

Central African Republic on the Eve of Elections: From Crisis to Reconciliation

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Key findings

- Since the beginning of the current conflict in the Central African Republic (CAR), thousands of civilians have been killed, injured or displaced. While the increasingly sectarian nature of the violence has left both Christian and Muslim communities vulnerable to attacks by rival groups, the Muslim minority in particular has faced de facto ethnic cleansing. Over 80 per cent of CAR's pre-conflict Muslim population have been driven out of the country, while in the capital Bangui the Muslim population has reduced from more than 100,000 to under 1,000.
- At present, an estimated 447,487 citizens are internally displaced and a further 452,247 refugees, predominantly Muslims, are located in neighbouring countries such as Cameroon, Chad, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and the Republic of the Congo. Besides being vulnerable to cross-border attacks from armed groups within the CAR, they face acute humanitarian shortfalls and increasing tensions over resources with host communities, exacerbated by a rapid demographic shift in many areas from a Christian to a Muslim majority population. Adequate assistance and protection to refugees is therefore vital to ensure security and prevent the development of sectarian divisions elsewhere in the region.
- Despite being framed as a religious and ethnic conflict, until recently the CAR had generally avoided large-scale violent division between its different communities. Nevertheless, much of the current violence is in fact rooted in long-term issues of discrimination, poor governance and inequalities over access to resources – issues that must be resolved if the underlying drivers of the conflict are to be addressed. This includes the perennial conflict linked with the seasonal migration into the CAR of pastoralist Mbororo cattle herders from Cameroon and Chad, a situation further aggravated by climate change and desertification.
- The CAR's referendum and national elections beginning in December 2015 represent an important opportunity to move forward from the tragic violence that has devastated the country. However, to ensure a stable, tolerant and diverse settlement, these processes must be truly inclusive for all of the CAR's citizens, including its minorities, many of whom are still outside the country. Transitional authorities, the international community and the post-election government must therefore take every possible step to ensure that any settlement is underpinned by equality, conciliation and a comprehensive social and political framework to end the conflict's legacy of discrimination and division.

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Executive summary

The outbreak of renewed violence in the Central African Republic (CAR), beginning in early 2013 with the rebellion of a northern alliance of anti-government armed groups, known as Séléka, and their subsequent seizure of power, has resulted in a tragic division of the country along increasingly sectarian lines. Despite a long history of relative tolerance in the country, the association of these respective armed groups with CAR's Muslim and Christian populations, reinforced by repeated human rights violations by both sides against civilian members of the other community, has reframed the country's fissures in terms of religious identity.

This has become particularly evident since the intensification of anti-Muslim violence. Though civilians from all faiths have been targeted by armed groups, the ongoing displacement of the country's Muslims by anti-balaka forces is especially acute. Around 15 per cent of the CAR's population at the start of the current conflict was believed to be Muslim: however, targeted violence and enforced population movement has meant that over 80 per cent of CAR's pre-conflict Muslim population have been driven out of the country, while in Bangui the Muslim population has diminished from over 100,000 to under 1,000. This amounts to the ethnic cleansing of many parts of the country where Muslims have long resided.

Despite their supposedly 'religious' character, today both anti-balaka and ex-Séléka are widely reported to be involved in criminal activities, surviving by preying upon and extorting revenue from the civilian populations in areas under their control. As a result, the line between 'sectarian' violence and simple criminal violence is blurred, even as the Muslim minority is largely driven out of the west and centre of the country, and territory becomes effectively partitioned between anti-balaka and ex-Séléka forces.

A further complication to the CAR's current environment is the perennial conflict linked with the seasonal migration into the CAR of Mbororo cattle herders from Cameroon and Chad. These Muslim pastoralists and their herds have historically moved through the region, crossing national borders in search of grazing for their cattle. However, climate change, desertification and other factors have reduced available pastures, pushing them further south where they conflict with settled communities over crop destruction and access to water and pasture. In a climate in which targeted violence has driven many of the CAR's own Mbororo herders to cross borders and take refuge in neighbouring countries, tensions around this traditional seasonal population movement have been increasingly acute. The outbreak of the current conflict in the CAR has made the situation worse due to the

breakdown of traditional community mediation mechanisms and the spread of the perception that the herders are linked to ex-Séléka armed groups.

As a result, Muslims and nomadic pastoralists (commonly referred to as Mbororo and also known also as Fulbe, Peuhl, Fula or Fulani), despite making up a small proportion of the CAR's population, now comprise the large majority of its refugee population. Consequently, besides the pressing humanitarian concerns, their continued displacement into neighbouring countries has important implications for the future of the CAR as a multi-religious, ethnically diverse country. At present, most refugees are unlikely to wish to return to the CAR, given the clear risks this would present for them, and many may prefer to integrate into their host communities in the long term. Nevertheless, for those wishing to return to the country once security is established – including a large proportion of its Muslim and pastoralist minorities – ensuring their ability to do so safely must be a major priority. In the meantime, ensuring the protection and wellbeing of the country's refugee population, who currently number more than 450,000 in Cameroon, Chad, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and other countries, is vital to prevent a further humanitarian crisis and deterioration of security across the region. This is particularly relevant as tensions rise between refugee and host communities over access to limited resources such as land, water and basic services.

A national referendum and elections were originally scheduled to take place in October 2015, though they were subsequently postponed due to renewed violence in the capital, Bangui. In mid-July, UNHCR had also expressed concerns about reports of a decision by the transitional authorities to bar refugees from taking part in the elections, though shortly afterwards the Constitutional Court decided to reinstate the right of refugees to vote in the elections. This issue was crucial in terms of recognizing the role of the country's forcibly displaced Muslims in the country's future and setting up a mechanism for their voices to be heard in the electoral process.

The referendum and elections are now scheduled to begin in December 2015, and represent an important opportunity for the country to move forward. However, to ensure a lasting solution to the CAR crisis, they must be truly inclusive processes for all of its citizens – including the hundreds of thousands of refugees, many of whom are minorities, currently outside the country as a result of the violence. Transitional authorities, the international community and the post-election government must therefore take every possible step to ensure that the future

security of the country is underpinned by equality, conciliation and a comprehensive social and political framework to bring an end to the conflict's legacy of division.

Furthermore, it is important to recognize that the conflict has been primarily driven not by differences of faith but deep-rooted problems of exclusion, discrimination, inequality and poor governance – issues that continue to be the main barriers today to lasting peace in the CAR. At this critical moment, then, efforts at reconciliation must focus not on narrow 'sectarian' solutions but on addressing the underlying drivers of the conflict holistically, focusing on a social, political and economic solution that includes all the country's communities as equal citizens, including its minorities.

Overview of the conflict

Independence and the beginning of the Central African Republic

The Central African Republic (CAR), part of territory once colonized by France, gained its independence in 1960. An ethnically and religiously mixed country of around 4.6 million people until the recent outbreak of violence began, with 80 per cent of the population holding Christian or Christian/animist beliefs and a minority, of around 15 per cent, of the Muslim faith, these groups had coexisted relatively peacefully for centuries, despite some tensions around socio-economic issues described more fully in this briefing. The CAR's ethnic minorities have historically included traditionally forest-dwelling, hunter-gatherer indigenous groups such as the Ba'Aka, mainly living in the south-west and comprising less than 1 per cent of the population, and nomadic Muslim cattle-herding groups such as Mbororo at almost 4 per cent.¹

Despite the country's vast wealth in diamonds, gold, uranium and other resources, the CAR has for decades been blighted by poverty and underdevelopment. According to the UNDP's Human Development Index 2014, out of 187 nations across the globe, only inhabitants of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Niger face more deprived and precarious circumstances. The CAR's 4.62 million people have a life expectancy of just over 50 years, with over three quarters (a reported 76.3 per cent of the population) living in multidimensional poverty. This situation prevailed in both urban and rural contexts, predating the current conflict with its widespread violence and displacement.²

Historically, the CAR struggled to lay the foundations for equitable and democratic development: for all but nine of the post-independence years, power was held by military dictatorships.³ Wealth and power were concentrated in the hands of the ruling elite and focused mainly in the capital, Bangui, in the south-west on the border with the DRC. Successive governments neglected to build, or failed to achieve, a working state apparatus, politically stable system of governance or a productive economy throughout the national territory. Outlying areas, and particularly the predominantly Muslim east and north-east, received even fewer government services than elsewhere and were under-represented in decision-making processes, including around the use and disposal of natural resources located there. The failure to ensure public security and to spread public services equitably across regions are some of the root causes of today's crisis, leading people in parts of the north and

east in particular to feel, in the words of UN Special Rapporteur on the Human Rights of Internally Displaced Persons Chaloka Beyani, like 'second-class citizens'.⁴

The rise of the Séléka – from northern rebellion to power in Bangui

At the close of 2012, a coalition (Séléka) of rebel groups, made up mostly of Muslim northerners with some fighters from neighbouring Chad and Sudan, launched a joint military offensive against the forces of then-President François Bozizé. Bozizé, a Christian and a member of the country's largest ethnic group, the Gbaya, had reportedly relied increasingly on family and ethnic ties to consolidate his influence since taking power in a military coup ten years earlier,⁵ while failing to comply with the terms of peace agreements reached with previous groups of northern rebels. The Séléka, united loosely by their grievances – including the perceived exclusion and discrimination described above – their regional background and Muslim faith, advanced quickly south-west, taking control of and occupying towns on their way. Largely unimpeded by the weak and sparsely spread armed forces, they looted and burned villages on their way and committed widespread human rights abuses including unlawful killing and rape, often targeted against Christian civilians.⁶

For their part, Bozizé's security forces reportedly committed violations of human rights and humanitarian law while trying to stop the rebel advance.⁷ The rebellion also saw a surge in hate messages in national media against members of minority groups such as Mbororo and other Muslims, on the apparent assumption that, due to their identity, they were likely supporters of the rebels.⁸ While over the ensuing months of conflict there were some reports of armed Mbororo men joining Séléka or ex-Séléka attacks, the vast majority of Mbororo and other Muslims were uninvolved civilians: they make up the bulk of today's refugees.

The formation of the anti-balaka and targeted violence against the Muslim population

After a failed peace deal, Séléka took Bangui and ousted Bozizé on 23 March 2013. Séléka leader Michel Djotodia, of the Gula tribe of Muslim pastoralists, took power; his group continued to carry out human rights abuses,

Central African Republic – conflict timeline

August – December 2012: following the signing of an agreement in August between rebel armed groups, initially calling themselves Alliance CPSK-CPJP, the group claim responsibility for attacks on a number of towns in the north of the country in September. By the end of the year, when the group has been renamed Séléka, a full offensive has been launched against the government.

March 2013: following a failed peace deal and widespread human rights abuses by both sides, the Séléka seize the capital of Bangui. On 23 March, their leader, Michel Djotodia, is declared President. However, widespread human rights abuses against civilians by Séléka combatants continue in the ensuing months, further polarizing communities.

September 2013: following international condemnation, Djotodia announces the formal disbanding of the Séléka and their integration into the national armed forces – an order ignored by many of its fighters. Against a backdrop of increasing division, members of the former military, government officials and other supporters of former President Bozizé form ‘anti-balaka’ (or ‘anti-machete’) self-defence groups. Attacks are subsequently launched in Bossangoa, Ouham province, targeting not only ex-Séléka forces but also hundreds of Muslim civilians.⁹

December 2013: in response to the increasing violence, the UN Security Council passes Resolution 2127, condemning sexual violence and authorizing the deployment of additional peacekeeping forces with a mandate to protect civilians, ensure security and promote disarmament. The announcement fails to curb the intensification of violence, with attacks of unprecedented scale and force by anti-balaka

forces taking place in Bangui on the same day, killing large numbers of civilians and provoking revenge attacks by ex-Séléka forces on non-Muslims. According to the UN, at least 1,000 people are killed on 5-6 December alone, with other sources placing the number even higher.¹⁰

January 2014: following Djotodia’s resignation from the Presidency, Catherine Samba-Panza, a Christian previously appointed by Djotodia as mayor of Bangui, is named head of the Transitional Government. However, neither this nor the presence of greater numbers of international troops is able to stem the violence. The withdrawal of ex-Séléka forces leaves Muslim civilians defenceless, with many thousands killed or forced to flee in the months that follow.

July 2014: a ceasefire agreement between the two sides soon collapses, resulting in a renewed escalation of violence.

September 2014: a new UN peacekeeping force mandated by the Security Council, the Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA), is deployed with an authorized force of up to 11,800 troops.¹¹

January 2015: a ceasefire brokered between anti-balaka and ex-Séléka in Kenya fails to gain traction, with the government claiming it was not involved in the discussions.¹²

September 2015: renewed outbreaks of violence in Bangui between Christian and Muslims groups force the government to cancel elections scheduled for the next month. Officials subsequently announce that the elections will be postponed until December.

including rape and other forms of gender-based violence, and to recruit and use child soldiers amidst a continuing breakdown of law and order. Séléka abuses at this time were believed to include some targeted killings of members of non-Muslim minority groups in the CAR. The UN reported several instances in which Séléka targeted and killed individuals which the UN described as ‘pygmies’, such as a father and two young sons in Ngouma, 80 kilometres from Mbaïki, in April 2013, and three others from this minority in Ndongo and Mangongi regions.¹³ This term likely refers to members of indigenous, traditionally nomadic hunter-gatherer groups such as the Ba’Aka living in the forests of the south-west. Séléka night raids, in which combatants robbed, looted and terrorized civilians, were also reported to have targeted members of these communities in Bangui and Lobaye Prefecture in April 2013.¹⁴ Like Muslim minorities such as Mbororo, these groups have long faced discrimination in the CAR and are at heightened risk of extreme poverty and a range of deprivations.

Under international pressure due to widespread violence in the country, in September 2013 Djotodia announced Séléka’s disbanding and the integration of some of its fighters into the national armed forces. The demobilization order was only obeyed by some troops; elsewhere it had little effect, with much of the now ‘ex-Séléka’ remaining armed and fragmented into smaller bands. Meanwhile, members of the former military, government officials and other Bozizé supporters, mostly Gbaya, planned a strategy of counter-attack. They joined forces with ‘anti-balaka’ self-defence groups in Bangui and other areas of the west, providing funds, weapons and organization for what was to become the large-scale killing of Muslims and looting of their properties. A UN Security Council-mandated International Commission of Inquiry¹⁵ described a ‘campaign to manipulate the population on the basis of religious hatred’¹⁶ organized by certain government officials. These efforts reportedly played at least in part on perceptions among majority groups in the CAR of some members of the

Muslim minority, including but not limited to nomadic or semi-nomadic pastoralist groups, as 'foreigners' with potential ties and allegiances to other countries and interests.

The Commission of Inquiry identified a clear pattern of attacks on the Muslim civilian population in western and central CAR between December 2013 and March 2014, by which point most of the Muslim population were displaced or refugees in neighbouring countries. Villages were targeted even after ex-Séléka had left and there was no longer any military objective; Muslim residents were sought out and attacked, often by non-Muslim former neighbours, even if they were already fleeing, with men and boys the most likely to be killed.¹⁷ In another pattern, Muslim civilians were also targeted and killed by anti-balaka in convoys heading out of the CAR – even those accompanied by international forces – or in the bush as they attempted to make their way towards the borders to flee the country.¹⁸

Ultimately, the International Commission of Inquiry found that all parties to the different phases of the conflict from 1 January 2013 – that is, the elements of the Armed Forces of the CAR (FACA) under President Bozizé, as well as the Séléka and the anti-balaka – committed grave and systematic violations of international humanitarian and human rights law, including sexual and gender-based violence. The Commission judged that many of the abuses would amount to war crimes or crimes against humanity.¹⁹ In addition, the Commission described 'a very large scale process of deportation or forcible population transfer against the Muslim population' orchestrated by the anti-balaka. As mentioned above, around 15 per cent of the CAR's population at the start of the current conflict was believed to be Muslim: however, targeted violence and enforced population movement meant that over 80 per cent of CAR's pre-conflict Muslim population were subsequently driven out of the country, while in Bangui the Muslim population had diminished from over 100,000 to under 1,000.²⁰

It concluded that, based on the evidence available, the crimes of persecution and forcible population transfer had been committed as part of a widespread or systematic attack against a civilian population. This amounted to ethnic cleansing of areas where Muslims had been living and constituted crimes against humanity.²¹

CAR's 'other' conflict – increasing tensions between farmers and the pastoralist minorities

By the end of 2014 and into the first half of 2015, inter-communal violence and the subsequent enforced displacement of many of the CAR's Muslims had drawn attention to a perennial conflict linked with the seasonal migration into the CAR of Mbororo cattle herders from Cameroon and Chad. These Muslim pastoralists and their herds have historically moved through the region, crossing national borders in search of grazing for their cattle. More recently, many have become semi-settled, migrating more locally. However, climate change, desertification and other factors have reduced available pastures, pushing them further south where they conflict with settled communities over crop destruction and access to water and pasture.²² In a climate in which targeted violence has driven many of the CAR's own Mbororo herders to cross borders and take refuge in neighbouring countries, tensions around this traditional seasonal population movement have been increasingly acute.

Availability of arms on both sides has made such confrontations more lethal.²³ The International Crisis Group (ICG) describes such pastoralist-farmer confrontations in the CAR as a 'conflict-within-the-conflict',²⁴ noting that the outbreak of the current conflict in the CAR has made the situation worse due to the breakdown of traditional community mediation mechanisms and the spread of the perception that the herders are linked to ex-Séléka. In fact, sources indicate that both anti-balaka and ex-Séléka elements have been involved in the theft of pastoralists' cattle, seen as a lucrative source of revenue by some armed groups. ICG has called on transitional and international authorities to address these issues as an integral part of their stabilization strategies.²⁵ Awareness of and sensitivity to such issues affecting minority groups is crucial for government officials, international peacekeepers and others as they work towards stabilization and an end to conflict in the CAR.

Beyond 'sectarianism' - what is driving the current violence in the CAR?

Although the CAR violence continues at times to be portrayed as an inter-religious conflict, this is overly simplistic and misleading. The roots of the crisis lie in historic failures to embed a functioning and equitable state across the national territory, and the motivations behind the Séléka revolt of CAR northerners with some, mainly Chadian, foreigners which started the current round of violence were widely accepted to be political and socio-economic rather than religious.²⁶ Although there have historically been some tensions on both sides around socio-economic issues in particular – with some of the Christian/animist majority resenting the perceived disproportionate wealth of some 'foreign' Muslim traders and cattle herders, while some Muslims have felt marginalized from state decision-making and resources – the two groups generally co-existed relatively peaceably. It is as the conflict has developed that the inter-ethnic and inter-religious elements have come to the fore, culminating in targeted violence and forced displacement of members of the Muslim minority.

The 'Christian' label attributed to the anti-balaka is often misguided, as many of these fighters reportedly hold predominantly animist beliefs. While some members genuinely joined to protect their families and neighbourhoods from Séléka, others are former members of Bozizé's security forces trying to regain power and amass what wealth they can following his ousting. Further, a significant proportion of the 'sectarian' and 'inter-communal'

violence since December 2013 has been described by close observers as markedly personal and retaliatory in nature, directed by individuals against specific individuals, rather than one whole community against another.²⁷

Finally, despite any 'religious' labels at times applied to them, today both anti-balaka and ex-Séléka are widely reported to be involved in criminal activities, surviving by preying upon and extorting 'tax' from the civilian populations in areas under their control. As a result, the line between 'sectarian' violence and simple criminal violence is blurred,²⁸ even as the Muslim minority is largely driven out of the west and centre of the country, and territory becomes effectively partitioned between anti-balaka and ex-Séléka forces.

The previously-mentioned Panel of Experts reported in October 2014 that both ex-Séléka and anti-balaka forces were profiting from an increase in illicit cross-border diamond trading following the CAR's May 2013 suspension from the Kimberley Process certification scheme.²⁹ Other sources of revenue are reported to include trafficking in gold, agricultural goods such as coffee, and cattle stolen from Mbororo or related groups, generally by anti-balaka and also by some ex-Séléka forces.³⁰

In-fighting over revenue has been cited as one reason for the fragmentation into rival sub-groups and subsequent in-fighting displayed by both sides; other factors are reported to include inter-ethnic divisions and competition for posts created as part of the political transition process.³¹

Recognizing the regional dimension

– refugees from the CAR in neighbouring countries

The distance the CAR still has to go before a lasting peace can be achieved is reflected in the large proportion of its population currently displaced into neighbouring countries as refugees. The changing composition of refugees has largely mirrored the nature of the conflict, with the first flow of refugees from the current round of violence fleeing Séléka abuses during its early 2013 advance on Bangui and after its ousting of Bozizé, coming largely from settled Christian communities. The second, more substantial wave came following targeted anti-balaka attacks on Muslim civilians from late 2013, with reports indicating that these more recent arrivals are overwhelmingly Muslim.³² This includes a significant proportion of nomadic pastoralist groups such as Mbororo who, as mentioned earlier, comprised around 4 per cent of the CAR's population of roughly 4.6 million before the current conflict.³³ Despite their relatively small proportion, they now constitute much of the refugee population, with some camps reportedly made up almost exclusively of these communities.³⁴

Another significant group of the CAR refugees are Arabic-speaking Muslims – either from the CAR's own Arab-speaking ethnic groups such as the Gula tribe of many Séléka leaders, or descendants of migrants from nearby Chad, Sudan or Mali. They were the CAR's principal traders, and when they were forced to flee the CAR lost much of its commerce and transport capacity. The traders had also controlled much of the (often illicit) diamond and gold trade, which became an immediate target for revenue-hungry armed groups as described above.³⁵

Sources indicate that Muslim traders were targeted both for their perceived wealth and ties outside of the CAR. Similarly, Mbororo were targeted, not just for their perceived links, as fellow Muslims, with ex-Séléka, but also because of their status as a distinct, identifiable minority. Their dress, features and language set them apart from other groups in the CAR. As mentioned above, the traditional nomadic lifestyle practised by some of the group at times brought them into conflict with the prevalent settled, predominantly Christian or animist communities in the CAR, who consequently saw them as 'other' and therefore a threat.³⁶ These tensions and socio-economic frustrations on the part of the Christian/animist population with regard to Muslim communities in the CAR have existed for centuries, despite the relatively peaceful coexistence between them, and have become more acute. According to some sources, Muslims are perceived as foreigners, often Chadian; they are seen as controlling the commerce and business sector, from the trade in diamonds and gold to shop-keeping. Some believe that they have been enriching themselves to the

detriment of the Christian /animist majority, leading to envy and resentment.³⁷

Consequently, besides its pressing humanitarian situation, the continued displacement of refugees in the region has a strong minority dimension with important implications for the future of the CAR as a multi-religious, ethnically diverse country. At present, most refugees are unlikely to wish to return to the CAR, given the clear risks this would present for them, and many may prefer to integrate into their host communities in the long term. Nevertheless, for those wishing to return to the country once security is established – including a large proportion of its Muslim and pastoralist minorities – ensuring their ability to do so safely must be a major priority.

In the meantime, the CAR government must take every effort to facilitate their continued political participation as the country attempts to move forward from the recent cycle of violence and division. This is particularly important as the country prepares for its national referendum and elections. At present, an estimated 452,247³⁸ refugees from the CAR are currently located in neighbouring countries, primarily Cameroon – where by far the largest number of refugees reside – as well as Chad, the DRC and the Republic of the Congo. These, as well as the sizeable population of internally displaced within the CAR itself, amounting to 447,487 persons,³⁹ must be allowed to engage fully in these processes.

A related dimension is the challenges that have arisen as a result of these refugee flows into neighbouring countries, particularly with the arrival of pastoralist groups in settled communities where resources are limited and the potential for conflict is considerable. In this difficult context, there is a danger that ethnic and religious differences could again be exploited to reinforce socio-economic divisions. This situation is further exacerbated by the spill over of violence from the CAR into neighbouring countries, such as cross-border raids and kidnappings of refugees in Cameroon by armed groups based in the CAR, described in greater detail below. Adequate protection and assistance for refugees is therefore essential to help minimize friction between new arrivals and established communities in the host country.

Cameroon

Cameroon, to the west of the CAR with a border partly formed by the Kadei River, hosts over half of CAR refugees. As a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention and the 1969 OAU Refugee Convention, it has maintained an open-border policy towards refugees. It currently hosts several sets of CAR refugees. This includes the 'old

caseload', amounting to less than 100,000 people who had mainly fled armed attacks in the CAR some years before the current conflict began and have been integrated into more than 300 host villages in the north and east of Cameroon, with relatively little reported tension between them and the local population.⁴⁰

More recently, a smaller wave of refugees into Cameroon during the preliminary stages of the current conflict were largely Christian and Gbaya, fleeing Séléka's bloody advance towards Bangui from December 2012 and the aftermath of Bozizé's ousting in March 2013. A second wave, from the outbreak of targeted anti-balaka violence against Muslim civilians, began in December 2013.⁴¹ These refugees numbered roughly 135,000; the UNHCR estimated that '87 per cent of the new arrivals are of Peuhl ethnicity'.⁴² Cameroon now hosts the largest number of refugees from CAR of any country, amounting to 254,115 people as of November 2015, 56.2 per cent of all CAR refugees.⁴³

Due to the anti-balaka's blocking of the roads and exit points from the CAR to Muslims attempting to flee in the first months of 2014, refugees arrived in Cameroon only after months of travel on circuitous routes to avoid

detection. Many were in an extremely fragile state, some with gunshot and machete wounds sustained on their journey. At the height of the influx, refugees were using over 30 different entry points into Cameroon as they were forced to take to the bush to avoid anti-balaka attacks; this made it all the more difficult to assist new arrivals, as UNHCR was unable to consistently monitor all of the multiple entry points. Moreover, UNHCR was forced to move new arrivals further into Cameroon, away from the border, to lessen the risk of armed infiltrations or cross-border attack.⁴⁴ Security remains an issue: in 2015 numerous attacks and abductions of CAR refugees in Cameroon, by assailants coming from the CAR, were reported.⁴⁵

The region where the refugees have ended up are some of Cameroon's poorest, with little infrastructure or services such as schools, water points and health centres.⁴⁶ UNHCR and its partners are working to improve service provision for host and refugee populations, including civil registration centres to help increase birth registration rates and reduce statelessness. UNHCR reports that three out of five new refugees are school-aged children, many of whom were not attending school in the CAR. For children with no previous schooling, illiteracy can complicate the process

Tensions between pastoralist refugees and settled communities in Cameroon

Though recognized by government bodies as indigenous, Cameroon's Mbororo are among the poorest groups in the country and frequently face discrimination as perceived 'others' or 'outsiders'. As in the CAR, they are confronted with competition and tension over access to land, water and pasture for their herds, most recently in the face of the growth of ranching, agro-industry and national parks. Cameroon's Mbororo also face other particular issues. Due to poverty, nomadic practices, discrimination and other factors, they are among the groups in Cameroon which are insufficiently covered by birth registration and identity documents. National authorities have made efforts to address this,⁵¹ but it remains an area of concern, particularly for those Mbororo who practise cross-border transhumance. Similarly, lack of identity documents, nomadic lifestyle and other factors hamper Mbororo children's access to school.⁵²

Given the challenges facing Cameroon's own Mbororo minority, experts are paying particular attention to the manner in which tensions between Mbororo refugees and other groups are resolved in Cameroon. While the new refugee population in Cameroon is itself fairly homogenous and cohesive as a result of having fled the same armed group, the anti-balaka, there are more tensions between the new arrivals and the local farming population than was the case with previous refugees. This has been attributed to competition for resources and local fears of heightened insecurity, but also to the fact that while many of the pastoralist refugees had to abandon their herds in the CAR,

or saw them stolen or slaughtered by armed groups,⁵³ many others arrived with large numbers of cattle. This has brought them into conflict with the local farming community over crop destruction and competition for the use of pasture and water. Some local farmers have begun cultivating far-flung fields to lessen the risk of crop destruction by livestock; refugee food crops have also been affected. At the same time, some herder refugees have migrated north, further into Cameroon, in search of pastureland for their herds.⁵⁴

The Mbororo refugees are reportedly not interested in resettlement to a third country; UNHCR considers gradual local integration for those settled in host communities to provide the best durable solution for them, in the absence of the security conditions needed for voluntary repatriation to the CAR.⁵⁵ Their arrival, however, has greatly altered the areas in which they live. Villages that were majority Christian are now majority Muslim, and the way of life of local farmers is being impacted by the presence of the refugees' herds.⁵⁶

UNHCR and its partners are making efforts to account for these realities in their programming by mainstreaming measures to facilitate peaceful coexistence in all areas of work. These efforts include, besides improved security, 'the promotion of mixed refugee/host community conflict resolution mechanisms, in particular with regard to land, agro-pastoralist and water disputes', the creation of communication platforms such as community radio and shared activities and outreach between refugee and host communities.⁵⁷

of integrating them into school. This further exacerbates their restricted access to education in Cameroon due to the limited absorption capacity of the existing schools.⁴⁷ Humanitarian groups have also raised concerns about the need to combat child marriage, an endemic problem in the CAR now made more acute due to the uncertain future faced by refugees.⁴⁸

Most of the 'new caseload' are settled in the vast, fertile, remote and sparsely populated east region and Adamawa region, either in villages or on seven sites designated by the government so as to move new arrivals further from the insecure border. Others have moved to the north region and to urban areas, in particular Yaoundé and regional town Douala. Humanitarian workers have reported challenges in tracking and assisting refugees in urban areas; they at times face heightened tension with local residents, some of whom blame them for a perceived rise in criminality,⁴⁹ prices and demand for scarce health and education services.⁵⁰

Chad

The CAR's north-west borders southern Chad. Chad's south, despite the discovery of oil reserves there, has largely been excluded from power and national decision-making; in recent decades under the presidencies of Hissène Habré and Idriss Déby, it has been dominated by northern Arab groups and interests. Southerners are themselves considered a minority group by MRG, and have, like other groups in Chad, been subjected to violence and abuse by a range of armed groups.⁵⁸

As mentioned above, migration between the two countries, of pastoralists and their flocks but also of other groups, has been common. After violence against Muslims broke out in the CAR in December 2013, Chadian authorities, with the help of Chadian soldiers and other international peacekeepers, organized a mass return from the CAR of people of Chadian origin; by December 2014 over 112,000 had returned.⁵⁹ Most were born in the CAR but had Chadian parents or grandparents; at risk as Muslims and 'foreigners' in the CAR, they lost everything when forced to flee. They have few if any remaining ties to Chad, and are frequently undocumented and therefore face the risk of becoming stateless.⁶⁰

Chadian peacekeepers were at times accused of collusion with Chadian and other members of ex-Séléka, and of disproportionate use of force when carrying out the evacuation of Muslims under threat from anti-balaka.⁶¹ Chad subsequently withdrew from the international peacekeeping force on 16 April 2014 and closed its border on 11 May 2014,⁶² reportedly to stop cross-border attacks on those fleeing the CAR. This move was criticized by human rights groups and others as cutting off an escape route for those under attack in the CAR.⁶³ It also obstructed traditional migration corridors for pastoralists, disrupting their routes and forcing them into new areas,⁶⁴

heightening the risk of conflict with settled communities unused to contact with them and potentially creating new conflict dynamics in the region. Meanwhile, it did not prevent cross-border attacks from Chad into north-west CAR in which unidentified attackers looted and burned villages, forcing villagers to flee either internally or across borders.⁶⁵ Some CAR refugees in Chad are settled in host communities; however, most are located in difficult conditions in camps and transit sites in the south-east including Logone Oriental, Mandoul and Moyen Chari.⁶⁶ As of the end of October 2015, Chad hosted an estimated 66,387 refugees from CAR,⁶⁷ amounting to 14.7 per cent of the total in the region.

DRC

Violence in the CAR has also caused refugees to flee into northern DRC, which borders the CAR's south-central and south-eastern regions. Around 75,000 were registered by January 2015,⁶⁸ reportedly fleeing fighting between anti-balaka and ex-Séléka in Kouango district, Ouaka Prefecture and elsewhere. As of the end of August 2015, DRC hosted 101,866 refugees from CAR – 22.5 per cent of the total in the region.⁶⁹

Just under two thirds of CAR refugees live in host communities, while the remainder are located in four camps - Mole, Boyabu, Inke and Ango, three of them in Equateur Province and one in Orientale Province. Both of these provinces have armed groups operating in them, at times causing internal displacement. Some refugees are located on the DRC side of the Ubangui River, which forms a natural border between the two countries; their proximity to the CAR raises the risk of cross-border attacks or infiltration by armed elements. The refugees' situations is extremely precarious due to lack of health care, clean water, food or access to education in what are already deprived and conflict-affected provinces.⁷⁰ In addition, some sites house both Muslim and Christian refugees from CAR violence, leading to tensions between them. The CAR's Mbororo refugees in particular are reported to be at risk of *refoulement* (forced return) back over the border; UNHCR has negotiated temporary protection measures for them with the local authorities in order to protect both the people and their cattle.⁷¹

Republic of the Congo

The south-western edge of the CAR borders on the extreme north of the Republic of the Congo. There are national parks on both sides of the border and the area is sparsely populated. Most refugees from the CAR are located in the Bétou district of Likouala region.⁷² Refugee flows from the CAR began in March 2013 and included Christians fleeing Séléka; subsequent arrivals include Muslims, and potential conflict between the two groups, and between refugees and Congolese nationals, are concerns. CAR refugees now number an

estimated 29,884 refugees from CAR as of the beginning of September 2015 – 6.6 per cent of the total in the region⁷³ - with around 40 per cent based in two official sites and the remainder living with host communities, increasing pressures around access to services and food security.⁷⁴

The current situation in the CAR

Some improvements, but insecurity continues

There have been some signs of progress in the CAR during 2015, and even tentative hopes that the situation in the country might stabilize despite periodic violence. In May, for example, the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) of humanitarian agencies removed the CAR from its list of 'Level 3 Emergencies' – the highest designation for a humanitarian crisis⁷⁵ – where it had been placed since December 2013. At the end of July, the UN also reported that the security situation in Bangui and in key towns was continuing a gradual improvement,⁷⁶ although regular clashes between ex-Séléka and anti-balaka were still taking place in the central part of the country,⁷⁷ with peacekeeping personnel also targeted for attack.⁷⁸ The violence continued into the autumn, with HRW reporting towards the end of November 2015 that more than 100 people around the Muslim district of Kilomètre 5 had been killed in sectarian violence since late September.⁷⁹

Furthermore, while the scale of displacement appears to have reduced slightly since the height of the conflict in early 2014, when more than 930,000 people were reportedly displaced,⁸⁰ there is no doubt that the situation remains grave. As mentioned earlier, besides the more than 450,000 CAR refugees in neighbouring countries as of November 2015, almost the same number (447,487) of people are also internally displaced people within the CAR.⁸¹ A reported 2.7 million people, over half the population, are dependent on aid to survive,⁸² though according to OCHA data only 41 per cent of its required funding for its CAR programmes for the year had been secured as of November 2015.⁸³ Similarly, the non-governmental organization (NGO) Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) has described the CAR's health indicators as 'catastrophic', with little prospect of improving in the short term. Malaria is endemic, the country has the highest prevalence of HIV in the sub-region – between 5 and 10 per cent, depending on the area – and health services are extremely limited as NGOs try to fill the void left by absent state structures.⁸⁴

ICG described the CAR state as 'a ghost state before the crisis and now ... the debris of a ruin'.⁸⁵ While the UN has taken steps such as supporting the training and deployment of new administrative and police officials outside of Bangui,⁸⁶ there are real fears that such efforts are piecemeal and will have little effect in the absence of a wider strategy to build a legitimate, functional state and security apparatus in the CAR. This review has highlighted

some of the complex dynamics around minority groups such as Mbororo and their relationships with other communities in the region: awareness of and sensitivity to these issues is crucial to effecting lasting change. Sources have expressed doubts about the international community's overall commitment to meeting the multiple and complex needs around governance in the CAR in a meaningful way – particularly in the light of the dire funding shortage in meeting even the most immediate and pressing humanitarian requirements.⁸⁷

The capacity of the nascent civil and police authorities, especially given the absence of a strong functional military institution, to function in the face of the ongoing security challenges described above is a crucial question, particularly in light of the country's challenging electoral timetable, under which a constitutional referendum and combined legislative and presidential elections were slated for October 2015.⁸⁸ Elections were later postponed, with key electoral officials resigning in September and October 2015. In mid-July UNHCR expressed concerns about reports of a decision by the transitional authorities to bar refugees from taking part in the elections,⁸⁹ though on 20 July the Constitutional Court decided to reinstate the right of refugees to vote in the elections.⁹⁰ This issue was crucial in terms of recognizing the role of the country's forcibly displaced Muslims in the country's future and setting up a mechanism for their voices to be heard in the electoral process. As of the end of 2015, ongoing insecurity and the slow pace of the electoral process, including voter registration amongst refugees, meant that the electoral timetable was pushed back, with elections now scheduled to begin in December 2015.

These issues remain the primary barriers today to lasting stability in the CAR, with recent research by the international NGO International Rescue Committee (IRC) indicating that Central Africans see chronic insecurity, misrule and failed governance as the main obstacles to a peaceful transition in their country.⁹¹ While international peacekeeping forces have a role to play in the short term – despite a number of allegations of sexual abuse by members of UN forces stationed in the country⁹² – these alone are likely to be insufficient: since 1998, a series of inter-African, EU and UN missions⁹³ have been deployed without achieving long-term stability in the country. At this critical moment, then, efforts at reconciliation must focus on addressing the underlying drivers of the conflict holistically, focusing on a social, political and economic solution that includes all the country's communities as equal citizens, including its minorities.

Recent peacebuilding efforts in the CAR

Although the situation in CAR is still precarious and the risk of continued outbreaks of violence remains high, the tentative improvements in security have been underpinned by efforts from a range of stakeholders to promote peace and reconciliation within the country. These present important ways forward for future efforts to strengthen governance and social cohesion in the CAR.

In May 2015 over 700 local leaders from different regions, religions and ethnicities, including from the diaspora and refugee populations, took part in the Bangui Forum for National Reconciliation to hold discussions on the areas of peace and security; governance; justice and reconciliation; and economic and social development. They agreed a set of recommendations, issued as the Republican Pact for Peace, National Reconciliation and Reconstruction.⁹⁴ Those around economic and social development, for instance, included an agreement on efforts to secure transhumance corridors in collaboration with pastoralists and farmers.⁹⁵ Nine out of ten participating armed groups signed an agreement on the principles of disarmament, demobilization and reintegration of combatants, as well as their integration into the national army.⁹⁶ Signatories agreed to disarm prior to the elections.⁹⁷

In addition to the Bangui Forum, Republican Pact and other initiatives described above, there are other significant forces working to encourage tolerance, restraint and respect for the rule of law in the CAR. The country's Roman Catholic Archbishop Dieudonne Nzapalainga, and its leading imam, Omar Kabine Layama, have played an exemplary role, working together to try to shed light on the true roots of the conflict, mitigate violence and mistrust between their two communities, and to minimize the risk of religious extremism among conflict-affected

communities.⁹⁸ Pope Francis' trip to CAR in November 2015, especially his visit to a mosque in Bangui, added further support to these local initiatives.

At the same time, organizations such as the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) have been working to promote awareness of humanitarian law and principles among combatants on both sides of the conflict. It has held sessions on key areas of the rules of war – including protection of the civilian population, treatment of prisoners and respect for medical services – with hundreds of anti-balaka and ex-Séléka personnel in west and central CAR.⁹⁹

The area of justice offers particular grounds for hope, thanks to an innovative and ground-breaking law adopted in April 2015 forming a hybrid Special Criminal Court for a renewable period of five years. The Court, with financial and logistical support from MINUSCA, will have both national and international investigators and prosecutors to address serious crimes committed since Bozizé's coup in 2003. It will work alongside two investigations opened by the International Criminal Court (ICC) into the violence. This unprecedented mechanism could provide an effective means of combating the impunity that underlies the violence carried out by armed groups in the CAR, in spite of the weakness of the CAR's judicial system.¹⁰⁰

The elections beginning in December 2015 also present a significant milestone for the country as it makes the difficult transition to stability. Ensuring a peaceful, inclusive and transparent platform for voting, accessible across the country and also to the large population of refugees currently living outside the country, will be a crucial litmus test for the CAR's future. It is also important that whatever political consensus results from these elections is founded on the rights of all citizens, regardless of religion and ethnicity, and a commitment to ending the discrimination, inequalities and other issues that contributed to the original outbreak of conflict.

Conclusion

This briefing highlights how important it is that within the CAR, efforts at peace-making, peace-building and reconciliation be grounded in awareness of the roots of the conflict, familiarity with the country's different groups and the relationships between them. In times of stress and tension, existing discrimination and inequalities between groups are frequently exacerbated, perpetuating conflict and placing already vulnerable groups at even greater risk.

Particular attention must be paid to the issues facing the remaining Muslim minority in the country, whether in ex-Séléka areas of influence or in enclaves in areas under anti-balaka control, as well as of other Muslims, such as Mbororo herders of other nationalities engaging in seasonal migration through the CAR. Finally, other minority groups facing historic discrimination, including indigenous, traditionally nomadic hunter-gatherer communities such as the Ba'Aka, must be protected and their interests taken fully into account in peace and reconstruction efforts.

While a number of significant positive steps must be noted, such as the Bangui Forum for National Reconciliation, the situation in CAR remains bleak – and especially so for its minority population. Large swathes of the country have been ethnically cleansed, and the national territory remains *de facto* partitioned between anti-balaka and ex-Séléka forces. Meanwhile, despite credible reports that both sides are disintegrating into competing bands increasingly involved in criminal activity, armed confrontations between them as well as with international peacekeepers continue, and the remaining civilian population continues to suffer the consequences.

Additionally, the presence of CAR refugees is changing the face of communities in countries of asylum.

Across the region, particular attention must be paid to the situation of minorities such as Mbororo and other nomadic or semi-nomadic pastoralist groups whose traditional practices, coupled with the impact of climate change and other issues, may bring them into increasing contact and conflict with sedentary communities. Within countries of asylum, the international community and national authorities must be particularly attentive to the ways in which the arrival of predominately Muslim and pastoralist 'new caseloads' affects existing communities and inter-communal dynamics, particularly given the situation of these countries' own minority groups. The aim must ultimately be to minimise potential tensions and the possibility of conflict spreading further across borders and exacerbating existing inequalities in countries of refuge. An essential step to achieving this, however, is to implement adequate protection and assistance for all refugees, to ensure their own safety and also reduce the risk of tensions between them and their host communities.

Finally, while the national elections represent an important opportunity to move the country forward, they must be truly inclusive processes for all of the CAR's citizens – including the hundreds of thousands of refugees, many of whom are minorities, currently outside the country as a result of the violence. Transition authorities, the international community and the post-election government must therefore take every possible step to ensure that the future security of the country is underpinned by equality, conciliation and a comprehensive social and political framework to bring an end to the conflict's legacy of division.

Recommendations

IN THE CAR

To the transitional authorities, post-election government and the international community:

- **Ensure the national referendum and elections are transparent, safe and inclusive:** in particular, the country's Muslim minority – many of whom are trapped in enclaves in Bangui and elsewhere or currently based outside the CAR as refugees – must have the opportunity to vote to ensure their participation in determining the post-conflict government.
- **Enable the reintegration and safe return of citizens currently displaced within the CAR or in neighbouring countries:** given their historic marginalization and recent ethnic cleansing in many areas, the security of the Muslim and pastoralist minorities should be a central priority for authorities in the post-election period to ensure these communities are able to re-establish themselves in the CAR and engage fully in the country's future.
- **Take concrete steps to strengthen governance and security:** to support this, the international community should provide sufficient financial and technical support to enable the CAR to begin building a functioning state apparatus in the country. The UN, bilateral donors and NGOs must support public services and build their capacity to begin to meet the needs of the population, as well as assist ongoing efforts to improve the justice sector, including the use of hybrid courts to deal with egregious human rights abuses. Police and security agencies must be developed and trained by the UN and its partners to meet continued security challenges from armed groups in line with international humanitarian law. Special attention needs to be paid to violence against women and girls, especially those belonging to minorities, for instance through training of police and security units, as well as prosecutors and judges.
- **Ensure adequate protection and assistance for the CAR's large internally displaced population:** hundreds of thousands citizens are still trapped in insecure environments and struggling with acute shortages in food, shelter and other basic humanitarian needs. Their situation, already protracted, is likely to continue without urgent and targeted interventions by the post-election government and its international partners.

- **Implement the recommendations of the Republican Pact for Peace, National Reconciliation and Reconstruction, issued at the Bangui Forum for National Reconciliation:** of particular importance are those around securing transhumance corridors for members of migrating pastoralist communities such as Mbororo and facilitating conflict mediation mechanisms between pastoralists and farmers.
- **Address the underlying issues of poverty and inequality to ensure lasting peace in the country:** the post-election government, together with international partners, should ensure that any political settlement is comprehensive, inclusive and focuses on alleviating the underlying sources of conflict and discrimination in the country. This should include not only the Muslim minority but also the indigenous forest-dwelling, hunter-gatherer Ba'Aka community and related groups, who make up one of the CAR's most marginalized and vulnerable communities.

IN THE REGION

To the transitional authorities, post-election government, international community and national authorities in neighbouring countries:

- **Ensure adequate protection and assistance for refugee populations in neighbouring countries:** more than 450,000 refugees are currently based in Cameroon, Chad, DRC and the Republic of Congo, made up overwhelmingly of members of CAR's Muslim and pastoralist minorities. Many continue to face acute humanitarian shortfalls and the threat of violence from cross-border attacks by armed groups in the CAR, as well as increasing tensions with host communities. In many ways, the effects of the conflict have now been carried over into these neighbouring countries, meaning that a comprehensive end to the crisis in the CAR must extend beyond its own borders to ensure the security and welfare of its citizens displaced across the region.
- **Facilitate the safe return of refugees to the CAR:** for refugees wishing to return voluntarily to their home country, authorities must ensure they are able to do so in safety and with adequate support to enable them to quickly re-establish their lives. As a large proportion are members of minority communities, their ability to resume their lives in the country will be an important determinant of its future diversity after a protracted

process of ethnic and religious cleansing. At the same time, it is essential that no forced return of the many refugees reluctant to return to the country takes place and their right to remain in their host country is respected.

- **Support the integration of refugees in host countries:** while CAR's post-election government, authorities in neighbouring states and the international community must invest efforts to ensure those wishing to repatriate voluntarily can do so, a significant proportion of refugees – including many Mbororo – are unlikely to be able to return safely for the foreseeable future. Providing assistance and support to refugee populations in Cameroon and elsewhere, including mediation mechanisms with local communities, is essential to prevent conflict over limited resources and enable them to contribute to the development of their host countries. As the recent influx of primarily Muslim refugees to established Christian communities has also brought about significant demographic changes in many areas, there is a risk that without sustained support along these lines, current tensions over access to land and other resources could become increasingly sectarian in future, posing a threat to stability across the region.

Notes

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working to secure the rights of minorities and indigenous peoples

minority
rights
group
international

Central African Republic on the Eve of Elections: From Crisis to Reconciliation

Since the beginning of the current conflict in the Central African Republic (CAR), thousands of civilians have been killed, injured or displaced. While the increasingly sectarian nature of the violence has left both Christian and Muslim communities vulnerable to attacks by rival groups, the Muslim minority in particular has faced de facto ethnic cleansing. *Central African Republic on the Eve of Elections: From Crisis to Reconciliation* highlights the continued challenges facing the country as it attempts to move forward towards a stable, diverse and tolerant future.

The briefing outlines how much of the current violence is in fact rooted in long-term issues of discrimination, poor governance and inequalities over access to resources – issues that must be resolved if the underlying drivers of the conflict are to be addressed. This includes the perennial conflict linked with the seasonal migration into the CAR of pastoralist Mbororo cattle herders from Cameroon and Chad, a situation further aggravated by climate change and desertification.

It also highlights the importance of a regional solution to the crisis: with more than half a million refugees at the end of 2015 located in neighbouring countries, a large proportion of whom belong to minorities, the security and humanitarian impacts of the recent violence are now being felt beyond the CAR's borders. Adequate protection and assistance to refugee communities in Cameroon and other bordering states is therefore essential to ensure the divisions created by sectarian violence in the CAR are not replicated elsewhere.

The referendum and national elections beginning in December 2015 represent an important opportunity to move forward from the tragic violence that has devastated the country. However, to ensure a stable, tolerant and diverse settlement, these processes must be truly inclusive for all of the CAR's citizens, including its minorities. Transitional authorities, the international community and the post-election government must therefore take every possible step to ensure that any settlement is underpinned by equality, conciliation and a comprehensive social and political framework to end the conflict's legacy of discrimination and division.

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