

CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC

USCIRF—RECOMMENDED FOR SPECIAL WATCH LIST

KEY FINDINGS

Religious freedom conditions in the Central African Republic (CAR) did not significantly improve in 2019, despite the government and 14 nonstate armed groups signing a [Political Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation](#) (also referred to as the “Khartoum Agreement”) on February 6. The agreement, which was a momentous effort with international support, includes a commitment to respect human rights, human dignity, and fundamental and religious freedoms. Nevertheless, armed groups continued to conduct violent attacks during the year, primarily in pursuit of control over pockets of CAR’s rich natural resources. At year’s end, armed groups maintained control over a majority of the territory of CAR. The government relied on United Nations (UN) peacekeepers in many areas, through the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the CAR ([MINUSCA](#)), to defend vulnerable civilians and attempt to prevent further violence.

Thousands of Central Africans remained displaced due to the conflict over the past eight years, which involved militias organized in part along religious lines targeting entire communities for violence and persecution based on their religious beliefs. At the height of the conflict in 2013-14, militias committed abuses that a UN panel later deemed ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity against Muslims; 95 percent of the mosques were destroyed and 80 percent of the Muslim community fled CAR. Between June and August 2019, CAR, the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), and neighboring countries signed agreements on the facilitation of voluntary returns of refugees displaced in Cameroon,

the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Congo. While [some](#) returns did [begin](#), and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) reported returns of displaced Muslim communities in southern parts of CAR, vast numbers of refugees opted to stay abroad due to security risks.

Although some positive steps were reported during the year following the peace agreement, including security sector reforms and the [disarmament](#) of some armed actors, violence and violations of the peace agreement continued. NGOs and the UN [Panel of Experts](#) on CAR reported new incidents of discrimination, mistreatment, and violence against civilians by armed groups and security actors based on perceived religious affiliation, although at lesser levels than in previous years. In a cycle of [attacks](#) in the Carnot area in January, fighters associated with the anti-balaka targeted a Muslim community. Militias also reportedly continued attempts to manipulate community sentiments about MINUSCA by promoting the narrative that the UN peacekeepers were anti-Muslim. Multiple attacks against civilians were [reported](#) in [April](#), resulting in the death, injury, and abduction of civilians. In a major series of [attacks](#) in [May](#), the 3R armed group killed more than 50 people in the Ouham-Pendé region. In [September](#), violent clashes between militias reportedly caused the further displacement of 13,000 people. The continued tensions, attacks, and the government’s reliance on MINUSCA to manage the conflict underscored the tenuous nature of the initial progress pursuant to the peace agreement.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Include CAR on the U.S. Department of State’s Special Watch List for engaging in or tolerating severe violations of religious freedom pursuant to the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA);
- Establish a high-level panel on human rights protection with international stakeholders and CAR authorities to:
 - monitor religious freedom violations and the proliferation of hate speech, in particular ahead of elections;
 - support peace and reconciliation efforts such as expanding interfaith dialogues; and
 - contribute to improving the human rights training of official security actors;
- Fund programs that support both official and traditional justice processes, including CAR’s judiciary and Special Criminal Court (SCC);
- Provide assistance to CAR authorities to undertake initiatives to ensure that Muslims have a future in the country, including by rebuilding destroyed mosques; ensuring Muslim participation in the upcoming 2020 elections and in government administration, security forces, and police units; and safeguarding sustainable returns of Muslim refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) to their homes; and
- Increase funding for humanitarian assistance for refugees, IDPs, and returnees, and for rebuilding projects; and collaborate with humanitarian actors to collect data on religious demographics to protect religious freedom and minorities more effectively.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Special Report:** [Apostasy, Blasphemy, and Hate Speech Laws in Africa](#)
- **Congressional Briefing:** [Silencing Religious Freedom in Africa: The Impact of Speech Restrictions](#)

Background

The population of CAR is [estimated](#) to be more than 5.9 million. Pew Research [estimates](#) that 89 percent of the population is Christian, and a minority of 9 percent is Muslim. Religious practice in CAR is syncretic, with many Christians and Muslims also incorporating traditional and other beliefs into their lives.

Historic ethnic, religious, and socioeconomic tensions in the country were significantly amplified in 2013 with the overthrow of then President Francois Bozizé, a Christian, by predominantly Muslim Séléka militias. In the process, the militias perpetrated mass violence against non-Muslim populations, including Christian actors and churches, prompting the formation of mainly Christian armed groups known as anti-balaka. Anti-balaka conducted reprisal attacks on Muslim civilians, killing and displacing thousands. Some militias claimed to be representing the interests of a particular religious or ethnic group, and fomented division and violence among civilians. The U.S. Ambassador to the UN [stated](#) in 2015 that 417 of the country's 435 mosques were destroyed in the violence. A [UN Commission of Inquiry report](#) that investigated violence between 2013 and 2014 concluded that “although the Commission cannot conclude that there was genocide, ethnic cleansing of the Muslim population by the anti-balaka constitutes a crime against humanity.” Religious-based [targeting](#) and [cycles](#) of violence continued in subsequent years, although militias were largely focused on maintaining power through territorial and resource control, and blurred lines of religious affiliation.

Due to the torrent of violence, hundreds of thousands of people were displaced, and by the end of the reporting period more than [600,000](#) remained displaced within CAR. The peacekeeping force, MINUSCA, was [deployed](#) in 2014 and given a broad mandate that includes protecting civilians, reforming the security sector, improving rule of law, supporting the peace process and 2020 electoral process, and other efforts. It reported more than 14,000 personnel in 2019 and continues to be an essential provider of security.

In December 2019, Bozizé, who was accused of incitement to genocide and supporting the anti-balaka militias, [returned](#) to CAR from exile and declared his desire to run for president in 2020. It remains unclear if the many Muslim refugees still living outside CAR will be able to vote in the elections.

The Khartoum Agreement

Signatories to the Khartoum Agreement committed to actions that would minimize separatism or the manipulation of religious and ethnic differences, and agreed to refrain immediately from “any form of propaganda, hate speech, and divisive discourse that makes reference to ethnic, regional, religious, or sectarian identity or that incites violence.” Although the agreement is the latest in a long list of attempts at peace deals over the past decade, it led to notable optimism and a reduction in violence. Nevertheless, NGOs continue to [report](#) a range of challenges with its implementation, and believe that the context remains extremely fragile. They note that Christians and Muslims continue to feel uncomfortable living next to each other in many areas, and much work remains to provide a path for the return

of displaced Muslims and the rebuilding of properties and houses of worship destroyed during the height of the conflict.

While some religious actors were hopeful about the peace agreement, others were skeptical. Religious actors and communities continued to be [active](#) in interfaith and peacebuilding efforts, despite also being impacted negatively by violent events and limited in activity by security risks. In May, a Spanish missionary was brutally [murdered](#) in southwest CAR. Militias also continued attacking civilians, including an incident in May [reportedly](#) in retaliation for an attack on an ethnic Peuhl. This attack tested citizens' confidence in the new peace agreement and resulted in swift [condemnation](#) from the international community. The UN reported [weekly](#) violations of the agreement.

Truth, Justice, and Reconciliation

The SCC, a tribunal set up in CAR to help hold accountable human rights violators of the ongoing conflict, [continued](#) to face challenges in funding and staffing for most of the year. It also appeared to be stalled significantly in conducting its investigations. The SCC [announced](#) that it might conclude the examination of some of its first cases, and potentially begin trials, by the end of 2020. In December, the International Criminal Court (ICC) [confirmed](#) it was charging two anti-balaka militia leaders—Alfred Yekatom and Patrice-Edouard Ngaïssona—with crimes against humanity that took place between 2013 and 2014. Crimes referenced included the displacement of Muslim populations from towns and neighborhoods, as well as the destruction and looting of Muslim houses and places of worship.

In tandem with achieving justice through formal and informal means, citizens also desire a broader truth and reconciliation process. The Khartoum Agreement committed parties to establish within 90 days a national Commission on Truth, Justice, Reparation, and Reconciliation (TJRRC), initially [prescribed](#) by the 2015 Bangui National Forum. The agreement also ordered a second interim commission to examine the conflict and begin community consultations. Consultations were [launched](#) in June and faced [mixed](#) reviews.

Key U.S. Policy

U.S. Ambassador to CAR [Lucy Tamlyn](#) was sworn in on January 11, 2019. Throughout the year, the United States provided a range of technical and financial assistance for humanitarian, peace, and security goals. More than \$6 million was requested in FY 2020. The State Department continued to [support](#) MINUSCA, whose mandate was again extended until November 15, 2020. The United States [provided](#) \$80,000 in support of the creation of the CAR Justice Sector Policy, which includes among its priorities transitional justice and human rights. In September, the UN eased the arms embargo on CAR in order to support the government's stabilization efforts through the unanimous adoption of [Resolution 2488 \(2019\)](#). U.S. Ambassador to the UN Kelly Craft [restated](#) the United States' commitment to bilateral support of CAR to achieve the implementation of the Khartoum Agreement. In May, U.S. Representative David Cicilline (D-RI) [introduced](#) H.Res.387 condemning the continued violence against civilians in CAR and recognizing the commission of atrocities based on perceived or actual ethnic or religious identities.