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A series of coups in Africa - a rejection of EU efforts to solve the problem of illegal migrants



A series of coups in West and Central Africa has forced thousands of new migrants to flee instability in their home countries, invalidating earlier attempts to end the migrant crisis that has lasted a decade.

The most recent coup in the series, in Gabon, has not yet resulted in any refugees, even though it is an exception compared to earlier similar crises in Mali, Burkina Faso, and particularly in Niger.

However, the isolation into which Gabon is gradually slipping (the African Union has suspended it) and the insecurity it brings every day without a democratic and legitimate government, are conditions that inevitably give rise to the migrant movement.

In the sub-Saharan region, the epicentre of migrant waves towards Western Europe, there have been 8 coups alone in the last 3 years.

The military coups occurred in the nations that have received the most European funding for stability and preventing illegal migration in recent years.

Billions invested in preventing migration

In the focus of the EU programme for eradicating the causes of illegal migration in Africa from 2015, the biggest recipients of aid were: Niger (about €300 million), Mali (about €290 million) and Burkina Faso (€190 million).

On top of that, these countries had another €600 million available for regional projects to solve the problem of illegal migration.

In an effort to address the factors that are leading to large-scale migration from Central Africa to Europe, it is estimated that the EU has spent about €8 billion since 2014 to strengthen security and provide humanitarian relief to the Sahel region.

This strategy's failure has been proved by the most recent military overthrow of the governments in the region. The coups were carried out with distinct anti-European signals, and their leaders gained support for severing ties with what they saw as exploitative European states.

The coup in Niger interrupted good practice

Niger has, in many ways, been the focus of European efforts to reduce the flow of illegal migrants from Africa as a significant transit point for thousands of migrants from the vast sub-Saharan African region.

In the years following the largest wave of migrants in 2015, the EU's policy to externalise its borders to the region where the biggest number of migrants come from, notably the Sahel area, has produced results.

“Europe's border is not in the Mediterranean, but south to the Sahel”, said Josep Borrell, chief EU diplomat, 3 years ago, highlighting the Union's new strategy to reduce migrant flows more aggressively by stopping them at source.

The Niger government was an important ally of the EU in that effort because the most populous branch of the migrant movement from the south to the north, via Libya and the Mediterranean to Italy and France, passed via its territory, through the central city of Agadez.

More than half of the African migrants who reached the European mainland in 2014 and

2015 passed through Niger, even though the majority did not originate from that country.

Since the Niger government passed a very restrictive law against facilitators of illegal migration (introducing a prison sentence of up to 25 years) in 2015, the numbers have dropped drastically. Out of the approximately 150,000 migrants who came from Africa to Italy via the Mediterranean in 2015, there were 23,000 only 3 years later.

Have the juntas lost a lucrative business?

The coup plotters in Niger can, in fact, have as a significant motive for their action: the joint measures of Europe and President Mohamed Bazoum, whom they overthrew, because this left them without a very important, stable and large source of income - illegal migrants.

Leading military officials in Niger were involved in this profitable operation, earning money for years by securing the passage of thousands of African migrants through their country.

“The army officers who used to stand on the checkpoints, the people who drove the migrants, the people who would take migrants into Libya - the whole population used to depend on this business”, Alkontchy Mohamed, a community leader in Agadez, the central city for the transit of migrants in Niger, told The Guardian.

Sanctions against coup plotters are a sufficient answer

The military coup in Niger and those that preceded it in the region have detrimental

effects regarding migrants - they start new waves and cancel previous programmes to reduce illegal transfers to Europe.

International mechanisms for helping refugees have long been unable to respond to the needs of the growing number of migrants in the Sahel.

On September 1, the UNHCR announced that it had only 35% of the requested fund of about \$250 million to help refugees in the Sahel.

The head of the UN Office for West Africa and the Sahel, Leonardo Santos Simão, has recently informed the UN Security Council that as many as 6.3 million people in the Sahel region are currently displaced.

After numerous military coups and the spread of instability throughout the region, the UN system cannot respond to the enormous scale of the humanitarian crisis in sub-Saharan Africa.

On the other hand, the juntas that have forcefully taken over the administrations from the civil authorities, like the last one in Niger and also in Gabon, are sanctioned by the regional and European (until recently) partners. This includes closing borders, which fosters a new environment for the growth of migrant populations.

However, the EU, which has been tightening its once very liberal policy towards the reception of migrants, is sticking to sanctions against coup regimes with ECOWAS, the community of West African states.

For years, the EU has invested large sums of money in tackling migration problems at their root, stimulating and financing local governments to establish an effective migration control system.

The response it received after a series of military coups has also been the response to its policy of systematic, not defensive and often repressive, prevention of the entry of illegal migrants.

Critics of the policy of moving the EU's borders from the Mediterranean deep in the heart of Africa would have to find another target after a series of coups in West and Central Africa.