

CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC

TIER 1 | USCIRF-RECOMMENDED COUNTRIES OF PARTICULAR CONCERN (CPC)

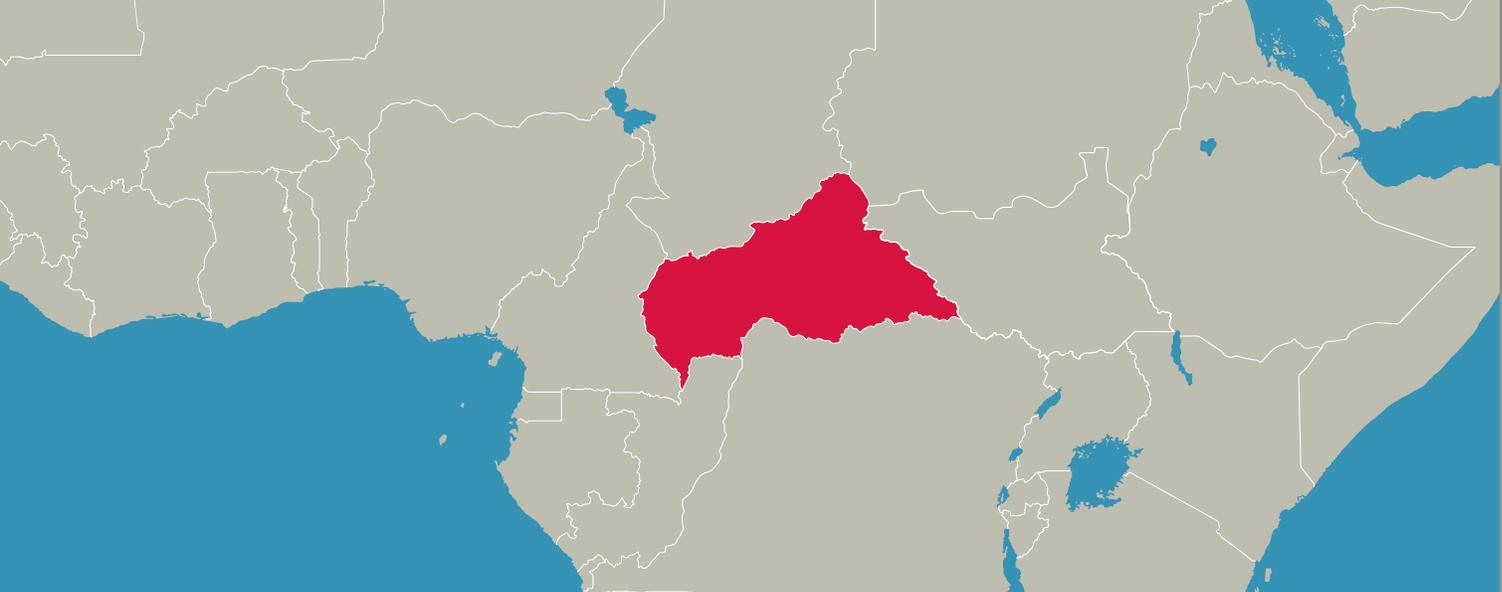
KEY FINDINGS

The Central African Republic (CAR) remains fragile, susceptible to outbreaks of sectarian violence, and fractured along religious lines. Militias formed along opposing Muslim and Christian lines continue to kill individuals based on their religious identity, leading to retaliatory attacks and waves of violence. CAR's Muslim population remains disproportionately displaced, and in the western part of the country, the Muslim community cannot freely practice their faith. The CAR government has taken some positive steps to address interfaith tensions, but has failed to increase its reconciliation efforts to reverse the ethnic cleansing of Muslims or improve interfaith relations. Since a 2013 coup that resulted

in rampant lawlessness and the complete collapse of government control, state authorities have almost no presence outside of the capital. USCIRF again finds in 2017 that CAR merits designation as a "country of particular concern," or CPC, under the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA). In 2015, USCIRF determined that the ethnic cleansing of Muslims and sectarian violence in CAR meet IRFA's standard for CPC designation. While IRFA's language focuses CPC designations on governmental action or inaction, its spirit is to bring U.S. pressure and attention to bear to end egregious violations of religious freedom and address the actual drivers of persecution.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Designate CAR as a CPC under IRFA;
- Sustain a high level of engagement with CAR authorities, the United Nations (UN), and international donors to ensure that issues related to ending sectarian violence and impunity, increasing interfaith reconciliation, and affirming the rights of religious freedom and religious minorities are supported and raised in all engagements with relevant parties;
- Press CAR authorities to undertake initiatives to ensure that CAR Muslims have a future in the country by issuing statements that Muslims are full and equal citizens, undertaking development missions in the northeast, ensuring Muslim participation in government administration, safeguarding sustainable returns of Muslim refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) to their homes, recognizing Muslim holidays as national holidays, and rebuilding destroyed mosques and Muslim properties;
- Press CAR authorities, the UN Multi-dimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA), and international donors to increase activities on disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration equally for all armed groups, while simultaneously providing sustainable reintegration opportunities;
- Work with the UN Security Council to continue to sanction ex-Séléka and anti-balaka members responsible for organizing and/or engaging in sectarian violence, ethnic cleansing, and crimes against humanity, and continue to speak out regularly against sectarian violence and gross human rights abuses;
- Continue to contribute to and work with international donors to ensure that future security forces and police units reflect the country's diversity, re-establish and professionalize the CAR's judiciary, and fully fund the Special Criminal Court;
- Continue to support interfaith dialogue and efforts by religious leaders to rebuild social cohesion at national and local levels; and
- Continue to support humanitarian assistance for refugees and displaced persons, as well as rebuilding projects.



BACKGROUND

CAR has a long history of political strife, coups, severe human rights abuses, and underdevelopment. Sectarian violence and targeted killing based on religious identity started after the 2013 coup by a coalition of Muslim-majority militias. The ongoing violence has resulted in thousands of people dead, 2.3 million in need of humanitarian assistance, more than 450,000 refugees, and almost 350,000 IDPs. Before 2012, 85 percent of CAR's population was Christian and 15 percent was Muslim. By the end of 2014, 80 percent of the country's Muslim population had been driven out of CAR.

The current crisis started in December 2012 with a rebellion by the Séléka, a coalition of four northern majority-Muslim armed rebel groups, supported by large numbers of Chadian and Sudanese foreign fighters. Following a brief peace agreement, the Séléka took the capital, Bangui, in March 2013, deposing then President François Bozizé. In September, Séléka leader and then self-declared President Michel Djotodia formally disbanded the Séléka

following international condemnation of the armed groups' crimes against humanity, including enforced disappearances, illegal detentions, torture, and extrajudicial killings. This announcement, however, had no practical impact; ex-Séléka continued to engage in violence, and its coalition members splintered into multiple armed groups. In June 2013, Bozizé, his inner circle, and former Central African Armed Forces (FACA) soldiers recruited existing self-defense militias, which

are largely Christian (known as the anti-balaka), former FACA soldiers, and other aggrieved non-Muslims to avenge Séléka attacks on non-Muslims.

Fighting between the ex-Séléka and anti-balaka groups started in September 2013, and escalated dramatically when the anti-balaka attacked Muslim neighborhoods in Bangui on December 5, 2013. The result was a large-scale conflict in which civilians were targeted based on their religious identity.

In an effort to stabilize the country, the African Union, European Union, and France deployed peacekeepers to Bangui and outside the capital in late 2013 and early 2014. The UN's almost 13,000 troop peacekeeping mission, MINUSCA, is the primary peacekeeping force, but is viewed with suspicion by local populations.

In March 2016, Faustin Archange Touadéra was inaugurated president, marking CAR's second peaceful

transfer of power since independence and the end of a two-year political transition. An elected National Assembly convened two months later. However, government officials, the police, and

the judiciary have neither the infrastructure nor the resources to stop ongoing fighting or to bring to justice perpetrators of violence.

In the first two months of 2017, fighting between ex-Séléka factions escalated in the center and east of the country as different groups sought to increase control over resource-rich territories.

In March 2016, USCIRF staff visited CAR and discussed religious freedom conditions and sectarian

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violence with CAR government officials, CAR religious leaders, international non governmental organizations (NGOs), and the U.S. Embassy.

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM CONDITIONS 2016–2017

Ethnic Cleansing and Marginalization of Muslims

In December 2014, the [UN Commission of Inquiry on the Central African Republic \(COI\)](#) issued a report finding a “pattern of ethnic cleansing committed by the anti-balaka in the areas in which Muslims had been living.” In the first part of January 2014, anti-balaka fighters deliberately killed Muslims because of their religious identity or told them to leave the country or die. As a result, the COI reported that in 2014, 99

percent of the capital’s Muslim residents left Bangui, 80 percent of the entire country’s Muslim population fled to Cameroon or Chad, and 417 of the country’s 436 mosques were destroyed. Since 2014, few Muslims have returned to CAR.

During the reporting period, the situation for Muslims in the country remained poor. Most Muslims in western CAR continue to live in peacekeeper-protected enclaves. The few who have returned to or continue to live in their home villages report that anti-balaka soldiers forced them to convert or hide their faith. The UN reports that Muslim IDPs and returning refugees have been harassed and abused.

The situation for Muslims in the capital’s Muslim enclave, PK5, was relatively better during the reporting period than in the previous year, with fewer attacks, increased trade opportunities with those outside of the enclave, and increased opportunities for freedom of movement. However, during USCIRF’s visit to Bangui in March 2016, Muslims outside of PK5 refrained from wearing traditional Islamic clothes, instead opting to wear Western clothes so as not to be identified as Muslim.

Muslims in CAR were already marginalized prior to the current conflict, which has further hardened views on religious identity and citizenship. During USCIRF’s visit, non-Muslims referred to Muslims as foreigners and

untrustworthy. Muslims endure structural discrimination related to access to education and identity documents, and suffer harassment frequently, including by security officers who treat them as foreigners, asking for multiple forms of identification.

Continuing Sectarian Violence

Killings and skirmishes along religious lines continued in this reporting period, although at far lower levels than during the height of the conflict in 2013 and 2014. As in

previous reporting periods, CAR authorities lacked the capacity to investigate the killings or hold the perpetrators accountable.

For example, on March 8, 2016, two Muslims were killed in Bambari; ex-Séléka killed 10 Christians in retaliation

over the next several days.

In June, several ex-Séléka and anti-balaka attacks in western CAR reportedly resulted in at least 17 deaths. Muslim Fulani and anti-balaka attacks and reprisals on local populations killed 14 in Ngaoundaye and displaced thousands. On June 21, 20 Muslims in Carnot were injured when youths torched their homes.

Violence escalated again in September and October. On September 16, ex-Séléka killed 26 people, including a local pastor, in and around Kaga Bandoro. On September 26, ex-Séléka killed at least 85 Christians in Kouango. After FACA director Marcel Mombeka was assassinated near PK5 on October 4, violence targeting Muslim and Christian civilians spread throughout western CAR. On October 5, four Muslim cattle herders were killed. The following day in Bangui, 11 Christians were killed and 14 Muslims were reported missing. On October 12, ex-Séléka attacked an IDP camp that housed Christians in Kaga Bandoro and killed 30; attacks on civilians in the area killed an additional 12. At least 19,000 were displaced because of the violence. On October 15, 11 Christians were killed at another IDP camp. And on October 27, clashes between ex-Séléka and anti-balaka killed 15.

Since December, violence between anti-balaka and ex-Séléka and between ex-Séléka factions has increased in and around Bambari. During this ongoing violence,

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MINUSCA intervened to protect Fulani and displaced Muslims living in Christian neighborhoods who had been targeted.

Reconciliation Efforts

President Touadéra has said that disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) of soldiers and reconciliation are priorities of his administration. In November, the CAR government presented its five-year National Recovery and Peacebuilding plan, which prioritizes the implementation of DDR activities, security sector reform, judicial access, local peace and reconciliation efforts, returns of displaced persons, provision of government services, and economic recovery.

During the reporting period, both President Touadéra and the Minister of Reconciliation met with Muslim representatives, including in PK5. On December 21, President Touadéra launched a plan for local peace and reconciliation committees nationwide. However, the Speaker of the National Assembly is the only prominent Muslim representative in the government; three Muslims hold minor posts and there are no Muslims in the president's inner circle. Further, reconciliation efforts agreed to at the May 2015 Bangui Forum have not been fully implemented. Finally, while the transitional Minister of Reconciliation declared two Muslim holidays as national holidays in 2015, current government officials' promises to pass a law declaring them national holidays were not met.

On February 15, 2017, the CAR government appointed Toussaint Muntazini Mukimapa from the Democratic Republic of Congo as prosecutor of the Special Criminal Court, a hybrid court composed of CAR and international judges to prosecute those accused of committing gross war crimes since 2003.

Abusive Witchcraft Accusations

Witchcraft is a part of many Central Africans' lives, and accusations of witchcraft can lead to human rights violations. Although the number of incidents is likely to be higher, the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights documented 45 cases of human rights violations related to witchcraft accusations during the reporting period. Women, the elderly, children, and people with disabilities are common targets of witchcraft accusations, which have resulted in detention, torture, or death. Such abuses are largely carried out by the anti-balaka.

U.S. POLICY

The U.S. government is engaged at very senior levels in reconciliation efforts in CAR. Then U.S. Permanent Representative to the UN Samantha Power, then Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs Linda Thomas-Greenfield, then Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom David Saperstein, and other senior U.S. government officials travelled to CAR in the past two years as part of a broader Obama Administration priority to prevent and end mass atrocities, increase interfaith dialogue, and encourage national reconciliation efforts in the country. U.S. Ambassador to CAR Jeffrey Hawkins regularly meets with President Touadéra and other CAR leaders to promote reconciliation and security.

As part of U.S. and international efforts to bring justice to the country, on May 13, 2014, then President Barack Obama issued [Executive Order 13667](#) sanctioning the following persons identified by the UN Security Council for threatening CAR's stability: former president Bozizé, former transitional president Michel Djotodia, ex-Séléka leaders Nourredine Adam and Abdoulaye Miskine, and anti-balaka "political coordinator" Levy Yakite. On December 17, 2015, the UN Security Council and U.S. government also sanctioned Haroun Gaye, ex-Séléka/Popular Front for the Rebirth of CAR (FPRC) leader, and Eugène Ngaikosset, Bangui's anti-balaka commander. The Treasury Department's sanctions freeze these individuals' property and financial interests in the United States.

U.S. government financial assistance includes humanitarian assistance; aid for conflict mitigation, peacebuilding, and rule of law programs; and MINUSCA contributions. Since 2013, the U.S. government has been the largest humanitarian donor to address the CAR crisis, providing \$404 million, and it also is the largest MINUSCA contributor. In Fiscal Year (FY) 2016, U.S. nonhumanitarian aid was estimated at \$14 million and is requested to be \$18 million for FY 2017. This assistance is directed at security sector reform, rebuilding the criminal justice sector, peacebuilding programs, and military professionalization. At a major donors' conference in Brussels in November 2016, the U.S. government pledged an additional \$11.7 million to support the justice sector, law enforcement, and livelihood opportunities.