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Alim, Bakari Yaya

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Adamaoua Under The Prism of Cross-Border Rural Banditry

Alim Bakari Yaya is a PhD candidate in Political Science at the University of Yaoundé II (Cameroon) and researcher at the Laboratory of International and Geopolitical Dynamics Analysis (LADIG). His research focuses on issues of strategy and defense, transboundary security challenges such as rural banditry, secession, maritime piracy, and the security of protected areas.

Abstract

The Adamaoua region has been the scene of intensive subversive activities by armed groups from conflict-prone areas of the Central African Republic and Nigeria in recent years. Instigators of insecurity have transformed this region into an ungovernable space, a stronghold where they deploy innovative strategies to dispossess populations. Rural banditry prevails in rural areas, under the configuration of kidnappings accompanied by ransom demands, ambushes of rural roads, and cattle theft, illustrating the worsening security situation. The question is how do we understand this security threat and how have the authorities reacted? The hypothesis put forward aims to demonstrate that rural banditry in the Adamaoua region is influenced by regional geography, socio-economic factors, and the crisis of governance security at the borders. The situation has led to the emergence of sovereignty actions in Cameroon and security cooperation with Central African Republic and Nigeria.

Key words : adamaoua, cross-border rural banditry, security cooperation, region

Introduction

The phenomenon of rural banditry remains an ancestral practice that persists in the Adamaoua region. Livestock theft was a frequent occurrence even before the arrival of Fulani herders on the Adamaoua plateau in search of pasture. The region offered a suitable ecosystem, as noted by J. Piot (1966), « water is everywhere in the Adamaoua. No point is more than 5 km from a water source, and the watering of livestock would never be a limiting factor for grazing here. » The extent of the pastures and the fertile source of the Vina River have encouraged Fulani Wolarbe herders to settle there with the approval of local Mboum chiefs (Boutrais, 1994, p. 176). Fulani Wolarbe herders from Ngaoundéré and Tignere were often subjected to violence perpetrated by local dignitaries. It was only with the support of their compatriots from Tibati that the herders were able to exert control over the plateau. After the region's conquest in the 19th century, the Fulani adopted cattle and crop raiding as a means of transferring capital (Nteanjemgnigni, 2024, p. 216).

The phenomenon of roadblockers emerged in the 1980s and was particularly prevalent in rural areas frequented by populations. It involved entrepreneurs committing crimes, obstructing roads and targeting

traders on their return from journeys or markets. This method relies on surprise and requires meticulous preparation, often carried out early in the morning or in the afternoon. During this period, the Fouban-Mayo-Banyo axis was the site of ambushes where traders were robbed. After a fruitful and well-deserved day, marked by substantial profits, traders from distant lands flock to the bus stations to return to their homes. While the final travel arrangements are being made, highwaymen deploy at dusk along the dilapidated roads, forcing drivers to slow down and become their prey. Numerous individuals have fallen victim to the assaults carried out by these bandits who operate along the routes from Meiganga to Ngaoui. The phenomenon subsided around 2000 due to repressive and dehumanizing policies by public authorities and the emergence of savings and credit cooperatives near border markets, allowing livestock farmers to sell their animals in exchange for a sales receipt that could be redeemed in the city (Dada Petel and Vircoulon, 2021). This transformation has discredited the use of ambushes and facilitated the adoption of kidnappings with ransom demands.

Kidnapping in the Central African Republic's northern region dates back to 2003, following the forced eviction of President Ange Félix Patassé from power. Rural banditry experienced a resurgence in the form of kidnappings with ransom demands (Saibou, 2006). Criminal groups use information obtained to track a victim for days or even weeks, employing strategies to achieve their goal. The operation involves the blockade of villages, followed by the abduction of individuals. Kidnappings can also occur after an ambush. In most cases, criminals leave a phone number for families to negotiate ransom for the release of their loved ones. Sometimes, criminals make threatening phone calls to an livestock farmer before taking action. There are also cases of 'self-kidnapping', where individuals exploit the situation and the compassion of their relatives to scam them by simulating a kidnapping.

The kidnappings are taking place in the Adamaoua regions using increasingly sophisticated equipment. This marks a gradual shift from primitive tools to modern gear integrated into regular army logistics. The use of non-lethal weapons (knives, bows and arrows, machetes, etc.) has diminished in effectiveness in criminal activities. While not entirely discarded, they have become secondary to more efficient modern equipment. The introduction of firearms into acts of banditry marked a decisive turning point, leading to an increase in violence. Military equipment has enhanced the aggressive capacity of criminal groups, intensifying physical violence towards victims and enabling them to exhibit resilience against the power of defense forces. Current security reports reveal a resurgence of attacks accompanied by a sharp rise in violence against populations, tragically resulting in assassinations and unimaginable physical abuses. Captives endure various forms of bodily torture inflicted using tools such as chains, padlocks, and whips. This violence creates an atmosphere that compels families to cooperate with their captors and avoid any collaboration with public authorities. It

generates psychological traumas that alter perceptions, attitudes, and popular behaviors, prompting passive obedience and a lack of resistance against their aggressors.

Hostage takings offer considerable advantages. Unlike highway robbers who require active and risky presence along roads, hostage takings rely on the use of available intelligence and the selection of specific victims capable of paying a ransom. This makes it difficult for regular forces to locate criminals who benefit from complicity within society. Hostage takers are informed about the positions of defense forces, patrol zones, and schedules, enabling them to adapt to the security situation and avoid any strategic surprises. Their constant mobility in remote areas, knowledge of the terrain, and establishment of hideouts in isolated and less frequented places underscore the complexity of this asymmetric threat. Only proactive intelligence can unmask these individuals infiltrated in society and supported by individuals from all social backgrounds.

Traveling in the peripheries of the Adamaoua region is a risky endeavor that requires exceptional courage from adventurers. Rural margins become uncontrollable territories, serving as refuges for armed groups. The proliferation of band leaders has led to the emergence of alternative norms regulating the circulation of people and goods. Due to the limited presence of law enforcement, those wishing to venture there must rely on military services due to the high level of threat. This privilege is not accessible to everyone and seems reserved for a specific social elite. The rise in kidnappings in the Adamaoua region, since the implosion in Central Africa in March 2013, has destabilized this area, leading to the erosion of the pastoral economy, internal displacement, poverty, de-schooling of youth, etc. This situation has sparked intense public debate. Publications from the Sahel Eye, positions of local associations such as APESS and Mboscuda, as well as media interventions from political elites, have drawn attention to the deterioration of the regional security situation, although regional authority evaluations seem less alarming. In this context, the study of rural banditry is situated.

The concept of rural banditry holds various meanings according to different authors. It can be interpreted as a social reaction to changes (Hobsbawm, 1959) and the oppression of governing power (Razamoelina, 2013). Banditry also manifests through evolving forms such as cattle theft, highway robbery, and hostage-taking with ransom demands (Saibou, 2010). Al Chukwuma Okoli and Anthony Chinedu Ugwo (2019, p. 202) believe it is associated with incidents of armed robbery or violent crimes, such as kidnappings, cattle rustling, and raids in villages or markets. This study perceives it as a predatory action occurring in rural areas through kidnappings, road blockades, and cattle plundering. The actors operate across state borders to appropriate resources from the population.

Specialized researchers in rural banditry have studied this phenomenon within specific societies. In Cameroon, for example, most studies have focused on the Lake Chad basin (Saibou, 2010 ; Musila, 2012), the northern region of the country (Tankeu, 2013 ; Abe, 2006 ; Seignebo, 2011; Koussouna Liba'a, 2015). The Adamaoua region has long been an underexplored area except for some recent works limited to parts of this space (Hamidou, 2018), or specifically addressing the issue of hostage-taking (Yogo, 2021 ; Alim, 2022). Bakari Yaya and Djibrilla Issa (2021) have also addressed rural banditry within the context of public policies. This work pays particular attention to rural banditry in Adamaoua by examining its triggering factors and the actions of Cameroonian authorities.

Methodology :

The data used in studying rural banditry stem from field research conducted in Adamaoua over the past four years within the towns of Mayo-Banyo, Mbere, Faro-et-Déou, Vina. The objective was to engage with local security actors (vigilance committees, traditional chiefs) and defense authorities (sub-prefects, defense and security forces, and other state agents). In this regard, an interview guide structured around various themes (causes, manifestations, consequences, public actions, and perspectives) was developed for the occasion. Despite financial and security challenges, the research results have provided insights into rural banditry. The work also relied on direct observation and documentary resources.

Results and Discussions

The resilience of rural banditry in Adamaoua necessitates an examination of the causal dynamics and the mechanisms of combat adopted by the authorities.

1- Explanatory Factors of Rural Banditry in Adamaoua

Understanding rural banditry requires questioning the triggering factors. Among these dynamics, several elements are identified, including geographical location, forested and mountainous ecosystems, socio-economic precariousness, and demographic weakness.

1.1 The Influence of Adamaoua's Geographical Position on the Resilience of Rural Banditry

Analyzing security issues in states leads experts to question the territory's position in the sub-region. This is a crucial element for understanding the transboundary circulation process of threats. The geographical contiguity of a political structure to a hotspot of insecurity causes a series of security problems, including the influx of refugees, trafficking of firearms, incursions by armed groups, formation and spread of criminal gangs taking advantage of political uncertainty. A security crisis in one country directly impacts neighboring

states. Barry Buzan asserts that threats spread more rapidly over short distances than long ones (Buzan, 2003).

Adamaoua is surrounded by several countries experiencing persistent resurgence of socio-political conflicts among belligerents in a power conquest dynamic through armed force.

The political turmoil in the Central African Republic (CAR) since 2003 and 2013 has contributed to the precariousness of border areas like Ngaoui, Alhamdou, Yamba, Batoua-Godole. Armed groups operating in this space exploit porous borders to commit atrocities, looting, kidnappings with ransom demands, cattle raids, and arms trafficking. Predation follows a disorderly profit maximization dynamic, an alternative mechanism for accumulation similar to the legal profession. It serves as financial support for rebellions and is part of a range of illegal activities that contribute to perpetuating conflicts in CAR. Adamaoua also served as a strategic retreat and financial capitalization zone. Despite numerous peace agreements between belligerents (Libreville agreements in 2008 and Khartoum agreements in 2019) constantly violated by parties, elements of discord persist that could at any moment lead to critical situations.

To the west, Adamaoua shares borders with Nigeria. The Faro-et-Deo and Banyo departments border the Nigerian federated states of Adamawa and Taraba. These areas are considered criminogenic due to weak state presence and proliferation of attacks by armed groups along the borders. Border practitioners behave like « resources in the Lake Chad Basin Commission area such as water and fish, moving back and forth across the border depending on resource availability, managing the border as a bridge between crime scenes and loot enjoyment » (Saibou, 2004, p. 15).

This region is also at the edge of English-speaking regions which have seen an upsurge in subversive actions by separatist groups since late 2016. Secessionist movements have taken advantage of the insecure situation marked by protests from lawyers and teachers in October 2005 to reposition themselves politically and security-wise in Cameroon. Legitimizing their protests by citing the marginalization of Anglophones, they have initiated plans to split the national territory to establish a new political order based on a fairer social contract. This was followed by proliferation of arms and multiplication of armed groups that dispossess populations and commit regular atrocities including assassinations, rapes, school burnings, and attacks on public buildings. The geographical proximity of Adamaoua to the epicenter of secession (northwest) increases the risk of threat propagation and could lead to an expansion of predatory activities by separatist groups into Adamaoua.

1-2 Forest and Mountain Ecosystems

Geographical elements play an undeniable role in the analysis of criminal activity. A region characterized by vast forested areas holds a distinct strategic value compared to savannah zones. Forests are particularly attractive to criminal groups, as they offer increased freedom of action due to the lack of human presence and low population density. This explains the formation of criminal camps in forests, such as the case of Faro Park. The outskirts of Adamaoua are marked by uninhabited forest galleries stretching for hundreds of kilometers. For instance, the protected area of the Mbere Valley, extending from the North to Central African Republic through Djohong district, serves as a potential hideout for kidnappers. Sambisa Forest, located in northeastern Nigeria near the Cameroonian border, is a stronghold of the terrorist group Boko Haram, challenging Nigerian military access and illustrating the difficulties faced by public authorities in asserting sovereignty over these spaces (Olaniyan and Yahya, 2016). Similarly, forested areas in Nigerian states like Kaduna, Sokoto, and Katsina are under the control of criminal gangs operating in the northwest of the country (Okoli and Ugwu, 2019). Strategically, it is extremely complex to dislodge them from these areas that provide multiple refuges and protection against aerial operations. The armed forces struggle to pursue criminals within forests due to lack of terrain mastery, making sweep operations risky. Rural banditry also benefits from mountain ranges dominating certain regions like Tignere, Mayo-Baleo, Mayo-Banyo, offering potential hideouts for criminals to observe defense force movements from a distance and monitor populations. The special commissioner of Faro-et-Deo emphasizes that ‘Faro-et-Deo is targeted by criminals due to its mountainous geography, vast forests, and low-lying areas which serve as potential refuges for armed groups.’

1-3 The Precariousness of Socio-Economic Conditions

Adamaoua is a region experiencing a lag in social and economic development. The absence of roads and frequent power outages in departmental capitals have hindered the region’s progress towards development. This has led to youth unemployment in a society that lacks promising prospects for its population. According to the National Institute of Statistics, the poverty rate in Adamaoua was 47.1% in 2014. Precarity becomes a legitimate argument justifying a shift towards criminal activities. People trivialize banditry by forming gangs or playing varying roles in predatory enterprises. In her study on banditry in the Horn of Africa, Néné Mburu suggests that ‘the motive for contemporary banditry is the impoverishment of people living in harsh physical environments’ (Mburu, 1999). Merton’s Strain Theory can explain citizens involvement in banditry – a state of anomie where social norms no longer influence individual behavior. According to Merton, social structures can drive individuals towards deviance or crime when there is a gap between societal cultural goals and available means to achieve them. Resource inequality places lower-tier individuals in an inability to reach

these goals, leading to deviant behavior. Merton outlines five adaptation methods for these individuals : conformity, innovation, ritualism, retreatism, and rebellion. Among these five methods, innovation seems most relevant to this issue, which occurs when individuals pursue societal goals through illegitimate means (Mentorshow, 2013). An example would be a businessman who acquired his fortune through crime. Banditry is thus justified by 'legitimate' arguments that defy social norms and ethical values that have traditionally guided society. Popular participation modes include collusion with criminal groups through various forms of support such as intelligence gathering, scouting, transportation, and other facilitations contributing to achieving their goals (Alim and Benoho Baboule, 2023, p. 73). Michel Tankeu (2013, pp. 38-40) categorizes support networks for armed groups including motorcycle taxi drivers, call box operators, marabouts (Islamic scholars), victims of family and social conflicts, and restaurant owners. The worsening living conditions increase labor supply for the crime industry.

1-4 The Crisis of Security Governance in Rural Border Margins

The surge in rural banditry stems from weak state presence in regional peripheries. There is a contrast between urban centers with a strong law enforcement presence and peripheral zones facing security oversight crises. Rural areas have been neglected for a long time creating a security vacuum that reflects the lack of government will to control them. Armed groups have seized this opportunity to establish themselves in Adamaoua and forge strategic alliances with local populations. This disinterest results from strategic choices made by authorities prioritizing threats, with terrorism taking center stage following Cameroon's declaration of war against Boko Haram at the expense of rural banditry. Subsequently, another security crisis emerged in Anglophone regions where separatist groups sought territorial disintegration. Throughout this period, government focus was on national territory protection and restoring order in crisis regions leading to relaxed vigilance over rural border spaces. Meanwhile, criminal groups freely seize assets from victims to fund their objectives. The security situation worsened due to low population density in remote Adamaoua areas – a vast region covering approximately 63,701 km² with an estimated population of 1,344,414 inhabitants as per 2019 INS data at a density of 21.1 per km². There exists unequal spatial occupation with population concentration in urban centers (Ngaoundere, Meiganga, Tibati) at the expense of rural areas experiencing depopulation trends exacerbated over the past decade by road bandit attacks leading to creation of small villages along roadsides while hinterlands remain deserted allowing predatory bands' settlements.

2-The Construction of Measures to Combat Rural Banditry

To counter rural banditry in Adamaoua, public authorities have implemented sovereign and bilateral actions.

2-1 Mobilization of Sovereign Actions in the Fight Against Rural Banditry

The management of rural banditry in Adamaoua has been part of a dual dynamic. The first is characterized by the implementation of administrative measures, while the second involves military actions on the ground.

From an administrative perspective, the authorities have taken a series of regulatory decisions to curb rural banditry in Adamaoua. This includes decisions such as restricting motorcycle taxis' circulation between 8 pm and 6 am, prohibiting the possession of firearms until further notice by the Minister of Territorial Administration, banning nighttime livestock transport, suspending automatic signaling in the Martap district, etc. These administrative actions strategically aim to reduce the capacity for harm and projection by insecurity producers and facilitate military security operations in the theater of operations. Human rights organizations could criticize government action in this context by citing human rights violations. This hypothesis is plausible given the severity of security policies implemented, but it is necessary to rectify the situation and restore disrupted public order. Defense and security issues take precedence in most state entities over social aspects and public freedoms. Although Cameroon's 1996 constitution enshrines them in its preamble, it also grants the President extensive powers to decide on all necessary measures in case of serious peril threatening the territory's integrity, life, independence, or Republic institutions.

Operationally, public authorities have strengthened defense forces by deploying elements from the National Gendarmerie's versatile group since 2020, establishing military bases in rural border areas with Central African Republic (Ngaoui, Djohong, DIR, Meiganga, Gbatoua-Godole) and Nigeria (Bankim, Mayo-Darle, Kontcha), and reorganizing territorial command which limited the 3rd military region's scope to Adamaoua and North excluding Mayo-Louti. These actions have proven effective in conducting crisis area security operations. Consequently, constant nighttime patrols are organized in rural areas to deter insecurity actors' presence and flush them out of forested areas. In addition to these specific measures, military operations have been initiated by regular forces. The first was Operation Emergence 3 launched on October 9, 2017 by the commander of the 3rd military region for a two-month duration. Its formation was due to armed groups presence in Faro Park, which poses a threat to northern regions security. This protected area serves as a sanctuary for hostage-takers operating in Adamaoua and northern regions. Hundreds of soldiers and gendarmes were deployed during this initiative to secure Faro (Alim and Issa, 2023, p. 21). A similar operation commenced on August 10, 2019 to cleanse Adamaoua and Northern borders plagued by criminal activities. Rural banditry knows no administrative boundaries ; criminals commit offenses in one region and hide in another. The operation aimed to overcome these constraints by combining resources from both entities' forces. This collaboration materialized through joint operations on the ground yielding significant results.

Examples demonstrating its effectiveness include the arrest of 20 hostage-takers in October 2019 in Bibemi district and three others by Garoua 2 company within Bascheo and Dembo villages.

Regular forces relied on vigilante groups' experience during these operations as they were familiar with the terrain. Vigilance committees were integrated into the army's structure as auxiliary forces to support uniformed personnel effectively on the ground. Their missions involve providing intelligence, serving as guides or scouts in bush during operations, or even assisting in combat. Self-defense groups scattered throughout Adamaoua demonstrated their civic commitment by venturing into insecure forested areas and resilience against predators despite their limited weaponry compared to powerful enemy logistics and minimal support from public authorities. Mayo-Darle and Kona Djenai regions witnessed improved local security actors presence through reduced hostage incidents. It is essential for state authorities not to demobilize them after the crisis but find mechanisms to regulate them as secondary forces operating at a community level under state supervision. The persistence of rural banditry in Adamaoua necessitates continuous vigilance from the army to deter actors. However, public authorities lack sufficient capacity to ensure regular security coverage in such a vast region with low population density.

2-2 Bilateral Mechanisms for Combating Rural Banditry

Rural banditry poses a cross-border threat. Actors take advantage of porous borders to move between sovereign territories based on available resources to the extent that territorial boundaries lose their significance. Armed groups from Nigeria regularly raid the neighboring town of Kontcha to kidnap people or steal livestock. The border areas of Mayo-Darle in the Nigerian state of Taraba serve as a sanctuary for cattle thieves. There exists a transborder criminal network, involving individuals from both states, who raid cattle. The modus operandi of these predators involves tracking a shepherd in grazing areas near the border, surprising them while they sleep at night, or seizing their livestock if they travel to town. The perpetrators then travel throughout the night with the loot to deliver it to their accomplices on the other side of the border. Consequently, cattle taken in Cameroon are sold in Nigeria and vice versa.

The Adamaoua border with the Central African Republic is a roaming ground for armed groups from the Central African Republic. The 3R elements, a powerful rebel group in the CAR led by Abdoulaye Miskine, operate in border areas such as Mbere', including Ngaoui, Alhamdou, Yamba, Diel, Gbatoua-Godole, etc. Kidnappings for ransom and ambushes on roads are common tactics characterizing their subversive actions. The border allows these individuals to strategically retreat to Adamaoua or the Central African Republic to evade military repression when necessary. It serves as a variable barrier used to the advantage of armed groups.

In this context, sovereign mechanisms for combating crime become ineffective in pursuing criminals across borders. The combination of bilateral actions is imperative to secure border areas and track down criminals who commit crimes in one state and seek refuge in another.

2-2-1 Bilateral Cameroon-Nigeria actions in managing transborder rural banditry

Security cooperation between Cameroon and Nigeria in security matters is part of a normalization of diplomatic relations. Since the 1990s, territorial tensions over sovereignty in Bakassi and Darak Islands in the Lake Chad basin have nearly led to an open war between the two countries. These disputes were peacefully resolved to pave the way for closer relations, culminating on February 28, 2012, with an agreement establishing a transborder security committee. This committee serves as a platform for high-level authorities to exchange views on challenges and strategies to counter transborder security threats. Additionally, meetings of governors from border regions are held to coordinate actions on the ground. This collaborative effort is supported by a rich normative framework including agreements on information exchange, policing, judicial cooperation, and combating small arms and light weapons.

The establishment of a legal-institutional framework has proven effective in pursuing transborder criminal actors. This is evident in the ongoing collaboration between authorities from Faro-et-Deo and Adamaoua State on security issues related to transborder transhumance, border security, and hostage release. In December 2023, a gendarme was kidnapped in Kontcha's bush by armed men who took him into neighboring Nigerian territory. Thanks to cooperation between authorities from both entities, he was eventually freed.

2-2-2-Cameroon-Central African Initiatives in Combating Transborder Rural Banditry

Security cooperation between Cameroon and the Central African Republic has long focused on border demarcation and transborder security issues essential for effective joint actions against rural banditry.

Regarding border demarcation issues between both countries often manifest over challenges related to border demarcation. An incident occurred in Bakari Bata near the Central African Republic where the Central African army lowered Cameroon's flag (Alim and Baboule, 2023). This problem stems from inadequate work along the border line to ensure boundary markers are intact or replaced where necessary. Many markers have been destroyed or displaced due to river courses. An ad-hoc border commission was established to address this issue. After a 12-year hiatus due to socio-political turmoil in the Central African Republic, it held its 5th session from June 12-13, 2022. The outcomes focused on evaluating recommendations from the 4th session held in Bertoua from February 4-5, 2010 ; updating activities' schedules for the ad-hoc commission ; and negotiating a transborder cooperation agreement (Bikole, 2022).

Concerning transborder security issues at borders between Cameroon and the Central African Republic witness increased activities by armed groups leading to rising insecurity in Adamaoua region. Security cooperation benefits from an institutional framework such as the Joint Permanent Security Commission established through an agreement signed in Bangui on August 24, 2006. This commission serves as an official permanent platform for transborder security cooperation unlike ad-hoc bodies that address temporary issues only. Ad-hoc commissions are temporary solutions designed for specific situations and dissolve once objectives are met without any binding treaty between parties.

Bilateral mechanisms have resulted in operational activities such as intelligence sharing among border authorities and strengthening military presence along territorial boundaries as recommended during the 2nd session of Joint Permanent Security Commission held from June 13-14, 2022. Cameroonian leaders have established military bases along the eastern border to prevent armed group incursions leading to improved security in rural areas. Meanwhile, following the failure of Khartoum Agreement signed in 2019 among warring factions in CAR ; Central African Republic relied on paramilitary group Wagener with bases established within its territory (Roux camp, Bria bases) pushing armed movements towards border areas under rebel control (Alim and Baboule, 2023). Joint operations like Operation Sagani involving Cameroon and CAR led to the freeing of hostages from both countries near Cameroon's border with CAR (Saibou, 2006).

Conclusion

Rural banditry poses a security challenge for Adamaoua region with solutions primarily focusing on military-security approaches neglecting underlying social and economic factors fueling this phenomenon. While regional security dynamics play a role ; structural issues like poverty and youth unemployment have been overlooked. To combat rural banditry effectively ; public authorities must implement development policies targeting Adamaoua's marginalized areas discouraging youth involvement in crime for survival reasons while addressing regional demographic concerns through spatial planning policies that prevent security vacuums.

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