

# Search and rescue in the desert: taking a proactive approach in Niger

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**A supportive environment for search and rescue in Niger has made possible an effective humanitarian response to migrants in distress in the desert, offering lessons for other contexts.**

Niger is a major departure, transit and destination point in West and Central Africa. Situated at the intersection of key trans-Saharan routes, the country's northern region, Agadez, is crossed by a main regional migratory axis as well as several auxiliary routes, notably to North Africa.<sup>1</sup> The region receives migrants of multiple nationalities in different phases of migration, including some in transit to and from other West African countries, as well as towards Europe via North Africa and the Mediterranean Sea. Some have been forcibly expelled to Niger from Algeria and Libya, to which they had migrated for work. While the needs, vulnerabilities and capacities of migrants vary according to the phase of migration in which they find themselves, both expelled and in-transit migrants in Niger can often remain stranded for days on end in need of life-saving assistance and protection.

Unlike the recent trend in several European contexts, civilian search and rescue (SAR) operations for migrants in distress are not criminalised in Niger and are, in fact, supported by authorities.<sup>2</sup> Further, with the recent revocation of the so-called 'anti-smuggling law' (No. 2015/036) in November 2023 and an evolving geopolitical context, the migration landscape in Niger has changed significantly. From its enforcement in 2016 and until its revocation, this law effectively penalised activities associated with migration.

An increase in controls on migratory routes by law enforcement (namely the police and gendarmerie) and the military, combined with a growing fear of persecution, led to the emergence of clandestine routes, often passing through dangerous desert areas to evade patrols and making migrant access to basic services even more difficult.

Monitoring and analysis undertaken by Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) indicates that migrants have resorted less to clandestine routes in the period since revocation of the law. According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), 505 migrants were reported to have died or disappeared in the Sahara desert between January and September 2024, with 111 cases reported in the Agadez desert, compared with 548 in Agadez in the same period in 2023.<sup>3</sup> However, migrants in the region remain vulnerable to disappearance, death, exploitation and other abuses. Clandestine and dangerous migratory routes continue to be used as mistrust in the system combined with migrants' lack of access to information persists.

## People in danger in the desert

MSF is one actor conducting SAR activities to assist migrants in distress in the Agadez region. Other organisations, such as Alarm Phone Sahara (APS) and IOM, undertake similar SAR activities in the region. In 2024, MSF conducted 42 operations, rescuing

or providing lifesaving assistance to 535 migrants (including women). Among these, MSF treated 22 migrants with fractures, 28 sick migrants and 122 migrants suffering from extreme dehydration. In May 2024, MSF also recorded the deaths of 11 migrants following their expulsion from Algeria in violent and inhumane conditions.

Since 2017, the number of expelled and other migrants arriving in Niger from Algeria has remained high. According to migrant testimonies collected by MSF, Nigerien nationals expelled from Algeria are transported by the Algerian security forces in 'official convoys' to the village of Assamaka in Niger and benefit from support offered to them to return to their community of origin. However, migrants of other nationalities are abandoned by Algerian forces in the middle of the desert at a point colloquially known as 'point zero' at the border of Niger and Algeria. Such migrants find themselves lost in the vast desert, without access to food, water or shelter at least 15km away from Assamaka, where the border police post is situated. IOM reports just under 8,500 migrants were expelled between January and June 2024 via official convoys,<sup>4</sup> while APS reports 14,300 migrants were expelled from Algeria to Niger between January and May 2024,<sup>5</sup> including those travelling in unofficial convoys.

### **Information sharing and coordination in response**

Quick and transparent information sharing facilitates the proactive deployment of SAR teams. For instance, upon receiving information about expulsions from the police or community members in Assamaka, MSF promptly deploys a search team comprising a nurse, a community mental health educator and a health promoter (whose role covers community liaison and awareness raising) in a vehicle equipped with emergency

medications and water. These proactive operations allow MSF to scope vast areas in the desert to search for migrants who may be stranded or lost and unable to reach help. This can be lifesaving in the case of expelled migrants because MSF teams have received reports of migrants having their personal belongings (including identification documents, mobile phones and money) confiscated or stolen during expulsion. Any gravely injured or ill migrants are stabilised on-site and then transferred to the nearest health-care structure supported by MSF.

Alarm Phone Sahara uses motorbikes to search for and rescue migrants who may be stranded, as these allow quicker deployment in the desert. Upon discovery of migrants in distress, they also relay the information as an alert to other NGOs in Assamaka or nearby authorities who can rescue them and/or mobilise a larger rescue operation. As such, rapid information sharing by the police in Assamaka is central to lifesaving SAR operations in the desert of Agadez.

Information sharing and coordination are also facilitated by the operation of helplines – an activity which is not criminalised or obstructed by the State. Since November 2018, MSF has operated a 24/7 toll-free helpline for those in distress on migratory routes. This is particularly useful for migrants transiting through Niger to destination countries as breakdowns and accidents of vehicles transporting migrants are common, leaving migrants stranded for prolonged periods in the middle of the desert. The helpline can be used by the authorities, law enforcement bodies or the military, local communities or even migrants themselves to inform MSF about a situation of distress, thereby raising the alert to launch a rescue operation.

In addition, coordination and facilitation of community-led rescues involving village

leaders, vehicle drivers, etc., also boost overall rescue capacities in the region. Not only are such rescuers closest to the place where migrants may be stranded, but they also know how to navigate the vastness of the desert and are aware of any risks or dangers. As such, rescues in the desert require mobilisation of a combination of public and private resources in terms of fuel, vehicles, assistance, personnel and volunteers, etc. Nigerien authorities, law enforcement and the military are integral to the entire process; their involvement avoids any obstructions or impediments to raising alerts and serves to actively maintain and promote smooth information sharing and coordination among NGOs and other private and State actors.

In addition, following rescue and depending on the migrants' needs and plans to continue their onward journey or return home, the military, police and/or local authorities direct them towards relevant actors and services in the region. Those willing to return home are oriented towards IOM transit centres in Arlit, Agadez and Dirkou for enrolment in the Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration programme, while others in need of urgent medical attention are referred to health centres where actors such as MSF can provide free health care, including psychosocial and mental health support. NGOs, in collaboration with law enforcement and local authorities, also facilitate proper and dignified burial of deceased migrants for those found without identification, and contact with families of the deceased for those who can be identified.

After an arduous journey and potentially traumatic experiences leading up to rescue, migrants may find themselves forced to resort to negative coping mechanisms, exposing them to exploitation. Even in Niger, while

those migrants who are accommodated in the IOM-run transit centres (space permitting) following rescue have access to assistance and protection, other migrants in transit unable to be accommodated in the centre or unwilling to return are often left to their own devices for survival. As such, there is still a need to boost holistic reception service provision (particularly for non-national migrants in Niger), including access to protection services, safe and legal channels for continuing their journey, integration into host communities, and social cohesion opportunities.

### **The way forward**

MSF's experiences in the Niger desert with SAR are in stark contrast to those in the Mediterranean Sea. Since 2015–16, MSF teams have witnessed a gradual disengagement by European member States from their duty to assist people in distress at sea, combined with an approach focusing on border and law enforcement as opposed to life-saving efforts.<sup>6</sup> MSF teams have reported increasing attempts to obstruct civilian SAR activities in the Mediterranean through the hindering of information sharing, defamation, administrative harassment and the criminalising of NGOs and activists.<sup>7</sup> Most notably, Law 15/2023 in Italy, also known as the Piantadosi Decree, has severely limited humanitarian assistance at sea. By contrast, in Niger, even when law No 2015/036 was effective, neither the authorities nor law enforcement or military attempted to obstruct or impede SAR efforts. There is a collective responsibility to reinforce coordination between State and other relevant stakeholders, including communities and migrants, to reduce loss of life and suffering, and to protect migrants' rights. To this effect, this article recommends the following:

### 1. Enhance scope for solidarity-driven SAR by facilitating information sharing and supporting community-based rescue efforts.

For both land and sea rescues, proactive searches within a humanitarian framework by State entities, complemented by timely sharing of information about migrants in distress between State and private actors, is integral to preventing loss of life. As seen in the case of Niger, communities and migrants themselves can be mobilised, trained and equipped to undertake SAR activities with logistical and coordination support from authorities and NGOs. Further, via improved and more proactive NGO-supported community engagement efforts, migrants can be sensitised on issues such as safer migratory routes and availability of services in order to facilitate a safer journey overall.

### 2. Tackle distress alerts as a humanitarian emergency instead of taking a law enforcement approach centring on border security, surveillance and interception.

Persons rescued from situations of distress must not be subjected to further physical and psychological stress. A humanitarian approach to SAR must encompass adequate reception, including access to medico-humanitarian assistance and protection services in line with international legal frameworks and standards, regardless of nationality and/or willingness to return.

### 3. States need to foster and build an environment conducive to SAR.

States need to decriminalise activities linked to migration and actively address administrative and bureaucratic obstacles to civilian SAR activities. Restrictive legal and policy frameworks on migration driven by containment, deterrence and expulsion practices have detrimental consequences that perpetuate patterns of violence across land and sea.

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1. IOM (2023) *Cartographie des mobilités au Niger*  
[bit.ly/niger-cartographie-mobilites](https://bit.ly/niger-cartographie-mobilites)
2. Civilian SAR refers to rescue carried out by NGOs, INGOs, and other private actors, such as those operating vehicles, local communities, etc.
3. Data extracted from quarterly reports of IOM DTM Niger. For 2024, DTM Niger - Rapport sur les enquêtes individuelles des flux de populations R15 (Janvier - Mars 2024), R16 (Avril - Juin 2024) and R17 (Juillet - Septembre 2024), and for 2023, R11 (Janvier - Mars 2023), R12 (Avril - Juin 2023) and R13 (Juillet - Septembre 2023) were used. [dtm.iom.int/niger](https://dtm.iom.int/niger)
4. Data extracted from quarterly reports of IOM DTM Niger, notably R15 (Janvier - Mars 2024) and R16 (Avril - Juin 2024)
5. '2024: More than 30,000 people deported from Algeria to Niger', APS, 30th December 2024  
[bit.ly/deported-algeria-niger](https://bit.ly/deported-algeria-niger)
6. See MSF 'Search and Rescue'  
[bit.ly/msf-search-rescue](https://bit.ly/msf-search-rescue)
7. MSF (2023) 'No one came to our rescue': The human costs of European migration policies in the Central Mediterranean  
[bit.ly/msf-no-one-came](https://bit.ly/msf-no-one-came)

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