



UNITED STATES COMMISSION *on* INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

POLICY UPDATE

October 2017

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USCIRF's Mission

*To elevate and promote
international religious
freedom as a norm
and practice.*

Central African Republic Factsheet

The Central African Republic (CAR) has a long history of political strife, coups, severe human rights abuses, and underdevelopment. Despite this, sectarian violence and targeted killing based on religious identity are new to the majority-Christian country. The ongoing conflict started after the 2013 coup by a coalition of Muslim-majority militias and has resulted in thousands of people dead, 2.2 million in need of humanitarian assistance, more than 480,000 refugees, and more than 500,000 internally displaced persons (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.

In 2015, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) first recommended that CAR be designated as a "country of particular concern" (CPC) because of the ethnic cleansing of Muslims and sectarian violence in that country. USCIRF continues to recommend CAR be designated as a CPC, finding the country remains susceptible to outbreaks of sectarian violence, is fractured along religious lines, has a severely marginalized Muslim population, and has a government that can and should increase its reconciliation efforts.

In May, a USCIRF delegation traveled to Bangui and Boda in CAR and assessed religious freedom conditions for CAR's minority-Muslim population, government reconciliation efforts, the status of the conflict, and the country's rule of law challenges. The delegation met with senior CAR officials, religious leaders, United Nations (UN) representatives, and civil society actors. USCIRF concluded that despite some positive efforts to address insecurity and Christian-Muslim communal tensions, the U.S. government should recommit to assisting the fledgling CAR government to prevent and end conflict, improve reconciliation, reverse the cleansing and marginalization of Muslims, and hold accountable perpetrators of crimes against humanity and gross human rights abuses.



Status of the Conflict

In its April 2017 annual report chapter on CAR, USCIRF stated that “killings and skirmishes along religious lines continue, although at far lower levels than during the height of the conflict in 2013 and 2014.” This remains largely true.

In May, just prior to the USCIRF delegation’s mission, targeted killings based on religious identity increased dramatically. On May 13–14, in Bangassou, the majority-Christian militias known as anti-balaka attacked and killed Muslims. The fighters sought to eliminate Muslims from the town, even trapping Muslims who sought refuge in a mosque and hospital. Cardinal Dieudonne Nzapalainga, Archbishop of Bangui and a founder of the national interfaith Religious Leaders Platform, had to negotiate their release and escort them to the town’s Catholic cathedral where they now reside as IDPs. Days later, in Bria, majority-Muslim militias—known as ex-Séléka—attacked and killed Christians. Other small towns, such as Alindo and Mombaye, also experienced sectarian violence. The UN reports that overall, the violence resulted in more than 100 dead and 40,000 displaced. The loss of life and displacement has continued since May and is reaching the same levels as during the height of CAR’s sectarian conflict in 2014. In early August, UN Aid

Chief Stephen O’Brien warned that the early signs of genocide are present in CAR.

USCIRF is troubled by this escalation of sectarian violence. Prior to these attacks, the majority of recent violence was between ex-Séléka factions in the center of CAR, as different ethnically-based factions sought to increase control over resource-rich territories. Some of the sectarian attacks occurred in villages that had escaped the 2013–2014 conflict. According to some interlocutors, the resurgent sectarian violence appeared to be a concerted effort by the militias to reignite the conflict that previously engulfed the country, thereby allowing the fighters to capture more resource-rich areas, including the strategically important central town of Bambari. One interlocutor said militia leaders were increasing their attacks and the corresponding chaos to avoid being captured, arrested, and tried by the Special Criminal Court. In a positive development, retaliatory attacks in Bangui and elsewhere in western CAR did not occur.

However, the militias succeeded in creating fear among some Muslims that the ethnic cleansing campaign would return. USCIRF was told that some Muslim youth in Bangui’s Muslim enclave, PK 5, spoke about engaging in revenge attacks before they were stopped by community leaders. In a meeting

with Bangui Central Mosque Imam Tidjani, he passionately and emphatically informed USCIRF that displaced Muslims in the central and eastern regions in CAR should not be moved out of those areas, implying that this would be considered more ethnic cleansing.

This recent violence is a reminder that while some areas of the country—such as the west—remain stable, the challenges to demobilization, disarmament, and reintegration negotiations are vast as 14 armed groups continue to operate and exert control over significant territory. The delegation concluded that the Central African Republic remains insecure and will continue to be unstable for the foreseeable future.

Continuing Need to Reverse the Ethnic Cleansing of Muslims

By the end of the height of CAR's sectarian conflict in mid-2014, 417 of 435 mosques in the country were destroyed, 80 percent of CAR's Muslims had fled the country, and those who remained sought safety in 19 UN peacekeeper-protected enclaves. In Bangui, 99 percent of the capital's Muslim population fled. Boda's Muslim population fell from 14,000 to 5,000.

The USCIRF delegation assessed reconciliation efforts in Bangui and Boda. Both cities demonstrated positive efforts to reverse the cleansing of Muslims, but notable concerns remained. USCIRF concluded that CAR's Muslim population remains highly marginalized and that the efforts to reverse the cleansing that occurred in 2014 should be increased.

In Bangui and Boda, USCIRF met with imams and Muslim leaders in their enclaves. The delegation was pleased to see that physical barriers had been removed and peacekeepers re-stationed to less stable areas. USCIRF also learned that some Muslims have returned to Boda and that almost all of the IDPs who had sought refuge at the Bangui Central Mosque resettled elsewhere.

Imams in Boda and Bangui informed USCIRF that Muslims can move outside of their enclaves. However, their freedom of movement remains

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limited. Imam Tidjani said he is fearful of traveling to certain Bangui neighborhoods, especially when he wears Islamic clothing. Imams in Boda said Muslims could not travel to work into nearby rural areas—referring to those areas as “their zones”—and cited the case of a Muslim man who was recently targeted and killed when traveling into this area. These leaders asked for the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA) to return to Boda, highlighting their continued security concerns.

In Boda, imams reported discrimination in accessing health services, schools, and the police. Due to lack of funds, the community has rebuilt only one of the 28 mosques that were destroyed in 2014.

Representatives from the office of the UN High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) and civil society actors have found that throughout western CAR, local predominantly Christian communities are limiting the freedom of movement of Muslims and prohibiting them from returning to their homes or their previous jobs in the mining sector. This is especially problematic in rural areas. Interlocutors stated that Muslims in Boda who live in rural villages are too fearful to pray in public. UNHCR stated that in some western villages, Muslims who have returned there are prohibited from practicing their faith.

The delegation was disappointed by CAR authorities' response to these concerns. Senior government officials were dismissive when USCIRF raised concerns about restrictions on Muslims' freedom of movement as well as general safety concerns for members of the Muslim community. CAR government officials with whom the USCIRF delegation met did not acknowledge that the conflict has resulted in gross violations of religious freedom—including killings based on religious identity, the ethnic cleansing of Muslims, separation of communities based on religion, and the destruction of houses of worship—instead stating that the conflict is not religious in nature.

UNHCR reports it must consistently encourage CAR government counterparts to plan for Muslims to return by engaging local communities about the rights of their former Muslim neighbors to return to their homes and the area, to freely and publicly practice and express their faith, and to re-engage in their previous employment. These concerns, however, are not being addressed.

80 percent of the country's Muslim population had been driven out of CAR

In a meeting with National Assembly members, USCIRF raised the outstanding issue of the parliament declaring two Muslim holidays as national holidays. In 2015, the transitional Minister of Reconciliation declared two Muslim holidays as national holidays. In 2016, President Touadéra declared Eid a national holiday. When USCIRF asked about the government's fulfillment of a promise to pass a law declaring Muslim holidays as national holidays, the representatives incorrectly said the president's 2016 declaration fulfilled the promise and incorrectly said the president first would have to submit the legislation for the body to consider the holidays' declaration. Designation of Muslim holidays as national holidays has been a sensitive subject and one which could serve as an important signal from the government of respect for Muslims in CAR.

Continuing Need for Reconciliation Programs

Many interlocutors spoke with USCIRF about the multiple reconciliation and social cohesion programs being funded in CAR. To date, Pope Francis' November 2015 trip to Bangui had the most impact to reduce interfaith tensions in CAR. Almost universally, interlocutors spoke about the visit as transformative and noted that the Pope's visit to PK 5 brought down both physical and emotional barriers. Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) such as Catholic Relief Services, Search for Common Ground (SFCG), and Tearfund informed USCIRF that social cohesion programs concentrated in targeted cities such as Bangui and Boda have allowed for increased contact and decreased mistrust between Muslims and Christians. The NGOs called for continued and increased U.S. government support for reconciliation programs, especially in rural areas.

However, NGOs confirmed USCIRF's observations that serious challenges remain for interfaith reconciliation. A Tearfund survey of Boda Muslims and Christians resulted in 85 percent of respondents stating that they felt distrust toward the other community. SFCG found similar reports of mistrust in its survey of Muslim and Christian youth in Bangui. The SFCG survey found that only half of respondents trust people from other communities and that 29 percent (the highest percentage of all responses) listed religion as the most common community divider. Internews, an international NGO that supports media development, found that the media and rumors play destructive roles in fomenting negative interfaith relations and conflict.

Religious Leaders Platform members and local religious leaders stated that the religious nature of the conflict is new to CAR. Many interlocutors stressed the importance of highlighting the political and economic drivers of the conflict, stating that the violence is not about theology. The leaders continue to be well respected throughout CAR as influential voices that reduce interfaith tensions and mediate with armed groups to protect civilians.

USCIRF was disappointed by the lack of government reconciliation programs. The Minister Counselor for National Reconciliation and the Minister of Social Affairs and National Reconciliation informed the delegation that the government is in the early stages of implementing the National Reconciliation Plan, including the creation of local peace committees as the 2015 Bangui Forum recommended. To date, 11 peace committees have been created. However, several interlocutors expressed frustration that the government has not developed a coordinating mechanism for these committees.

Rule of Law Challenges

For many years, USCIRF has recommended that the U.S. government support and encourage CAR authorities and the international community to rebuild the country's rule of law institutions and

assemble the Special Criminal Court. The delegation visit reinforced USCIRF's concern about the challenges for CAR's rule of law institutions.

Multiple interlocutors spoke about the significant need for a functioning judiciary beyond Bangui. National Assembly members, the American Bar Association Rule of Law Initiative (ABA-ROLI), and SFCG highlighted the problem with mob justice in rural areas. In particular, they voiced concern about mob justice in response to witchcraft accusations.

According to various interlocutors, also problematic is the high degree of impunity at a local level. According to Tearfund, both Christian and Muslim communities believe the other is more heavily armed and, fearing violence from the other, they each protect perpetrators from accountability. This dynamic leaves victims who know and can identify their abusers without justice.



Picture taken April 25, 2017. REUTERS/Baz Rathner

A Cameroonian United Nations peacekeeping soldier guards women fleeing the village of Zike as they arrive to the village of Bambara, Central African Republic, April 25, 2017.

The U.S. Embassy, the UN Mission in CAR, and civil society representatives spoke positively about the Special Criminal Court. The UN and ABA-RO-LI informed USCIRF they are helping to prepare evidence and testimonies that can be used by the Special Criminal Court. However, USCIRF is concerned that CAR government officials are lessening their support for the Special Criminal Court, prioritizing instead a peace agreement and political solution that would exclude efforts to address impunity.

Recommendations to the U.S. Government

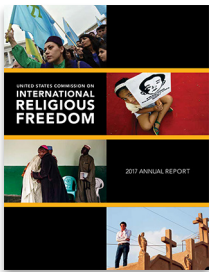
Despite some positive efforts to address insecurity and communal tensions, serious challenges to ending and preventing conflict remain: improving reconciliation, reversing the ethnic cleansing and marginalization of Muslims, and holding perpetrators of crimes against humanity and gross human rights abuses accountable. USCIRF recommends the U.S. government should:

- Designate CAR as a CPC under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 (IRFA);
- Sustain a high level of engagement with CAR authorities, the UN, and international donors to ensure 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 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 IDPs to their homes, recognizing Muslim holidays as national holidays, and rebuilding destroyed mosques and Muslim properties;
- Press CAR authorities, 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 future security forces and police units reflect the country's diversity, and re-establish and professionalize CAR's judiciary;
- Continue to support and work with international donors to fully fund and establish the Special Criminal Court;
- Prioritize support for interfaith dialogue and efforts by religious leaders to rebuild social cohesion at local levels; and
- Continue to support humanitarian assistance for refugees and displaced persons, as well as rebuilding projects.



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The Latest *from* USCIRF



2017 Annual Report

(April 2017)

USCIRF's flagship publication contains extensive policy recommendations to the White House, the Secretary of State, and the Congress concerning religious freedom abroad.

Abbreviated version



Wilting in the Kurdish Sun: The Hopes and Fears of Religious Minorities in Northern Iraq

(June 2017)

Kurdistan shelters numerous groups from genocide and violence yet faces its own challenges with

regard to freedom for religious minorities.

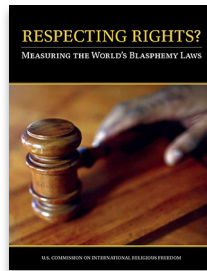
Abbreviated version



Women and Religious Freedom: Synergies and Opportunities

(July 2017)

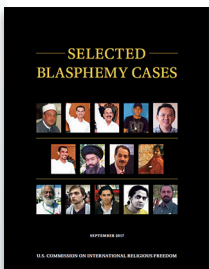
This groundbreaking report asserts that women's right to freedom of religion or belief is not in conflict with religious freedom.



Respecting Rights? Measuring the World's Blasphemy Laws

(August 2017)

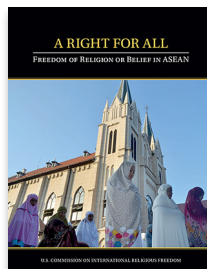
A comprehensive listing and analysis of blasphemy laws in 71 countries.



Selected Blasphemy Cases

(September 2017)

This report highlights a selection of individuals throughout the world who are imprisoned or imperiled because of blasphemy laws.



A Right for All: Freedom of Religion or Belief in ASEAN

(September 2017)

An analysis of the religious freedom-related challenges in the Member States and the region.



Religious Prisoners of Conscience Project

Commissioners work for the release of individuals who have been imprisoned for their religious identity, beliefs, practices, or advocacy and highlight the laws and policies that led to the imprisonment.



UNITED STATES COMMISSION *on* INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

WHO WE ARE

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) is an independent, bipartisan U.S. federal government commission created by the 1998 International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA) that monitors the universal right to freedom of religion or belief abroad. USCIRF uses international standards to monitor violations of religious freedom or belief abroad and makes policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State, and Congress. USCIRF Commissioners are appointed by the President and Congressional leaders of both political parties. The Commission's work is supported by a professional, nonpartisan staff of regional subject matter experts. USCIRF is separate from the State Department, although the Department's Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom is a non-voting, ex officio Commissioner.

WHAT IS RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

Inherent in religious freedom is the right to believe or not believe as one's conscience leads, and live out one's beliefs openly, peacefully, and without fear. Freedom of religion or belief is an expansive right that includes the freedoms of thought, conscience, expression, association, and assembly. While religious freedom is America's first freedom, it also is a core human right international law and treaty recognize; a necessary component of U.S. foreign policy and America's commitment to defending democracy and freedom globally; and a vital element of national security, critical to ensuring a more peaceful, prosperous, and stable world.

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