates field clinics in the north, said that any search-and-rescue missions it carried out were complicated due to the “size of the desert”, and sometimes they did not find those who sent distress calls.

When contacted, Nigerien authorities reported no recorded deaths this year and only 52 last year. The EU border agency Frontex – which has a liaison officer in Niger – said it “did not collect data on the number of migrants reported missing in Niger”.

The European Commission said it regrets the “loss of life, and stands by the

conviction that saving lives is a moral duty". It added that it would continue to support search-and-rescue efforts in the country.

The EU renewed its partnership "against migrant smuggling" with Niger, which it has called a "key partner", in 2022. EU officials are frequent visitors, including a Dutch delegation in February which promised to draw up a "migration partnership" of its own this year.

According to draft documents from the commission seen by the Guardian, the Netherlands planned to support migration management efforts, contributing €55m (£47m) to the International Organization for Migration (IOM) in Niger for the 2021-2023 period.

The UK has similarly contributed funds to the IOM to the tune of £2.58m for a one-year project from 2021-22 combating "trafficking and smuggling between Nigeria and Niger". It states that the project targets an "extremely porous and unregulated" border.

As such money continues to pour into the country, Nassim Amanda*, 24, from Eritrea sits under a tree. He was expelled from Algeria and has been sleeping rough in Agadez since May last year, feeling safer on the streets than the camp.

"I won't find the strength to go back to the desert again," he says quietly. Amanda knows the perils of the sand all too well: most of the people he knew who dared attempt the passage are now out of contact.