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Contacts:  
Rick Neal and Joel Charny

## Central African Republic: Take Steps Now to Head Off Intractable Crisis

The United Nations and other international stakeholders are missing an opportunity to defuse the humanitarian and political crisis in the Central African Republic. The situation there, while fluid and uncertain, is clearly not as intractable or violent as the conflicts in Darfur or the Great Lakes.

Immediate, sustained political engagement in Bangui and rapid assistance now for the marginalized north will move the country towards peace and help people return home before the conflict hardens into yet another intractable disaster for the region.

Over 200,000 Central Africans have abandoned their homes since 2005 and are now hiding in their fields, just managing to survive under life-threatening conditions. The root cause of their misfortune is political, as people in a large swath of the northern part of the country are suffering from a long period of neglect by the central government in Bangui. Armed rebellions in the northwest, home to deposed President Ange-Félix Patassé, and the northeast, more integrated with Sudan than the CAR, have sprung up out of frustration with the lack of health care, education, and economic development over the past twenty years. Government troops, particularly the Presidential Guard (but also, more recently, rank-and-file soldiers), have provoked massive displacement by burning and looting villages and summarily executing civilians in retaliation for rebel attacks.

The current president of CAR, General François Bozizé, came to power in a coup in 2003, but won elections, generally considered legitimate, in 2005. He is unable to fulfill the promise of those elections, however, due to his own discriminatory and abusive policies, a closed political system, and a weak state. The northwest area heavily affected by government neglect is inhabited by members of ex-president Patassé's tribe, and the region has borne the brunt of the government's counterinsurgency strategy of burning, looting, and killing to punish civilians for allegedly collaborating with the rebels. President Bozizé is heavily dependent for security on President Déby of Chad, who supported him in his drive to topple Patassé. Chadian troops are part of the Presidential Guard

and participate in FOMUC, a small regional peacekeeping force. They also cross into CAR at will, looting villages and terrorizing the population along the border.

As details of the current crisis in the CAR have emerged over the past year, many assumed that it was linked, particularly in the northeast, with the crisis in Darfur. However, there is little evidence of this. Rebels in the northeast may be getting support from Sudan, and Chadian rebels supported by Khartoum crossed through northeast CAR in April 2006 in their failed coup against President Déby. But the ideology of Arab superiority that has killed and displaced millions of non-Arabs in Darfur has not yet appeared in northeast CAR, and it is clear in any event that the more substantial crisis in the northwest is shaped by abusive governance in the CAR, exacerbated by Chadian incursions.

Despite the increased attention to the CAR because of presumed links with Darfur, the response by diplomats in Bangui, donor countries and development agencies, and the United Nations has been slow, unorganized, and unimaginative. Humanitarian agencies are starting to respond to the needs of the displaced, but this response remains insufficient and is not coordinated with any larger efforts to stop attacks on civilians and help people return home.

International engagement remains premised on supporting a national reconciliation process led by an elected government and has not evolved to deal with the new reality of conflict and displacement. The United Nations Peace-Building Support Office in the Central African Republic (BONUCA) was established in 2000 following a UN peacekeeping mission and elections. BONUCA, headed by General Lamine Cissé of Senegal since July 2001, is a political rather than a peacekeeping mission, so it has no troops at its disposal and

is managed by the UN Department of Political Affairs (DPA) rather than by the UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations, which has substantial experience managing multi-faceted peacebuilding operations. BONUCA's original mandate was, among other objectives, to support the government's efforts to consolidate peace and reconciliation, and to strengthen democratic institutions.

In a letter to the Security Council at the end of 2006, however, the Secretary-General made a telling change, charging BONUCA to support national reconciliation and dialogue, without making reference to the government. This is crucial because, in interpreting its mandate, BONUCA and its leader, General Cissé, have grown too close to the government, preventing it from acting as a neutral mediator and facilitator.

The most telling example of BONUCA's unwillingness to confront the government was its failure to conduct an immediate investigation into the killing of 26 civilians, including the execution by government troops of 17 school children in Paoua in January 2006, a rights violation widely reported and condemned by respected international human rights organizations. When challenged on this failure to conduct an immediate investigation, two senior BONUCA officials, in separate interviews, claimed that UN security rules prevented them from traveling to the affected area. The problem is that to this day, even as the UN has relaxed its security protocols in the northwest, BONUCA has established no field presence in the affected areas and failed to solve simple logistical problems that prevent their human rights staff from traveling. BONUCA's human rights reporting is consistently weak and incomplete, for example, referring only to "many cases of the violation of the right to life" in the Secretary-General's most recent update on the CAR.

The diplomatic community in Bangui has also adopted a strategy of support for President Bozizé, downplaying abusive policies and practices and counseling patience, implying that heavy outside criticism will encourage rebel intransigence and derail plans for reform. However, there seems to be no concerted plan to work with the President to curb abuses and help people return home; rather, diplomats cite vague initiatives – development assistance from the European Union, security sector reform by unidentified partners – that will somehow produce results. The consensus is that President Bozizé is "the only game in town;" at least, as one diplomat said hopefully, the President "is not bloodthirsty."

Representatives of the UN and key member states have no political strategy to facilitate an end to the conflict. In this context, local and national mediation initiatives languish. There is no genuine process of dialogue between the government, rebel groups, and other stakeholders, despite peace deals stage-managed by Libya and signed in Syrte in February 2007. The national Group of Elders based in Bangui seems paralyzed, focused, like BONUCA, on lingering tensions from the 2005 elections rather than current threats.

In Paoua, the former deputy mayor has defied repeated arrest and the loss of all his assets at the hands of the Presidential Guard to form a local Group of Elders. "These boys in the bush are our sons," he told Refugees International, referring to nearby rebels. "We want to go out to tell them to stop fighting." He has asked the government to recognize his efforts, to avoid accusations of complicity, but has received no response. The displaced themselves are particularly ready for peace: they will go home, they said, when they see rebels put down their weapons, when the president announces a peace agreement, and when the army no longer attacks them.

The situation in the CAR is not yet as complex or as intractable as that in Darfur or the Great Lakes. Representatives of France, the European Union, and the United States in Bangui will find the leverage they seek in promoting reform with the President by launching a donor group in concert with the World Bank and the Vatican; and the Secretary-General must deploy a new Special Representative to fulfill a new, revitalized mandate for BONUCA. With a population of less than four million and only 4,000 troops in the military, and with the southern half of the country at peace, concerted political engagement and rapid assistance for the north offers the United Nations and international donors an opportunity for success in central Africa, if they can grasp it in time.

#### REFUGEES INTERNATIONAL RECOMMENDS:

- ❑ President Bozizé take a decisive step towards peace in the CAR by declaring a unilateral cease-fire in the north, launching immediate relief and development projects, including the payment of restitution for house burnings, and cracking down on abuses by government troops on civilians.
- ❑ The United States, the European Union, France, the Vatican, the World Bank, and BONUCA come together in Bangui to work directly with President Bozizé over a sustained period of time on fulfilling the promise of his election, specifically through negotiating with rebel groups, stopping attacks on civilians, and funding development for the north.
- ❑ BONUCA work with local mediators to reach out to rebel groups with the message that they should stop attacks on the government and allow a political process to develop, and that their military strategy is having deadly consequences for civilians.
- ❑ The United Nations Department of Political Affairs, Security Council members, and the Secretary-General clarify and strengthen BONUCA's mandate to make it more neutral, and deploy a new Special Representative to ensure that BONUCA has the leadership it requires to implement the new mandate.

*Advocate Rick Neal and Vice-President for Policy Joel Charny visited the CAR from March 3 to 17, 2007.*