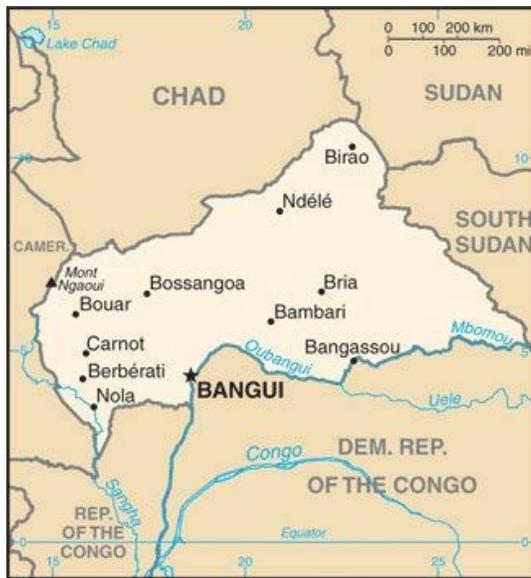




Factsheet

CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC

Increasing Sectarianism and Violence in the Central African Republic



The Central African Republic (CAR) has a long history of political strife that frequently has led to coups and human rights abuses. Yet the current chaos and fighting following the March 2013 coup against former President Françoise Bozizé is uniquely dangerous, as it increasingly is centered around religious identity and risks pulling the country into an intractable Muslim-Christian conflict. If these forces are not contained, severe human rights abuses are expected to be increasingly perpetrated along religious and ethnic lines. The UN Special Adviser on the Prevention of Genocide, Adama Dieng, noted these very concerns when he warned recently that the CAR may spiral into genocide. In addition, the growing conflict and lawlessness could turn the CAR into a failed state vulnerable to terrorist groups from either East or West Africa looking to expand their operations.

Map from U.S. Department of State, CAR, <http://www.state.gov/p/af/ci/car/>

November 2013

THE U.S. COMMISSION ON INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

was created by the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 to monitor the status of freedom of thought, conscience, and religion or belief abroad, as defined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and related international instruments, and to give independent policy recommendations to the President, Secretary of State, and Congress.

CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC

732 N. Capitol St. N.W.,
Suite A714
Washington, D.C. 20401
Phone: (202) 786-0613
Communications@uscirf.gov

www.uscirf.gov

Background

Fighting began in December 2012 when a coalition of armed rebels, the Séléka, advanced on the CAR capital, Bangui, in response to the government's failure to implement provisions of the 2007 and 2011 peace accords to pay former rebel fighters and integrate them into the army. The Séléka (Sango for coalition) is an alliance of fighters from at least four armed rebel groups that have been operating in the northern part of the country since 2003: the Convention of Patriots for Justice and Peace, the Convention of Patriots of Salvation and Kodro, the Democratic Front of the Central African People, and the Union of Democratic Forces for Unity. The fighters are Muslims from CAR's almost universally Muslim Vakaga region in the northeast of the country, a large number of foreign fighters from Chad and Sudan, and some of former President Bozizé guards and soldiers. At the beginning of the rebellion, the Séléka were estimated to number around 5,000, but Amnesty International now reports estimates of up to 20,000 soldiers. The rebellion was led by Michel Djotodia, a Muslim from the Vakaga region and a former Ministry of Planning official and Consulate Council in Nyala, South Darfur.

By the time the fighters reached the outskirts of the capital Bangui in December 2012 they controlled two-thirds of the country, including the major city of Bambari and the diamond mining town of Bria. Before the Séléka could take Bangui, neighboring countries politically intervened to end the fighting. The regional intervention by Chad and the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS) led to the signing on January 11, 2013 of the Libreville Agreement.

The short-lived Libreville Agreement upheld the 2003 constitution and set up a three year power-sharing Government of National Unity that would end with presidential elections in 2016. Per the Agreement, the GNU was to be led by President Bozizé through 2016 and a presidentially-appointed Prime Minister with full executive powers who would come from the opposition. The National Assembly would be dissolved and replaced with newly elected representatives within 12 months.

Bozizé failed to implement the Libreville Agreement, which led the Séléka to once again take up arms. On March 24, 2013 the Séléka captured the capital Bangui and deposed Bozizé. Djotodia proclaimed himself President and Minister of Defense; appointed opposition party leader Nicolas Tiangaye Prime Minister; suspended the Constitution; dissolved the National Assembly, the Constitutional Court and the Government of National Unity; and appointed a new government, composed of representatives from Séléka, opposition parties, civil society, and one Bozizé ally.

In response to these new developments, Chad organized two summits of African states and CAR leaders on April 3 and 18 culminating in the N'Djamena Declaration and the N'Djamena Summit Road Map. The new CAR transitional government was recognized, a new 18 month transitional period led by a National Transition Council was tasked to draft a new constitution and prepare for new elections, and a new constitutional court was agreed upon. Djotodia was formally sworn in as interim president on August 18, marking the beginning of the 18-month transition period.

Current human rights situation in the Central African Republic

The Séléka are responsible for a breakdown in the overall human rights and rule of law environment in the CAR. The transitional government remains very weak and is absent outside of Bangui, as are rule of law institutions such as the police or judiciary and government service providers. Séléka fighters freely roam the country. Former special representative of the UN Secretary-General to the CAR, Margaret Aderinsola Vogt, told the Security Council in May that the country had plunged into a “state of anarchy.”

There are continuous reports of killings, torture, arbitrary detention, gender-based violence, and enforced disappearances by the Séléka. Séléka fighters also loot property and food from civilians, churches, international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and UN agencies; recruit and use child soldiers; and engage in sexual violence. International charities report having to pay Séléka rebels to prevent being robbed. The human rights situation has worsened since June, following a breakdown in Séléka cohesion, and again since September with the formation of anti-Séléka militias.

Since March, the four associated groups and other parties comprising the Séléka have become increasingly disorganized, with the various factions and fighters increasingly difficult to control. Séléka members repeatedly have been involved in gross human rights abuses. The UN reports that Séléka leaders can access only areas controlled by men loyal to them, as different factions do not recognize leaders from other groups. While Djotodia signed a presidential decree in September disbanding the Séléka, the rebels continue to operate and commit gross human rights abuses.

Current religious freedom violations

The CAR is a majority Christian country. Eighty five percent of its citizens are identified as Lutheran, Catholic, Protestant, or Evangelical. The remaining 15 percent are Sunni Muslim. The Muslim population can be found in the Vakaga district, a poor and remote area in the north-east of CAR located at the borders with Chad and Sudan where Arabic is the primary language. According to recent State Department International Religious Freedom reports, prior to the 2012-2013 rebellion and subsequent coup, Muslims faced consistent social discrimination and Muslim citizens were labelled “foreigners.” Low-level bureaucrats impeded access to services like citizenship documentation. Muslim-owned shops frequently were vandalized and, in some cases, vigilantes subjected Muslims to harassment, beatings, and detention. There also were reports of isolated clashes between Muslim nomadic groups and Christian or non-Muslim farmers and between Muslim traders and others.

In the CAR’s current lawless environment, a number of identifiable religious freedom violations have occurred. The United Nations, International Crisis Group, Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, Christian religious leaders, and humanitarian organizations all report that the Séléka attack priests, pastors, nuns, church buildings, and other Christian institutions. Séléka soldiers are reported to have beaten Catholic priests Abbé Philippe Greballe and Abbé Alain Banganzi, and nuns are threatened with rape. The Brethren church in Bangui’s Cité Jean XXIII quarter was shelled during a worship service on April 14, killing or seriously injuring a number of people, including children. The Catholic Church of Basse Kotto Prefecture and the Mobaye Catholic

Church were looted and damaged in late January and early February 2013, respectively. On April 13-14, clashes along religious lines occurred between Séléka elements and the population of Ouango and Boy-Rabe in Bangui, killing and displacing large numbers of civilians.

Additionally, during their advances toward Bangui in December 2012 and March 2013, the Séléka targeted predominantly Christian neighborhoods and businesses were targeted for destruction. Séléka fighters in different villages, such as Bambari, Bangui, Boali, and Markounda, looted churches but not mosques. In other villages, the Séléka protected Muslim residents while Christian residents were killed or raped and their properties were destroyed and looted. Amnesty International and Catholic leaders report that in some Séléka-controlled areas, non-Muslims are prohibited from selling foods not eaten by CAR Muslims, including pork, bushmeat and caterpillars.

Concerns for the future

The rise of the almost universally Muslim Séléka and CAR's first Muslim leader has increased fear and confusion among CAR's Christian population. Neighboring countries are also increasingly concerned about CAR's internal religious tensions and rising religious fundamentalism. The UN Assistant Secretary-General for Human Rights has warned that "The conflict in the Central African Republic should not remain forgotten for three main reasons: conflict will continue to impose suffering on large numbers of people, it will deepen the religious and ethnic divide, and it may destabilize the wider region." The International Crisis Group reports that in online forums, some CAR citizens and members of the diaspora have encouraged the population to take up arms and systematically retaliate against any and all Muslims.

These fears are based on the facts that large percentages of Séléka soldiers are from Chad and Sudan; wounded Séléka soldiers have been flown by military aircraft to Sudan and Saudi Arabia for treatment; Séléka leaders have visited Qatar; Djotodia has strengthened ties with Morocco and Sudan; and most importantly, a rumor that in the April 2012, Djotodia wrote to the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC) asking for monetary and material support, and in return, the Séléka would implement Islamic law across the CAR and try to do likewise in Chad. Djotodia has since denied writing this letter and reaffirmed that CAR will remain a secular state.

In response to the Séléka attacks, a number of militias have formed to fight back. Known as the anti-balaka (Sango for anti-machete), these disparate groups can be characterized as local self-defense militias who are Christian, pro-Christian militias, or militias made up of Christian Bozizé supporters. The various anti-balaka militias, depending on the situation, attack the Séléka, individual Muslims, and/or Muslim villages.

For example, on September 6, anti-balaka fighters killed or captured 20 Séléka fighters and targeted Muslim homes in Benzambé. Three days later, on September 9, the anti-balaka attacked a Muslim neighborhood in Bouca, killing three people and burning 150 homes belonging to Muslims. In response, Séléka fighters that same day in Bouca killed 10 Christians and burned down 300 homes belonging to Christians. A Séléka commander also accused a humanitarian worker of assisting the anti-balaka and executed him. In early October, Séléka and anti-balaka clashes again broke out. On October 7, anti-balaka and Séléka engaged in battle in Gaga village,

before the anti-balaka attacked Muslim civilians. Two days later, the Séléka retaliated in Gaga, targeting Christians. Doctors Without Borders reports that more than 100 people died in this fighting. Anti-balaka and Séléka attacks and counter-attacks also occurred on October 12 in Bomboro and on October 26 in Bouar, killing dozens.

The increase of fighting between the Séléka and the anti-balaka falls along religious lines, and is so viewed by CAR's many citizens. French UN Ambassador Gerard Araud said on November 1, "More and more you have inter-sectarian violence because the Séléka targeted the churches and the Christians, so now the Christians have created self-defense militias and they are retaliating against the Muslims." The BBC reports that displaced residents of the Bozizé's hometown of Bossangoa have fled to their co-religionists and that the town is split in half into Muslim-Christian areas. Displaced Christian Bossangoa residents also reported to the BBC that they fear if they leave their refuge in the Christian Mission that the Séléka fighters will identify them as Christian and detain, beat, shoot or kill them. Muslim residents report carrying weapons with them at all times. Amnesty International and Doctors Without Borders report that on September 29, Séléka soldiers executed two Christians south of Bossangoa and on October 4, anti-Balaka separated eight Muslims from a group of travelers between Bangui and Bossangoa and shot them.

U.S. government and the international community response

The United Nations, AU, ECCAS, and France have led the international response to the crisis in the Central African Republic. The African Union plans to deploy a 3,600-member peacekeeping mission, the International Support Mission in the Central African Republic (MISCA), in the country. This force would incorporate ECCAS soldiers already on the ground, but will not be fully operational before 2014. The Security Council on October 10 adopted a resolution asking UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon to outline "detailed options for international support to MISCA, including the possible option of a transformation of MISCA into a United Nations peacekeeping operation, subject to appropriate conditions on the ground." In October, the Security Council approved a plan by the Secretary General to send 250 military personnel to Bangui plus 560 troops to be deployed outside the capital where there is a UN presence. France plans to have a small force of 700 soldiers in Bangui by the end of the year, but only to secure the airport and its local interests.

The U.S. government supports UN, AU, and ECCAS efforts to bring stability to the CAR; condemns the ongoing gross human rights abuses and insecurity; calls for the transitional government to move toward elections in 2015 and adopt a new constitution to bring democracy to the country; and funds humanitarian assistance operations in and outside of CAR. The U.S. government condemned the Séléka's seizure of power in March, followed by Djotodia's self-appointment as president, and his decisions to end the transitional governance structures implemented by the Libreville Agreement. It primarily works with the Prime Minister. The U.S. government closed its Embassy in Bangui in December 2012 for security reasons and the Embassy remains closed. A Senior Advisor is in place, however, to address the crisis.