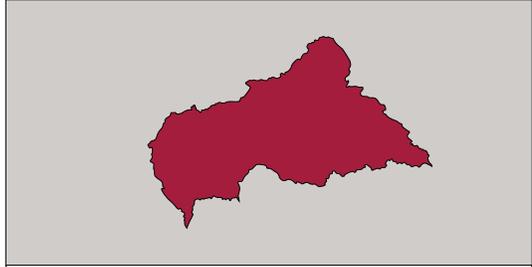


**CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC**



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## Key Findings

Militias formed along opposing Muslim and Christian lines in the Central African Republic (CAR) 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, trapped in peacekeeper enclaves and unable to freely practice their faith. The 2013 coup resulted in rampant lawlessness and the complete collapse of government control. State authorities have almost no presence outside of the capital, Bangui, with the remainder of the country controlled by armed groups. Despite an overall reduction in violence, the passage of a new constitution with religious freedom protections, and the holding of peaceful presidential elections, CAR remains highly volatile, fractured along religious lines, and susceptible to regular outbreaks of sectarian violence. Accordingly, USCIRF again recommends in 2016 that CAR should be designated a "country of particular concern," or CPC. In 2015, USCIRF determined that the ethnic cleansing

U.S. engagement to work with the new CAR government to demobilize armed groups, address impunity, tackle the root causes of the conflict, improve interfaith relations, and reverse the effects of the ethnic cleansing of the Muslim community.

## Background

CAR has a long history of political strife, coups, severe human rights abuses, and underdevelopment. Military dictatorships ruled the country for all but nine years since independence and, despite being rich in natural resources, CAR routinely is at the bottom of development indexes. Despite this, sectarian violence and targeted killing based on religious identity are new to the majority-Christian country. The current conflict has resulted in thousands dead, 2.7 million in need of humanitarian assistance, 450,000 internally displaced, and 450,000 refugees. 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.

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of Muslims and sectarian violence in CAR meet the International Religious Freedom Act's (IRFA) 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 broaden the U.S. government's ability to engage the actual drivers of persecution. Bringing stability to CAR will take years and significant U.S. and international support. A CPC designation should be part of sustained

Fighting started in December 2012 due to a rebellion by a coalition of four northern majority-Muslim armed rebel groups, the Séléka, which ostensibly protested the government's failure to implement previous peace agreements and address marginalization in the country's Muslim-majority northeast. Complicating the conflict, large numbers of Chadian and Sudanese foreign fighters and diamond sellers seeking access to CAR's natural resources also supported the rebels. Following a brief peace agreement, the Séléka took the capital, Bangui, in March 2013 and deposed President

François Bozizé. Subsequently, Séléka leader Michel Djotodia proclaimed himself President. In September 2013, Djotodia formally disbanded the Séléka following international condemnation of its 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 political parties.

In June 2013, deposed president Bozizé, his inner circle, and former Central African Armed Forces (FACA) soldiers planned his return to power by recruiting existing self-defense militias (known as the anti-balaka), FACA soldiers, and other aggrieved non-Muslims. They framed the upcoming fight as an opportunity to avenge Séléka attacks on non-Muslims. Many Central African Christians feared for their future under the country's first Muslim leader, who sought support from Muslim leaders during a period when Séléka attacks disproportionately targeted Christians, including by attacking churches while sparing mosques and Muslims. Even prior to this hostility, Muslims in CAR were distrusted and faced consistent societal discrimination.

Ex-Séléka and anti-balaka fighting started in September 2013, and escalated dramatically when the anti-balaka attacked Muslim neighborhoods in Bangui on December 5, 2013. The ensuing fighting led to a large-scale conflict in which civilians were targeted based on their religious identity. In January 2014, Djotodia was forced to resign and the country's parliament elected Catherine Samba-Panza, then mayor of Bangui, as Interim President. When French peacekeeping troops arrived that same month, they targeted ex-Séléka fighters for disarmament, leading those fighters to withdraw from western CAR and leaving Muslim civilians in those newly-deserted areas vulnerable to anti-balaka attacks.

## **Religious Freedom Conditions 2015–2016**

### **Ethnic Cleansing of Muslims**

In December 2014, the United Nations 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, the anti-balaka emptied CAR's western and northwestern

cities, towns, and villages of their Muslim residents. Anti-balaka fighters deliberately killed Muslims because of their religious identity or told them to leave the country or die. The anti-balaka even killed Muslims fleeing the violence, including those in humanitarian-assisted evacuation convoys. Muslims from ethnic groups deemed “foreign” or “invaders” of CAR were especially targeted. The UN reports 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.

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During the reporting period, the situation for Muslims in western CAR remained the same. The existing Muslims in western CAR continue to live in peacekeeper-protected enclaves and are vulnerable to anti-balaka attacks and killings if they leave. Few displaced Muslims returned to CAR or their homes. The few Muslims in western CAR who have returned or continue to live in their home villages report that anti-balaka soldiers forced them to convert or hide their faith. In a particularly troubling development, the interim parliament, the National Transitional Council, voted in July to prohibit CAR refugees from voting in the presidential and legislative elections; given that Muslims comprise the majority of refugees, this vote would have disenfranchised that population. The Constitutional Court, however, overruled the vote that same month, and refugees were able to vote in the December 2015 and February 2016 elections.

### **Continuing Sectarian Violence**

Killings and skirmishes based on religious identity continue in CAR, particularly in Bangui and central CAR,

where there are more religiously-mixed communities. This violence, albeit reduced from 2013-14 levels, now is largely within and between militias for land and resource control. It continues despite the country's *de facto* partition between the ex-Séléka and the anti-balaka; the presence of French, European Union, and the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA) peacekeepers; promised ceasefires and disarmaments; and the successful Bangui Forum on National Reconciliation (see below under Positive Developments).

The most serious episode of sectarian and retaliatory violence in 2015 erupted on September 26 in Bangui, after a Muslim taxi driver was murdered and his body left near a mosque in the capital's PK-5 Muslim enclave. The ensuing violence between Muslims and anti-balaka fighters over the next several days resulted in 77 dead and 40,000 displaced. Continuing violence through mid-November left more than 100 dead in total. Individuals were deliberately targeted because of their faith and were killed entering into neighborhoods dominated by the opposite faith.

dent Samba-Panza promulgated the establishment of the Special Criminal Court, a hybrid court composed of CAR judges and international judges, to investigate and prosecute grave human rights violations committed in the country since 2003. During an incident-free trip to the country in late November, Pope Francis visited Bangui's PK-5 central Koudoukou mosque. Between December 13 and 15, 93 percent of Central Africans voted to approve a new constitution. The new constitution: recognizes the country's religious diversity; provides for separation of religion and state; establishes equal legal rights for all persons regardless of religion; guarantees freedom of conscience, assembly, religion and worship; and prohibits the formation of political parties based on religion. Unfortunately, however, the vote was marred by low turnout, poor voter education, and violence, including in Bangui's Muslim PK-5 neighborhood on December 13, as discussed above, which prevented Muslims in that area from voting. The vote was extended by two days in response to violence in Bangui, Bria, and elsewhere. Finally, peaceful presidential elections were held in December 2015 and February 2016.

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Other incidents during this reporting period include: fighting on August 20 between ex-Séléka and anti-balaka in Bambari that left 10 dead and thousands displaced after a 19-year-old Muslim was beheaded; and violence in the PK-5 neighborhood on December 13, during the constitutional referendum vote, that resulted in five dead and 20 injured.

### **Positive Developments**

There were several positive developments during the reporting period. From May 4-11, 2015, 600 Central Africans from around the country and different religious communities participated in the Bangui Forum for National Reconciliation to create recommendations to CAR leaders and the international community to bring stability to the country. On June 3, Transitional Presi-

### **U.S. Policy**

U.S.-Central African Republic relations are generally good, but limited. U.S. Embassy Bangui has closed multiple times due to instability. It closed at the start of the current conflict, but reopened in September 2014, and in October 2015 Jeffrey Hawkins was sworn in as U.S. Ambassador to the Central African Republic. U.S.-CAR policy is led by Special Representative for the Central African Republic Ambassador W. Stuart Symington, who has served in this position since April 2014.

As part of U.S. and international efforts to bring justice to the country, on May 13, 2014, President Barack Obama issued Executive Order 13667 sanctioning the following persons identified by the UN Security Council for threatening CAR's stability: former president François 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 sanctions block these individuals’ property and financial interests in the United States.

Over the past two years, the United States has provided over \$800 million in humanitarian, development, and security assistance, including support for international peacekeepers, conflict mitigation, and interfaith relations. U.S. Permanent Representative to the United Nations Samantha Power, Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs Linda Thomas-Greenfield, and other senior U.S. government officials have traveled to the Central African Republic in the past two years, as part of efforts to prevent and end mass atrocities, increase interfaith dialogue, and encourage national reconciliation efforts. During the reporting period, the U.S. government quickly denounced episodes of sectarian violence and urged the holding of the constitutional referendum and elections.

## Recommendations

In addition to recommending that the United States designate the Central African Republic a “country of particular concern” for systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of freedom of religion or belief, USCIRF recommends that the U.S. government should:

- Sustain a high-level of engagement with CAR authorities, the United Nations, and international donors following the country’s presidential elections, and ensure that issues related to ending sectarian violence and impunity, reducing interfaith tensions, and affirming the rights of religious freedom and religious minorities are supported and raised in all engagements with relevant parties;
- Press MINUSCA, CAR authorities, and international donors to increase activities on disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) 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 fully fund the Special Criminal Court, re-establish and professionalize the CAR’s judiciary, and ensure that future security forces and police units reflect the country’s diversity;
- Encourage CAR transitional authorities to undertake initiatives to ensure that 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 to their homes, recognizing Muslim holidays as national holidays, and rebuilding destroyed mosques and Muslim properties;
- Continue to support interfaith dialogues and efforts by religious leaders to rebuild social cohesion; and
- Continue to support humanitarian assistance for refugees and displaced persons, as well as rebuilding projects.