
Crisis in the Central African Republic:

Muslim Minorities
and the Descent into
Sectarian Conflict



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Prepared for the All-Parliamentary Group for the Prevention of
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Executive Summary

Over the past year, the Central African Republic (CAR), a small but resource-rich country of 4.6 million inhabitants, has descended into sectarian violence. This violence has already claimed the lives of thousands and displaced over a million. Of particular concern is the country's Muslim minority who are increasingly being driven out of Christian-dominated and urban areas, in a situation which risks descending into a *de facto* ethno-religious cleansing and division of the country along religious lines. This report analyzes the background and causes of this violence, and examines the risks facing the Muslim minority population of CAR. It concludes with recommendations to the All-Party Parliamentary Group for the Prevention of Genocide and Other Crimes against Humanity.

Background to the Sectarian Violence

The Muslim minority in the Central African Republic (CAR) comprises roughly 15% of the population in a nation of about 4.6 million.¹ They are split between the merchant class who tend to live in the major cities, and pastoral farmers/herders, who live in the rural northeast. Muslims originally migrated to the country in the early 19th century as traders, with Muslims currently comprising most of CAR's merchant class in the urban areas and especially in Bangui. Most of the remainder of the Muslim population in CAR lives in the northeastern parts of the country (see Annex II), near the borders with Chad, Sudan, and South Sudan. This region is resource-rich, containing CAR's major petroleum extraction and diamond mining developments, but is also one of the country's poorest areas and one long-neglected by the central government (see Annex III).²

The current sectarian violence must be understood in the context of the Séléka rebellion which overthrew President François Bozizé in March of 2013. Bozizé came to power in 2003 when he overthrew Ange-Félix Patassé. Through his 10 years in power, he consistently placed family members and others from his Gbaya tribe in positions of power, while gradually displacing others (including future Séléka leaders) from this inner circle.³ As dissent against his rule mounted, especially in the historically poor and under-governed northeast, Bozizé turned to a possible Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) settlement with those groups. This process was outlined in the 2007 Birao Peace Agreement.⁴ Although the process was greeted by rebels with great enthusiasm, Bozizé failed to implement many of its recommendations, and by 2012 many of the groups were sufficiently disillusioned to begin organized rebellion. They were joined by many former politicians and prominent officials under Bozizé, such as Michel Djotodia and Firmin Findiro, who were alienated by the President's increasing nepotism and paranoia.⁵

Particularly active in rebelling were the groups Union des forces démocratiques pour le rassemblement (UFDR) and the Convention des patriotes pour la justice et la paix (CPJP). These two groups eventually formed an alliance of convenience and rallied under Djotodia to form the largely-Muslim "Séléka". The Séléka moved quickly and by December 2012 were outside the capital of Bangui.⁶ In March 2013, Séléka attacked and captured Bangui, killing 13 South African soldiers and ousting Bozizé.⁷

Djotodia became the leader of a so-called ‘transitional’ government in March 2013, but the Séléka coalition began unravelling amid widespread raping, looting, and killing by Séléka militants. In an attempt to restore order, Djotodia officially disbanded the Séléka in August 2013 and set up a transitional parliament and a process to return the country to democratic rule. This failed to rein in Séléka militants, who continued to steal and kill rather indiscriminately.⁸ The ongoing anarchy also prompted largely Christian groups within CAR to organize local self-defence militias, labelling themselves “anti-Balaka” (anti-machete) groups. These groups, believing the Muslim Séléka to be deliberately targeting them, began orchestrating reprisal attacks against Muslims in Bangui and in the countryside.⁹ Due to the ongoing violence and chaos, Djotodia was pressured to resign in January 2014, and Catherine Samba-Panza has been chosen as interim president.¹⁰

Since the Séléka coup, the situation between Christian and Muslim communities has continued to deteriorate. As Séléka rebels have retreated, anti-Balaka militants have increasingly committed atrocities against Muslims in the centre-west: beating and killing small groups of suspected Muslims, burning mosques, and looting abandoned houses. These armed factions have also increasingly been using language and propaganda to ‘cleanse’ Muslims out of CAR. Public lynchings, rape, mutilation, and even cannibalism have been reported.^{11 12} Over 80% of the Muslim population have left their homes in the capital of Bangui and over 100,000 have fled Christian-dominated areas.¹³ The continuing cycle of violence and reprisal has segregated Bangui between Muslim and Christian communities, and led to a massive exodus of CAR’s Muslims, in what many observers are labelling ethnic cleansing.¹⁴

2,000 French troops and 6,000 African Union (MISCA) troops were deployed in late 2013,¹⁵ but have been unable to stop the sectarian violence.¹⁶ Recognizing this, the EU has agreed to deploy up to 1,000 troops to Bangui,¹⁷ while the UN has authorized the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA), a force of 12,000, to be deployed by September 2014.¹⁸ Unfortunately, MINUSCA remains critically short on both funding and troop contributions.^{19 20}

Underlying Causes of the Sectarian Violence

While the violence has taken on a religious dimension to it, this report finds that it is not a *religious* conflict per se. Rather, it argues that the sectarian violence is a product of a *political* conflict between northern rebels (Séléka) and the central government (Bozizé) which has set in motion certain drivers which have transformed the conflict into one of sectarian violence.

A. Regional Interference

The Séléka rebellion was caused in large part by the gradual regional withdrawal of support for Bozizé’s rule. Bozizé was able to seize power in 2003 in large part thanks to the approval of CAR’s neighbours (and the benign neglect of France), who were fed up with Ange-Félix Patassé’s rule.²¹ Over time, however, this support waned.²² By 2012, none of CAR’s neighbours, or France, was willing to heed his calls for support against rebels. Chad even withdrew its Presidential Guard troops, some of the most capable forces in the country.²³ In fact, Chad, apparently angry at Bozizé for failing to negotiate effectively with the rebels, began releasing rebels held in the country under house arrest in the fall of 2012.²⁴ There are widespread reports of Chadian mercenaries in Séléka,²⁵ as well as allegations that the Chadian military has actively helped Séléka militants along the border.²⁶ Chad’s role in the current sectarian violence has been

to accelerate the *de facto* segregation of the population of CAR. Its peacekeepers have helped Séléka retreat north to consolidate a base of operations, and have evacuated thousands of Muslims²⁷ northward to that base. In addition, Chad, along with other countries such as Cameroon and Senegal, has sponsored air evacuation of almost 50,000 Muslims from Bangui International Airport.²⁸ This report does not seek to criticize this particular policy, but rather to highlight the role that regional states play in the conflict and violence in CAR.

B. Control over Resources

At the heart of this conflict is an unmistakable competition over resources on many levels. There is a perception among many northern Muslims that they have been deprived of their fair share of natural resource wealth by the central government. In fact, this was one of Séléka's main demands during the rebellion. There are also divisions within Séléka which have made it almost impossible to control as a military force. The two main rebel groups in Séléka, UFDR and CPJP, have long fought with each other over control land and natural resources (including diamonds).²⁹ These divisions, along with the perception of relative deprivation held by many Séléka militants, helps explain the descent into widespread looting and killing upon seizing control of Bangui. Furthermore, many of the Muslims in the urban areas form the bulk of CAR's merchant elite, and thus are seen to have disproportionately benefitted economically in this extremely poor country. There is a significant element of individual greed involved in this sectarian violence; killings and expulsions of Muslims are almost always followed by the looting and removal of objects and materials of value, *and then* by the destruction of remaining property.³⁰ Thus, in many cases, the targets may on the surface seem to be chosen simply because of their religion, but their wealth may also play a role.

C. Breakdown in Security

The current sectarian violence is largely the product of a catastrophic breakdown in security. Bozizé feared a coup against himself, and so categorically refused to augment the security forces of CAR to the point where they effectively disbanded in the face of the Séléka offensive.³¹ This allowed for Séléka militants to essentially run wild once Bangui was under their control. Unable to speak French or Sango in Bangui, Séléka militants relied on Arabic-speaking Muslims to shelter them, consequently using their homes as storehouses for looted goods.³² Looting was thus seen as disproportionately targeting non-Muslims. With no state-sponsored security force in place, many communities resorted to building their own forces – what would become known as the anti-Balaka militias – to defend themselves from Séléka abuses and looting. In fact, many members of the anti-Balaka are reported to be former members of CAR's armed forces. With the intervention of French and AU forces in late 2013, Séléka began retreating north, but many militants stayed behind in Muslim areas. As the violence continued, communities increasingly began to see the anti-Balaka and ex-Séléka conflict as a Muslim vs. Christian conflict, with anti-Balaka generally operating from Christian areas, and ex-Séléka operating from Muslim areas. Each force thus became the default 'defence' force for their community. Consequently, Christian and Muslim communities began to see each other as security threats and self-segregated out of mutual hostility and insecurity.³³ This is the main proximate driver of the sectarian violence in CAR. While the other two causes are also significant, they are longer-term challenges to be addressed (through regional cooperation and resource-sharing) once a base level of security has been provided.

The State of the Sectarian Violence in CAR

Although primarily caused by political conflict and the resulting effects of the Séléka rebellion, the violence is increasingly being seen in CAR in religious terms. Residents are increasingly killing each other over suspicion of belonging to the other religion. For example, CAR's first confirmed case of cannibalism involved residents halting a bus, interrogating the driver to reveal any Muslims on board, hauling a suspected Muslim off, and then beating him to death in front of a cheering crowd. One resident then hacked off a leg and began eating it.³⁴ In addition, anti-Muslim sentiment and propaganda is especially on the rise.³⁵ The unofficial anti-Balaka spokesman, Sébastien Wenezoui, has stated that the main purpose of the movement is to protect Christians from Muslims, and to exact revenge upon them.³⁶ The threats faced by Muslims in Christian-dominated parts of CAR are evident in their increasing evacuation. MISCA has reported that as many as 85% of houses in Bemal and Betoko were burned down, and that more than 2,445 individuals fled from Bemal to Paoua. Moreover, waves of violence have also displaced as many as 23,000 people in north Kaga Bando.³⁷

Bangui is also becoming increasingly segregated. Red Cross officials have reported that 1,240 bodies were collected from its streets between December 5, 2013 and Feb 26 2014.³⁸ Most of its largely-Muslim neighbourhoods are entirely empty, with residents either fleeing or coalescing into the last remaining enclave in the neighbourhood of PK5. Human Rights Watch has noted that the Muslim-majority neighbourhoods of PK12, PK13, Miskine, and Kilo 5 have all emptied of their Muslim residents.³⁹ It is estimated that 80-85% of Bangui's Muslims have fled the city. The violence and tension is also heating up around PK5. On May 29, in a rare show of force, ex-Séléka militants attacked a Christian church located in PK5, killing 17 and kidnapping 27. They were driven off by the arrival of anti-Balaka forces. Christian protests and reprisal violence occurred for days afterwards,⁴⁰ with Burundian peacekeepers killing 2 demonstrators in an attempt to quell the unrest.⁴¹

The sectarian violence in CAR has resulted in *de facto* segregation of the country into a Muslim north and a Christian south. Most of CAR's urban Muslims have either fled the country or to the Séléka-controlled northeast. However, there remains some contention among IGOs, Human Rights groups, and the international community as to whether or not the violence in CAR should be classified as ethnic cleansing. Amnesty International has called the violence ethnic cleansing,⁴² while Human Rights Watch has warned of the risk.⁴³ UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has also labelled the conflict as "ethno-religious cleansing," and warning that without action the international community could risk repeating another Rwanda.⁴⁴

A recent UN report, however, concluded that labels of ethnic cleansing or genocide were "premature", but argued that there was a significant risk of it becoming that if left unchecked.⁴⁵ The main point of contention is over whether or not the violent displacement of Muslims is systematic or organized. Human Rights Watch has noted that the anti-Balaka groups are much more organized than they appear to be,⁴⁶ but it is not yet clear if the geographic expulsion of Muslims is a systematic goal or the product of widespread, but local, violence. This report agrees with the UN report that there is not sufficient evidence of a systematic intent to displace Muslims, but that there is a severe risk of it becoming more systematic if the cycle of violence and reprisal attacks between communities is left unchecked.

Policy Implications and Recommendations

A. *Implications for Canada*

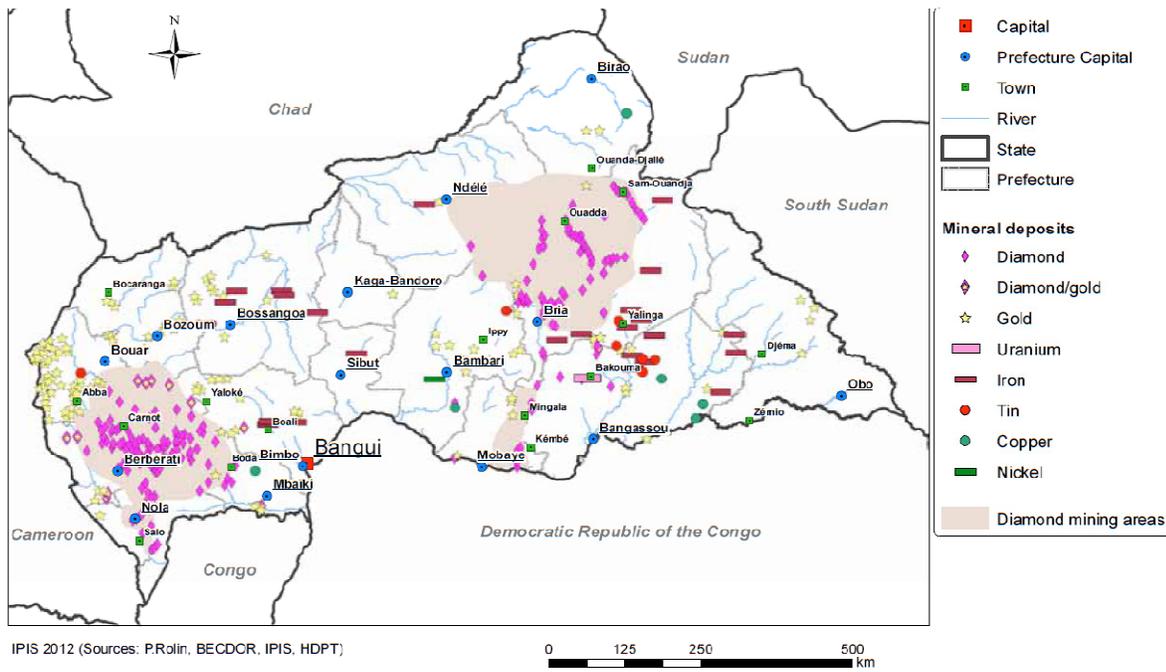
Canada has modest bilateral diplomatic and trade relations with CAR. Thus, the Canadian government has provided modest humanitarian assistance: \$30 million from 2006-2014 and most recently \$5 million announced in February 2014.⁴⁷ Despite the modest relations, there are two important implications for Canada:

- 1) **Regional Diffusion.** The massive exodus of refugees to neighbouring countries adds significant strain to an already fragile region. The World Food Programme (WFP) has declared a level 3 emergency in Cameroon, a country which is also severely impacted by ongoing religious violence in Nigeria.⁴⁸ Furthermore, large numbers of refugees have fled to the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), a country of significant Canadian development focus.⁴⁹ The bulk of refugees (see Annex I) have fled to southern Chad, a historically restive and region that has opposed President Idriss Déby.⁵⁰
- 2) **Canadian Foreign Policy Principles.** The violence, *de facto* segregation, and risk of widespread ethnic cleansing of Muslims in CAR, represents a threat to Canadian core interests of promoting respect for human rights abroad. Canada's commitments to human rights can be seen in the endorsement of the principles of Responsibility to Protect (R2P), and their embodiment in the Constitution of the All-Party Parliamentary Group for the Prevention of Genocide and Other Crimes against Humanity.⁵¹

Both of the implications listed above are security-focused, and with this understanding, this paper makes the following recommendations to the Group:

- 1) **Lobby the government to take a more assertive stand in warning of the risk of systematic crimes against humanity and/or ethnic cleansing in public statements.**
 - There is a lack of political will to get involved in CAR, as evidenced by the limited EU deployment and the continuing personnel and funding shortages in MISCA and MINUSCA. More assertive statements may help build political will in domestic and international circles for greater contributions to peace operations in CAR
- 2) **Continue to engage with civil society to monitor the plight of the Muslim minority in CAR, and keep parliament updated on sectarian tensions in the country.**
 - The situation remains chaotic on the ground, and organizations in CAR have warned of a severe risk that the violence could become much more systematic. Consistent monitoring is needed to ensure up-to-date information is obtained and indications of widespread crimes against humanity and/or ethnic cleansing may be detected.
- 3) **Encourage the government to increase its commitments to peace operations in CAR, including (but not limited to): making airlift capabilities available to the MISCA or MINUSCA missions; and/or increasing Canadian funding contributions to MINUSCA.**
 - The government did provide airlift capacity to French troops in Mali as part of peace operations there in 2013.⁵² Furthermore, MINUSCA is suffering from both a shortage in manpower and funding; given the government's reluctance to deploy troops to this region,⁵³ a funding increase would also help improve security on the ground and reduce sectarian tensions.

Annex III: Mineral Deposits in Central African Republic



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Source: Ken Matthysen and Iain Clarkson, *Gold and Diamonds in the Central African Republic*⁵⁶

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- ⁵⁵ GlobalSecurity.org, "Central African Republic – C.A.R. Map – Ethnic Groups," *GlobalSecurity.org*, available at <http://www.globalsecurity.org/jhtml/jframe.html#http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/war/images/map-car-ethnic.jpg||Central%20African%20Republic%20-%20C.A.R.%20Map%20-%20Ethnic%20Groups> (accessed June 17, 2014).
- ⁵⁶ Ken Matthyssen and Iain Clarkson, *Gold and Diamonds in the Central African Republic*, (Netherlands: IPIS, February 2013), available at: <http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Gold%20and%20diamonds%20in%20the%20Central%20African%20Republic.pdf> (accessed June 17, 2014), p. 34.