

POLICY BRIEF



Central African Republic

A long way to peace and stability

The Central African Republic (CAR) gained independence in 1960. Since then, the country has been mired in cycles of violence. These cycles have been driven by overlapping tensions between armed groups, religious and ethnic groups, and herders and farmers. As a result, CAR has endured repeated outbreaks of conflict, population displacement, alarming food insecurity, and limited access to basic services and economic opportunities.¹ The most recent conflict began when a coup organized by the Séléka militia, an alliance between several rebel groups from the north,² overthrew Francois Bozizé's government in March 2013 and appointed Michel Djotodia, a Séléka leader, as the President of CAR. Djotodia dissolved the Séléka later that year since he was unable to control the excesses of its fighters.³ The ex- Séléka members continued to act with impunity, destroying villages, killing civilians and raping women and girls. In retaliation to these atrocities, the anti-Balaka, groups of vigilantes initially organized to combat local crimes,⁴

took up arms against the ex- Séléka. These groups have undergone long successions of fragmentations and reconstitution since the current conflict first began in 2013. Over the years these rebel groups have been involved in human rights violations that have included extrajudicial killings, enforced disappearances, arbitrary arrests and detention, torture, sexual violence against women and children, rape, recruitment and use of children and attacks against civilians.⁵ The ex-Séléka is considered a coalition of Muslim groups while the anti-Balaka, often referred to as Christian groups, but in reality followers of African Traditional Religions. Nevertheless, the leaders and community members of both faith groups in CAR have vociferously condemned this conflict and have vehemently denied that it is rooted in any religious differences.⁶

Article 10 of the Constitution of CAR guarantees freedom of conscience, of assembly, and of religion and of beliefs within the conditions established by law. It mandates that

¹ "Central African Republic: Country Dossier", World Watch Research, February 2022. Available at Full Country Dossier Qatar 2022 (opendoorsanalytical.org) (password: freedom).

² This was a consequence of their unfulfilled demands. Their demands included the implementation of recommendations from the Inclusive Political Dialogue (IPD) (held in 2008 to create conditions for peaceful elections in 2010, which were carried out in 2011 and fraught with difficulties) financial compensation for the rebels, the release of political prisoners, and the opening of investigations into past crimes. What is the Seleka, January 2015. Available at <https://institute.global/policy/what-seleka>.

³ These excesses include destruction of rural villages, deliberate killing of civilians, sexual assault of women and girls. 'I can still smell the dead'-The Forgotten Human Rights Crisis in the Central African Republic, A Report by Human Rights Watch, 2013. Available at https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/car0913_ForUploadWInsert_0.pdf.

⁴ 'A Question of Humanity': Witness to the Turning Point In Central African Republic, May 2014. Available at <https://time.com/42131/anti-balaka-central-african-republic/>.

⁵ UN Security Council Resolution 2121, 10 October 2013. Available at <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/758730?ln=en#record-files-collapse-header>.

⁶ 'Don't Blame The Central African Republic Conflict On Religion', TIME, April 2014. Available at <https://time.com/55813/dont-blame-the-central-african-republic-conflict-on-religion/>.

all forms of religious fundamentalism and intolerance should be prohibited.⁷ However, conversion from Islam to Christianity makes an individual susceptible to attacks by family or community members. In parts of the country controlled by these groups, they have created their own informal administrative structures with greatly reduced state control. In areas controlled by the ex- Séléka in the north, there are severe restrictions on the general population regarding taxes, farming etc. Permission is required for attending a religious meeting during the week. Attendance to church service is not explicitly prohibited, however, due to the constraints imposed on other activities, Christians only meet on Sundays. Similarly, in territories under the anti-Balaka control, non-Muslim leaders involved in peacebuilding and reconciliation have been attacked and assaulted by the rebel group members.⁸

The efforts of international troops in the country since a UN mission, United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA), was deployed in September 2014, have had a marginal impact on the violence.⁹ After a few years of reduced violence, the CAR government and fourteen recognized armed groups signed the 2019 Political Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation in the Central African Republic (the 2019 Agreement) for the restoration of durable peace.¹⁰ However, this deal was short-lived and since the elections in December 2020, followed by the results in January 2021, the country has witnessed increase in unlawful attacks and killings carried by Coalition of Patriots for Change (CPC), an alliance made up of ex- Séléka and anti-Balaka groups.

Years of ongoing high intensity non-international armed conflict in the CAR¹¹ has resulted in destroyed infrastructure and government institutions, leaving millions of Central Africans without access to clean water, health care and food. The country ranks 114 out of the 116 countries in the Global Hunger Index.¹² Over the years the conflict has forced hundreds of thousands to flee their

homes with the UNHCR estimating 649,794 internally displaced persons (IDPs)¹³ and 737,596 refugees.¹⁴ Sexual violence has become a public health crisis and women and children are most affected.¹⁵

State weakness, absence of rule of law and issues of impunity

High corruption levels and exceedingly low governance capacities have further intensified the problems in CAR. With the largely absent governance structures and public service delivery systems, CAR steadily ranks near the bottom of established State fragility and corruption indices.¹⁶ Most populations living outside the capital city Bangui are provided inadequate services leading to increased vulnerabilities resulting in marginalization. The ensuing shortage has increased the already existing intercommunal tensions that, when they worsen, have often formed a vicious cycle where State weakness leads to resentment and armed conflict, which in turn further destroys government institutions and infrastructure.¹⁷ The violence of the 2013 conflict further collapsed public order and the rule of law in the already fragile CAR. Most prisons and court buildings, including criminal records, were destroyed in the fighting. The absence of a substantial police presence in areas outside the capital Bangui engendered conditions which allowed armed groups to retain control of cities and towns.¹⁸ As a result, most of the courts outside Bangui are not functional.

Many perpetrators of serious international crimes and human rights crimes continue to operate with impunity. The lack of accountability further leads to reprisal attacks, resulting in escalation of violence. Therefore, the Special Criminal Court (SCC), a UN-sponsored hybrid court based in Bangui, was created to fill this accountability gap, as a complementary mechanism to the International Criminal Court and the ordinary criminal courts. The SCC's mandate is to investigate and prosecute crime under international law and serious human rights violations

⁷ Central African Republic's Constitution of 2016. Available at https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Central_African_Republic_2016.pdf?lang=en.

⁸ Central African Republic: Freedom of religion or belief, September 2018, CSW. Available at https://www.ecoi.net/en/file/local/1447966/3175_1540637083_2018-09-general-briefings-central-african-republic.pdf.

⁹ 'What Is the Antibalaka?', Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, September 2016. Available at <https://institute.global/policy/what-antibalaka#:~:text=The%20membership%20of%20the%20Antibalaka,no%20other%20avenue%20for%20survival>.

¹⁰ This Agreement included both political power-sharing promises and a plan for integration of rebel fighters into the national military. Available at <https://www.polgeonow.com/2021/07/who-controls-the-central-african-republic-2021.html>.

¹¹ The conflict in the CAR has been defined as high-intensity non-international armed conflict since the nature of the conflict meets all the four requirements listed in Article 1(1) of the 1977 Additional Protocol II to the 1949 Geneva Conventions. Please see 'Additional Protocol II: Elevating the minimum threshold of intensity?', January 2022. Available at <https://international-review.icrc.org/articles/additional-protocol-ii-elevating-the-minimum-threshold-of-intensity-915>.

¹² Available at <https://www.globalhungerindex.org/car.html>.

¹³ Data for IDPs available at <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/car/location/399>.

¹⁴ Data for refugees available at <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/car>.

¹⁵ Available at <https://reliefweb.int/report/central-african-republic/sexual-violence-remains-public-health-crisis-central-african>.

¹⁶ Fund for Peace, Fragile States Index 2021. Available at <https://fragilestatesindex.org/country-data/>. Transparency International, Corruption Perceptions Index 2021. Available at <https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2021/index/car>.

¹⁷ RULE OF LAW, Support to Conflict Prevention and Sustaining Peace in the Central African Republic, pp.102, March 2021. Available at https://i.unu.edu/media/cpr.unu.edu/attachment/5175/RuleofLaw_CAR.pdf.

¹⁸ Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs: Central African Republic Summary, U.S. Dept. of State. Available at <https://www.state.gov/bureau-of-international-narcotics-and-law-enforcement-affairs-work-by-country/central-african-republic-summary/>.

committed in the CAR since 2003.¹⁹ It is staffed by both international and Central African judges, prosecutors, and administrators.²⁰ However, very few individuals have been arrested and prosecuted thus far. There have been delays regarding execution of arrest warrants issued by the SCC.²¹ Additionally, regular criminal courts also suffer from corruption and unqualified personnel.

Efforts of Interfaith Peace Platform and Truth, Justice, Reparation and Reconciliation Commission

The conflict in CAR has been going on for such a prolonged period of time that the international community sometimes refers to it as the “largest forgotten humanitarian crisis”. The Central African citizens have struggled to find impactful and durable solutions to end the crisis.²² Three most senior religious leaders of CAR,²³ established the Interfaith Religious Platform to promote peace and mutual understanding at village level throughout the country.²⁴ There’s an environment of fear and suspicion as a consequence of the conflict. National governments over the years have been unable to provide justice. This has created opportunity for rebels, militia groups and political leaders with an interest in perpetuating instability to use religion as a tool to further divide and manipulate the Central Africans people.²⁵ The clerics from the Interfaith Peace Platform have consistently put all their efforts to enable reconciliation, restore social cohesion and dissociate religion from criminal acts.²⁶ Nonetheless, policymakers and practitioners have yet to explore the clerics’ experiences and their role as partners in strengthening the peacebuilding process.

As an attempt to bring “fair justice” involving meaningful improvements to the victims’ overall life improvement, the Truth, Justice, Reparation and Reconciliation Commission (the Commission) was launched in Bangui in 2021.²⁷ The Commission’s mandate is to bring to light

serious human rights violations, determine their nature, causes and extent from the period between 29 March 1959 to 31 December 2019. As a non-judicial body, the Commission is an independent body even though the budgetary allocation is from the State budget. The Commission will operate for four years in a difficult political context with widespread uncertainty and insecurity. Therefore, the support for the Commission could change at any moment potentially leading to its isolation, creating innumerable hindrances to achieving its objectives, or affecting its independence.²⁸

Contributions by Local Faith Actors

Local Faith Actors (LFAs) have been the source of support for many communities across CAR given the almost non-existent state presence even in peacetime. LFAs play a number of crucial roles in this conflict such as engaging in mediation with communities and armed groups, welcoming people into their compounds and providing them with assistance including shelter, food and health services. In many instances they also became first responders by letting people take refuge in their religious establishments. Due to their closeness with affected people and their networks, LFAs have reached people in need more easily and in a more proactive manner than international humanitarian organisations.²⁹ Many of these international organizations have been able to track the number of displaced and their needs because of early warning by the LFAs. Many local churches or church based organizations are actively involved in providing psycho-social trauma counselling to victims of sexual assault, building safe communities, providing basic necessities to IDPs and refugees who have returned. However, the work of these LFAs is often times affected due to scarcity of resources or they are considered ‘less traditional’ actors not easily fitting within some of the requirements of these international organizations and their donors.

¹⁹ On 19 April 2022, the SCC opened a trial against three armed group leaders over war crimes and crimes against humanity committed during in May 2019, in which dozens of civilians were killed. Available at <https://reliefweb.int/report/central-african-republic/central-african-republic-first-ever-scc-trial-ensures-alleged-war#:~:text=On%2019%20April%202022%2C%20the,dozens%20of%20civilians%20were%20killed>.

²⁰ “Looking for Justice”, The Special Criminal Court, a New Opportunity for Victims in the Central African Republic, May 2018. Available at https://www.hrw.org/report/2018/05/17/looking-justice/special-criminal-court-new-opportunity-victims-central-african#_ftn9.

²¹ Central African Republic: One step forward two steps backwards. Justice in the Central African Republic, Amnesty International, December 2021. Available at <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/afr19/5038/2021/en/>.

²² UN warns Central African Republic is becoming largest forgotten humanitarian crisis. Available at <https://news.un.org/en/story/2015/04/497142>.

²³ Imam Oumar Kobine Layama, president of the Central African Islamic Council, Archbishop Dieudonné Nzapalainga and Reverend Nicolas Guerekoyame-Gbangou, president of the Evangelical Alliance in the CAR.

²⁴ Making peace reality – the impact of the Interfaith Peace Platform on the peace process in the Central African Republic, Geneva Liaison Office of the World Evangelical Alliance. Available at <https://jilifc.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Making-peace-reality-the-impact-of-the-Interfaith-Peace-Platform-on-the-peace-process-in-CAR.pdf>.

²⁵ University of Oxford, Religious leaders unite to disarm hearts and minds, Forced Migration Review 48. Available at <https://podcasts.ox.ac.uk/fmr-48-religious-leaders-unite-disarm-hearts-and-minds>.

²⁶ These efforts include organizing prayer weeks, cultural events, sports, training community and religious leaders as ambassadors of social cohesion, promoting “peace schools” where children belonging to different religions can attend as well as mixed healthcare centers that treats everyone irrespective of their religious or ethnic backgrounds, *Ibid*, pp.11.

²⁷ Why in the Central African Republic, Reparations Should Come First, International Center for Transitional Justice, April 2021. Available at <https://www.ictj.org/news/why-central-african-republic-reparations-should-come-first>.

²⁸ ‘A Drop of Water on a Hot Stone’, Justice for Victims in the Central African Republic, a research report by International Center for Transitional Justice and Cordaid, March 2021, pp. 27. Available at: <https://www.cordaid.org/en/wp-content/uploads/sites/11/2021/03/A-Drop-of-Water-on-a-Hot-Stone-Report-2021.pdf>.

²⁹ Central African Republic: addressing the protection crisis, Humanitarian Policy Group, November 2015, pp.9. Available at: <https://odi.org/en/publications/central-african-republic-addressing-the-protection-crisis/>.

Recommendations:

To address the current crisis affecting hundreds of thousands in Central African Republic, and restore regional security in the Central African region, Open Doors makes the following recommendations:

1 To prevent impunity, ensure institutional accountability and curb the endemic violence in the Central African Republic, the International Community should:

- Strengthen MINUSCA's capacity by equipping the troops for efficient identification and response to emerging threats to ensure greater civilian protection without any discrimination;
- Ensure accountability of MINUSCA operations by strengthening independent, dedicated, and transparent accountability tools such as the Office for Peacekeeping Strategic Partnership (an independent inspectorate-general for peacekeeping);
- Provide technical support and financial help to CAR government in their efforts to strengthen internal security forces like the police and the gendarmerie;
- Provide financial, administrative, and diplomatic support to the SCC and other investigations into violations of international humanitarian law and other human rights abuses by individuals of armed groups;
- Urge the CAR government to ensure investigations into such violations are conducted without obstructions;
- Support the CAR government's endeavors in restoring formal justice system including the corrections system by providing technical expertise on prison management and security;
- Work alongside the CAR government to boost local approaches such as grassroots legal training to help effectively deliver justice needs across all levels of society.

2 To augment peaceful mediation between conflicting parties and rebuild communities based on inclusivity, the CAR government should:

- Frame policies taking into consideration the learnings and experiences of the

Interfaith Religious Platform to develop local peacebuilding initiatives to address the violence and its root cause;

- Extend protection to key religious and community leaders who are working on peacebuilding and reconciliation initiatives;
- Support the independent investigations carried by CAR Truth, Justice, Reparation and Reconciliation Commission without attempting to influence the outcome.

3 The International Community should integrate flexible funding opportunities into their programming to allow well-coordinated and non-partisan Local Faith Actors and Community Based Organizations in CAR to carry out their work including providing access to food, safe drinking water and essential medical supplies, locally-appropriate psychosocial care, reconciliation and community-building projects amongst the internally displaced.

4 To ensure protection of women and children from conflict related sexual violence, the CAR government must:

- Expedite its efforts to strengthen provision of comprehensive care for sexual violence survivors, in particular medical, mental health and psychosocial services;
- Ensure that legal proceedings for sexual assault cases are conducted on timely basis;
- End impunity by holding perpetrators to account;
- Create a fund to provide comprehensive reparation to the survivors;
- Employ an efficient, transparent, prompt and fair administrative process for the implementation of reparation.

Any questions?

Please email advocacy@od.org