



10.8.2017 – For centuries a hub of international trade in gold and salt, and later a site for desert tourism, the town of Agadez in Niger has more recently become a centre for smuggling and trafficking in guns, drugs and – above all – desperate refugees and migrants heading for Europe.

Former smuggler Bashir, who transported people to Libya for 17 years, grew up in this maze-like outpost perched on the edge of the Sahara desert where his knowledge of city and desert made him a successful human smuggler taking people over the searing border to Libya.

Since 2015, when this activity became illegal, he has been struggling to find alternative sources of income to feed his family.

“We don’t know how to do anything else,” he [said](#) in an interview with UNHCR. “Can’t you see? We’ve lost our work. We’ve lost our lives – because this was our life. This is what put bread on the table.”

In 2015, largely in response to pressure from EU governments, Niger passed a law cracking down on operators helping those travellers, mainly from West and Central Africa, from crossing into Libya. In return, the EU has offered more than €2 billion in aid to help the region – also including other African countries – on issues ranging from security to economic development.

Before 2012, when Muammar Gaddafi still ruled Libya, Bashir says his clients were focused mainly on going to Niger's northern neighbour Libya to work – not travelling onward. "Libya was just fine. People could make even more money in Libya than in Italy," Bashir says.

Now, it is widespread insecurity in Libya that has increased the [risks](#) for his clients, attempting the crossing over the Mediterranean – and triggered a clampdown on the business that earned him a living for 17 years. So far, in 2017, 12,420 migrants have been rescued off the Libyan coast [according to](#) IOM data. Total [fatalities](#) in the Mediterranean in 2017 have risen to 2,405.

Faced with the new law, Bashir traded in his illicit occupation last October for a new life. Now he helps smugglers like himself to prepare for a career change. He and colleagues have helped hundreds of them put together proposals seeking promised EU funds which are earmarked to finance business ventures and skills training for those in the smuggling trade.

"We're a bit hopeful because the Niger government came to us. They brought us in, and have discussed this directly with us. We've told them all our problems," he said.

But the crackdown on human smuggling comes at a cost for the whole country, which ranks 187th out of 188 on the Human Development Index. In Niger, where 46 per cent of people survive on less than US\$2 a day, a driver who transports people to Libya can make US\$4,000, even US\$5,000 per trip. But now, to stay on the side of the law, many who have lived off of smuggling

are being forced to find new ways to survive.

Bashir warns that smugglers need a real solution to abandon a business that has provided them with a lifeline.

The international assistance is acknowledged, but, according to some locals, falls short, as EU aid offered for job retraining and kick-starting businesses covers only about 200 people while more than 6,000 people are involved in the human smuggling trade in the city.

But it's a start.

UNRIC's related links:

Mediterranean migration data / IOM: <http://missingmigrants.iom.int/>