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CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC: NO TIME TO LOSE

The Central African Republic is experiencing a major humanitarian crisis. Widespread internal conflict has displaced more than 600,000 people within CAR and forced another 300,000 to live as refugees in neighboring countries. In the capital, Bangui, tens of thousands of people are living in makeshift camps that are prone to flooding. In rural areas, those who have decided to return home are coming back to destroyed homes and market places. CAR's minority Muslim communities are under siege and many have decided to flee the country. The international community was unable to prevent a humanitarian catastrophe in CAR. But action can be taken now by the United Nations and major donor governments to stop the crisis from getting worse and assist those who can be reached.

BACKGROUND

The current crisis in CAR began when a coalition of Muslim-majority rebel groups from the north of the country, known as Séléka, marched south. Looting villages along the way, the rebels overthrew then-President François Bozizé in March 2013. The Séléka were united in their opposition to the corrupt and centralized regime of President Bozizé, as well as a perceived economic marginalization of the north. Dissatisfaction with the president's slow implementation of a previously agreed peace accord was also a factor.

After taking over the capital, Bangui, the rebels imposed their reign of terror on the rest of the country – attacking

villages, killing civilians, and forcing hundreds of thousands of people to flee from their homes. Christian militias, known as anti-balaka (“anti-machete”), fought back, but also attacked civilians from CAR's minority Muslim community – destroying houses, burning down mosques, and mutilating victims.

In January 2014, the rebel leader who the Séléka installed as president, Michel Djotodia, stepped down due to international pressure, as African Union and French peacekeepers attempted to disarm members of armed groups and mitigate the violence. Since the appointment of an interim president, Catherine Samba-Panza, the political

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Donor governments must honor their funding pledges in Central African Republic and provide financing for flexible programming that enables humanitarian agencies to respond to the rapidly changing levels of access to populations in need.
- The United States must re-open its embassy in Bangui to enable staff from the U.S. Agency for International Development's Office of U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance to engage more directly and frequently with implementing partners and beneficiaries.
- The United Nations must deploy additional program staff who can work in-country beyond short-term surge deployments.
- The planned European Union Force in CAR (EUFOR) must urgently deploy police advisors who can both embed with the African Union peacekeeping mission (MISCA) and train CAR's local police.
- The U.S. and European governments must increase their funding and logistical support for MISCA, including providing vehicles and airlift capacity.
- Though the military component of the UN peacekeeping mission in CAR (MINUSCA) will not be established until September 2014, the UN should fast-track the deployment of MINUSCA's civilian staff, including protection of civilians advisors, human rights officers, and the establishment of a community liaison unit.

situation has stabilized somewhat. However, state authority still barely extends beyond the capital. Anti-balaka militiamen, as well as rebels from the now-disbanded Séléka movement, have continued to carry out attacks.

There are currently tens of thousands of people living in makeshift camps for internally displaced people (IDPs), many near the airport in Bangui. In early March, aid workers were hopeful that IDPs would begin returning home during a period of relative calm. In recent weeks, however, insecurity in the capital has spiked, preventing people from going home and forcing even more people to seek refuge at makeshift IDP sites. Unfortunately, seasonal rains have begun and many of the camps have started to flood.

There are also an untold number of IDPs who fled into the bush when their villages were attacked. Many remain hidden, but others have begun to return home – only to find their homes destroyed and medical clinics ransacked. They are in urgent need of basic support as they begin to rebuild their lives.

Additionally, while many of CAR's Muslims have fled to neighboring countries, there remain several pockets of Muslim IDPs throughout the country who face imminent attack by anti-balaka groups. Many are asking for support from peacekeepers and UN agencies to be relocated to potentially safer areas within CAR. But there are challenges to safely transporting, supporting, and protecting the IDPs in relocation sites, as well as providing documentation to ensure that they can access their property when they return.

The displacement crisis is further complicated by worsening food security in the country. Agriculture is the main source of income and livelihoods for over 75 percent of the working population. The conflict forced many farmers to miss two planting seasons, and the flight of Muslim traders from town centers has severely disrupted market systems. Despite the severity of crisis and the widespread humanitarian needs, as of late April 2014, the UN had received little more than a quarter of what is needed to respond.

UNDERFUNDED HUMANITARIAN RESPONSE IS NOT ACCEPTABLE

Insecurity and access constraints in parts of CAR cannot excuse the limited response by donor governments. At a donors' conference in Brussels in January 2014, the U.S., European Union member states, the European Commission, the World Bank, and the African Development Bank pledged a combined \$496 million to respond to the crisis. Unfortunately, many of those pledges have yet to be fulfilled.

There are areas of CAR that remain extremely dangerous and volatile, preventing access by humanitarians. But other areas affected by the conflict are beginning to stabilize. In March, an RI team interviewed villagers on the outskirts of the northwestern town of Bossangoa who had just returned to their homes. After Séléka rebels attacked them last fall, they were too scared to take the road into Bossangoa, where many urban IDPs had sought refuge at the Catholic parish and on the grounds of a local school. Instead, they chose to flee into the bush, where they were forced to forage for food and sleep in makeshift shelters.

One man, René, told RI that he now felt it was safe enough to return to his village. Three of his children had died from illness while living in the bush, and his wife and the rest of his children were desperate to return home and restart their lives. Unfortunately, as he said, they were “starting from zero.” Their home was damaged and they did not have seeds or tools to begin planting, let alone the resources to re-open the local school where René had worked as a teacher.

Villagers like René can be reached, but if there are not enough funds to respond, aid agencies will not be able to deliver appropriate services. This is unacceptable. According to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs' Financial Tracking Service, as of April 24, the humanitarian aid provided by the European Commission and the United Kingdom has fallen woefully short of the amount they pledged.

The United States response has been more robust, having already fulfilled their pledge. However, in addition to providing the necessary funding, donors must be willing to allow for flexible programming by aid implementers. The humanitarian situation in CAR is changing so rapidly that the traditional program funding cycle presents challenges. By the time an organization has conducted an assessment, applied for a grant from a donor, and received the money, the specific needs have often shifted. Those organizations need to be able to reallocate funding as necessary.

For example, just as IDP returns were beginning to take place in Bangui in March, a flare-up in fighting led to even more displacement, including that of many returnees who were forced back into camps. Money that was originally budgeted for supporting returns may now need to be used for emergency services in IDP sites. Further, access to areas in the northwest is shifting as the security situation evolves. Therefore, aid organizations must have the ability to adjust programming as access changes, and donor governments must be willing to permit such flexibility.

Donors must be present in CAR in order to ensure a more rapid response to the evolving crisis and to monitor program effectiveness. Unfortunately, most donor governments closed their embassies due to the growing insecurity over the past year-and-a-half. Except for the European Community Humanitarian Office (ECHO), most major donors do not have a permanent presence on the ground. The U.S. Embassy, for example, was evacuated in December 2012 as Séléka rebels gained territory and advanced toward Bangui. High-level officials from the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and the State Department have visited CAR recently, but there is no permanent U.S. government presence.

To improve its ability to support the humanitarian response, the U.S. government must re-open its embassy as quickly as possible. Once the embassy is open again, staff from USAID's Office of U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA) can have a permanent presence on the ground, enhancing direct engagement with partners and beneficiaries and facilitating the adaptation of programming to the changing context.

MORE IMPLEMENTATION, LESS COORDINATION

In December 2013, the principals of the UN Inter-Agency Standing Committee declared CAR a Level 3 emergency (L3). An L3 declaration signifies that there is inadequate UN capacity and leadership in-country to respond to the crisis. It triggers a system-wide UN response, including, where necessary, the deployment of a senior humanitarian coordinator with empowered leadership to make timely decisions regarding the response even when there is no consensus of the full Humanitarian Country Team.

Further, surge staff for all agencies can be deployed using funds from the Inter-Agency Rapid Response Mechanism. An L3 also requires the UN Humanitarian Coordinator to rapidly develop a strategic statement and a flash appeal, which can involve the use of a Multi-Cluster Initial Rapid Assessment. The L3 designation lasts for three months. In CAR, it was extended for an additional three months, through mid-June. But the crisis will not be over by then, so there must be longer-term solutions to improve the response.

The L3 declaration triggered a deployment of high-level UN coordination staff tasked with leading the various humanitarian clusters. However, this did not correspond with a surge of staff to implement programs. As such, the response became very top-heavy, without the necessary staff to deliver services. This must be corrected.

There is also a need for senior UN staff to remain in CAR beyond short-term deployments. Surge staff may be appropriate for a sudden-onset emergency, but their use is problematic during a prolonged conflict like CAR. In the context of the current L3 declaration, many staff members are deployed only for short periods of time even though the severity of the crisis remains high. Going forward, UN agencies should prioritize hiring senior staff who can remain in the country beyond the temporary three-month periods. This will help to facilitate the post-L3 transition.

BETTER CIVILIAN PROTECTION NEEDED NOW

In April, the UN Security Council voted unanimously to establish a 10,000-strong UN peacekeeping operation in CAR. The deployment of this mission (known as MINUSCA) could be an important step toward bringing peace to CAR, but the mission's military component will not be deployed until September 15, 2014. Before this happens, there are steps that must be taken to improve the African Union peacekeeping mission (MISCA) that is already operating in the country.

There is an urgent need for additional police support for MISCA. CAR's national and local police service is extremely weak and ineffectual. Where there is insecurity in urban areas, police are required to mitigate violence, promote rule of law, and enforce crowd control measures. In Bangui, beyond the inter-communal attacks on civilians, banditry and criminality are major problems, with armed groups profiting from the lack of law and order.

The EU is preparing to deploy a small peacekeeping force of up to 1,000 personnel to CAR, known as EUFOR. The EU should prioritize sending formed police units (FPUs), as well as police advisors who can embed with MISCA soldiers and build the capacity of Central African police units. More FPUs from African countries for MISCA would also be beneficial. Given the global scarcity of such units, an alternative might be the deployment of police advisors who could help MISCA military units operate more effectively in urban environments. Many of the current MISCA units are expected to "re-hat" and become UN peacekeepers once MINUSCA takes over in September, so any training and support they receive now would carry over.

Ultimately, effective Central African police and security forces will be needed to enforce rule of law in the long-term. When RI staff entered Bangui by road from Bossangoa, French peacekeepers were in the process of taking down anti-balaka roadblocks and disarming militia members. The next day, the road blocks were re-established and anti-

balaka were harassing aid staff trying to driver through. When militia groups are disarmed a security vacuum is created because there are no state security forces to take their place.

There is also a significant lack of security personnel in rural areas. For example, MISCA peacekeepers are currently stationed in the town of Bossangoa. However, when RI staff traveled to villages about 20 kilometers north and east of the town, local villagers said that they rarely saw peacekeepers patrolling. Attacks against rural villages in the north are continuing. One man said that he had only seen one patrol pass by his village over the past month. Peacekeepers operating in rural areas need increased logistical support – such as vehicles and gasoline – to facilitate patrolling throughout the countryside. There are nowhere near enough peacekeepers in CAR to provide adequate security across the country, but the soldiers who are there can increase their coverage with greater logistical support.

The Security Council resolution establishing MINUSCA notes the Secretary-General's call for increased capacity for air and ground mobility to MISCA. There must be more than just an acknowledgement of this need. It must be turned in to action. In a positive step, the U.S. recently announced the provision of an additional 200 trucks to MISCA, as well as \$100 million in logistical assistance, including airlift support. Other donor governments must follow suit, particularly European countries that are not planning to contribute troops to EUFOR.

Also, while it will be months before the UN deploys its own troops to CAR (and re-hats the AU troops on the ground now), the UN should fast-track its deployment of civil affairs staff to provide support to MISCA and to facilitate an effective transition to MINUSCA command. This should include protection of civilians advisors, human rights officers, political officers, and a risk mitigation officer. Civil affairs staff plays a key role in laying the groundwork for the deployment of a UN peacekeeping mission by conducting context analysis and establishing relationships with local authorities and the local population.

To facilitate this relationship-building, a community liaison system should be established. Utilized effectively in other peacekeeping missions, such as in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Community Liaison Assistants (CLAs) are locally-recruited individuals whose role is to act as a bridge between their communities and the peacekeeping mission. In the immediate term, this will aid MISCA to better communicate with the people they are meant to protect, especially since

MISCA contingents are often relocating to different bases, confusing the local population about their role (for example, since December, Bossangoa has seen peacekeepers from Congo, Chad, France, and now Cameroon). In the longer term, CLAs will provide a valuable resource in communicating with local communities about the new mandate that will come in to force once MISCA troops are re-hatted.

Mark Yarnell traveled to the Central African Republic in March 2014 to assess the situation of displaced people in the country.