

From left to right, a former refugee who returned to Paoua, a woman who tried to flee but did not have the means to and who is now hosting the displaced woman and her two children sitting next to her.
Photo: IDMC/M. Wissing, 2014



BRIEFING PAPER

Central African Republic: complexity of displacement demands nuanced and sustained response

24 MARCH 2014

In March 2013, the alliance of armed militias known as Séléka arrived in Bangui, the capital of the Central African Republic (CAR). They seized power from then-president François Bozizé and their leader, Michel Djotodia, proclaimed himself president. What ensued was a year of conflict between various armed groups and militias, retaliation attacks against civilians, human rights abuses and exactions perpetrated against civilians often based on their religion ([International Crisis Group](#), n/d). All these multiple forms of violence contributed to the displacement of almost one million people, some 20 per cent of the nation's population. 601,000 of them still remained displaced as of 19 March 2014 ([OCHA](#), March 2014).

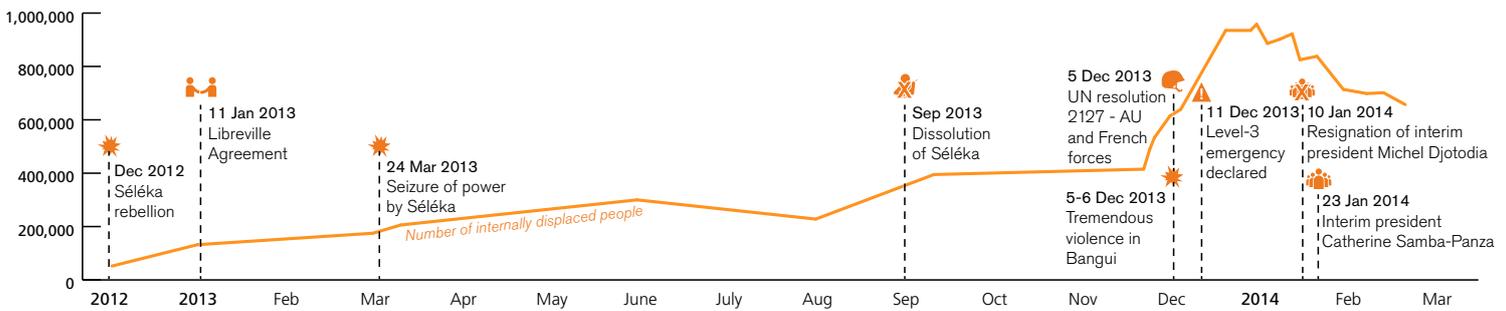
While the situation remains volatile, the presence of an African Union-led peacekeeping force – Mission internationale de soutien à la Centrafrique (MISCA) – supported by French forces, has contributed to the prevention of further escalation of violence in some areas and the improvement of security conditions in certain neighbourhoods in Bangui. However, in general the situation remains volatile and there are conflict hotspots in Bangui and in the provinces where conflict, violence and human rights abuses continue to be daily occurrences ([OHCHR](#), February 2014; IDMC interviews, February 2014).

While return movements have already started within Bangui, and are also reported for some other areas, other Central Africans continue to flee their homes or do not see any other option than remaining displaced. Now that there is tentative stability in Bangui and some people are returning, the government, the international community and local civil society must continue to support spontaneous returns, while continuing support for the hundreds of thousands that remain displaced. Additionally, more attention and efforts are needed to support and assist people displaced outside Bangui.

Internal displacement patterns, trends and scale

Since Séléka launched their rebellion in December 2012, the country has seen several waves of displacement ([ACAPS](#), February 2014). At the beginning of 2013, most new displacements took place in the country's northern and north-central areas from where Séléka marched on the capital from December 2012. After they seized power in March 2013 most fighting and displacements occurred in north-western areas. In September 2013, predominantly Christian militias, known as anti-Balaka self-defense groups, started to proliferate. This

Internal displacement and key events in the Central African Republic



Sources: OCHA, International Crisis Group, OHCHR

led to an increase in retaliation attacks from both ex-Séléka and anti-Balaka elements, particularly in western CAR. This violence reached a peak in December 2013 with atrocious violence, particularly in Bangui. Muslim and Christian civilians were targeted along religious, political or economic lines and subjected to such abuses as rape, arbitrary killings, torture, destruction of properties and looting (OHCHR, February 2014; IDMC interviews, February 2014).

After Djotodia was pressured into resigning the presidency in January 2014, ex-Séléka elements started to withdraw and regroup in northern and eastern CAR. Muslim populations became more vulnerable to targeted anti-militia attacks and exactions in Bangui and the west, causing many of them to flee, either to neighbouring countries or elsewhere in CAR. In mid-March 2014, about 20,000 members of minority groups, including Muslims, were waiting to flee to safer areas, both in and outside of CAR, but were blocked from doing so by armed militias, including anti-balaka combatants (OCHA, March 2014). Many have asked humanitarian organisations to facilitate their evacuation.

During the peak of the displacement crisis in mid-January 2014, around 958,000 people were believed to be internally displaced, five times more internally displaced persons (IDPs) than during other recent periods of instability – in 2002-2003 prior to Bozizé's arrival in power and in 2007 (OCHA, January 2014; IDMC, August 2004; IDMC, December 2010).

The sheer scale of violence made half a million of people flee their homes in Bangui in a single month. It most certainly pushed thousands outside Bangui, but information outside the capital is scarce. As safe havens became more and more scarce in Bangui, small, medium and large IDP sites appeared within a few days, something hitherto not occurring during previous displacement crises during which IDPs tended to flee to the bush or live with host families (IDMC interviews, February 2014).

Returnees in Bangui require assistance to restart their lives

Certain neighbourhoods in Bangui have been relatively calm for nearly two months causing some IDPs to feel emboldened to return home, certainly during the day. IDPs interviewed by IDMC said that some people feel safe enough to return home more permanently, and have begun doing so. Thus the number of IDPs in Bangui dropped from a peak of 513,000 in early January 2014 to 177,000 on 12 March 2014 (OCHA, January 2014; OCHA, March 2014). While some of this reduction is due to better data and the departure of some Muslim IDPs for other destinations, it also reflects return movements to Bangui.

Returnees will need assistance in restarting their liveli-

hoods for many lost tools and other assets during displacement, destruction and looting (IDMC interviews, February 2014). Many IDPs told IDMC that their houses have either been looted or destroyed. Public services, including education, are only restarting slowly, and further restoration of services is essential for them to restart a normal life. Currently many children are not getting an education as a result of displacement (IDMC interviews, February 2014). While education programmes are being run in some IDP sites, IDPs in 36 out of 54 registered sites do not have access to a school according to IDP sites profiles carried out by the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) in February 2014 (IOM, February 2014).

Humanitarian agencies have already started evaluating the needs that current and future returnees will encounter upon their return home and have started to programme on the basis of those assessments. This proactive approach is commendable and encouraging, as returnees are those whose needs are often forgotten.

The humanitarian community needs to make sure that it does not focus on the return movements in Bangui to the detriment of those IDPs who cannot return, who do not want to do so or who have been displaced within and outside Bangui. The complexity of the situation requires support to facilitate spontaneous returns and for those unwilling or unable to return as well as the newly displaced.

People who cannot or do not want to return must not be forgotten

IOM data indicated that 66 per cent of IDPs in sites in Bangui plan on returning soon, compared to 72 per cent in January (IOM, February 2014; IOM, January 2014). Nineteen per cent indicated that they want to stay in the current displacement sites for the time being. Among the displaced Muslim population in Bangui, only 33 per cent want to return home now, 37 would prefer to reside elsewhere in CAR and 22 per cent to leave the country (IOM, February 2014). Most IDPs interviewed by IDMC stress that the still-volatile security situation, impunity and the absence of permanent security forces in certain areas of Bangui remains one of the major obstacles for return. Criminality is on the rise and murders, killings, and looting continue (OHCHR, February 2014; Africa Confidential, March 2014). Given this potentially dangerous climate, it is crucial that IDPs do not feel pressured to return home prematurely. If IDPs' needs are not met they will face the dilemma of choosing between return to an unsafe environment or living in unbearable conditions in displacement sites. While certain sites, especially larger ones, have received humanitarian assistance, others have only benefitted from little or no aid (IOM, February 2014). For many of those who want to stay in their current displacement site, access to food

remains a major challenge. Many have reduced their daily food consumption: some have gone entire or several days without eating (IDMC interviews, February 2014). During IDMC interviews, IDPs voiced concerns that people with disabilities and older persons, especially if they have lost their families, have even greater difficulties in finding sufficient food.

Many IDP sites are in low-lying swampy areas ([CAR Shelter Cluster](#), February 2014). The rainy season is about to set in and IDPs will be exposed to risks of malaria and water-borne diseases. Some areas of Bangui have already been badly affected by the first rains this year. This could force some IDPs to return home earlier than anticipated. Discussions have begun to explore the possibility of relocating those IDP sites which will be unsustainable as the rainy season progresses. It is important that any such relocations will be with the consent of IDPs, new host communities and authorities.

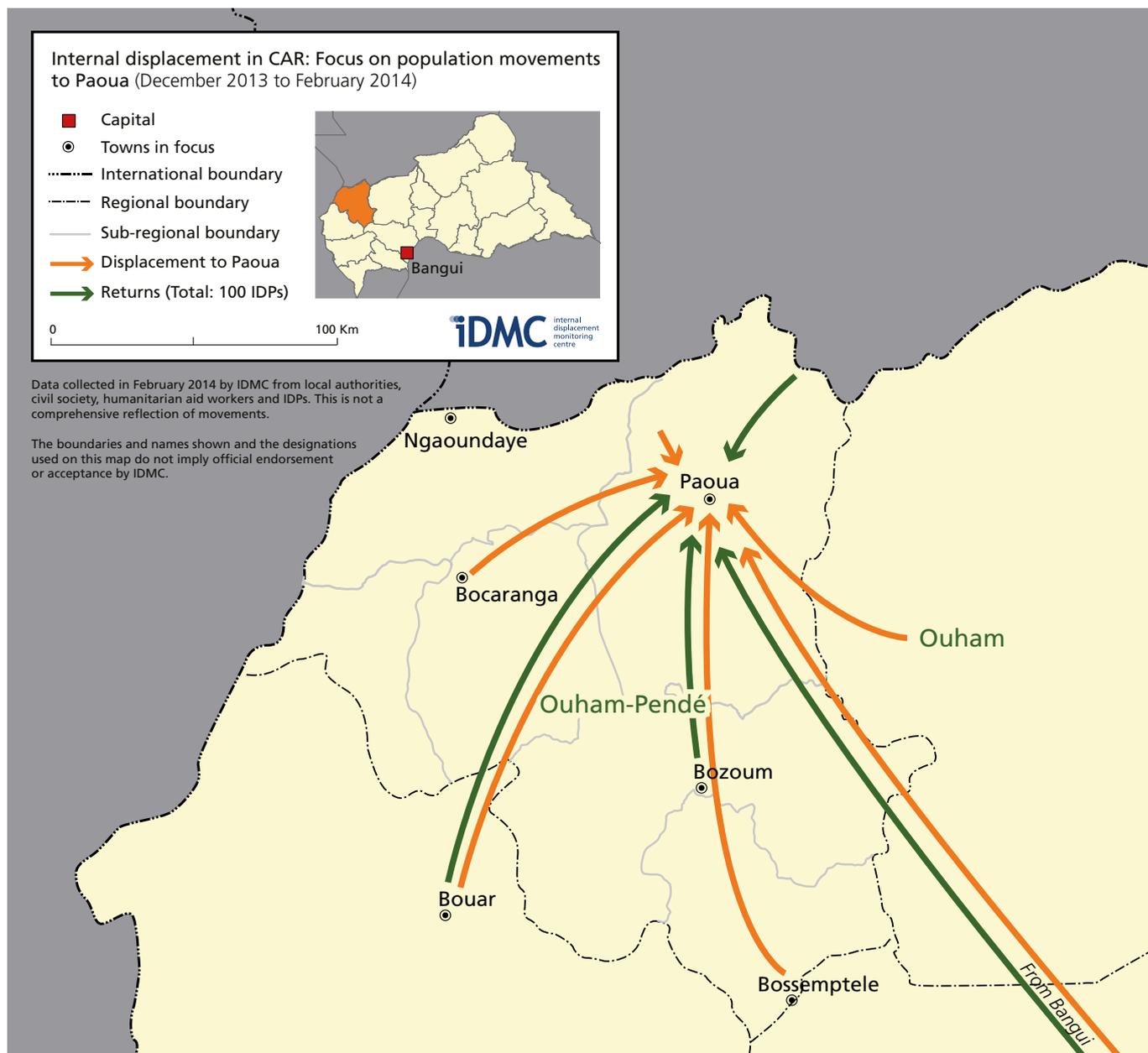
Beyond Bangui: The neglected provinces

Comprehensive information on internal displacement outside of Bangui is scarce, with a few exceptions such as Bossangoa. This is evidenced by the fact that the estimate of the number of IDPs in the provinces outside Bangui published by the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs

(OCHA) has not changed from 425,000 since late December 2013, despite known population movements ([OCHA](#), December 2013, [OCHA](#), March 2014; IDMC interviews, February 2014).

The lack of sufficient data on population movements outside Bangui is mainly due to the restricted presence of government or international actors and insufficient information flow (IDMC interviews, February 2014). Without a bigger commitment and attention to the situation outside of Bangui, new displacements or returns may go unnoticed and as a consequence IDPs may go without sorely-needed assistance. The government and the international community must stay alert and be prepared to respond to such movements as the situation is likely to remain volatile and result in further new displacements.

During its field visit to the town of Paoua in February 2014, IDMC witnessed the kind of convergence of various displacement dynamics that is likely to be replicated in provinces across CAR. IDMC interviewed IDPs who were displaced from their homes in Ouham-Pende and Ouham provinces to Paoua in March and April 2013, as well as another wave of IDPs who arrived in Paoua, including people from Bangui, starting December 2013. Some of these IDPs were occupying houses that they had found deserted when they arrived. This might give rise to tensions once the owners return from displacement.



Many IDP interviewees in Paoua had not received any, or only very modest, humanitarian aid. Unable to continue their normal activities, they were relying on their host families' resources. Their stocks had been depleted, leaving both IDPs and host families in need of assistance.

Some of those who had fled Paoua around August and September 2013 have recently returned home and told IDMC they need support restarting their livelihoods. At the time of IDMC's visit, some CAR refugees – either residents of Paoua or people who had become IDPs there – started timid and temporary returns from Chad (predominantly men without their families) to check on the security situation and their belongings. In the sub-prefecture of Paoua, displacements into the bush happened in several waves in 2013 (IDMC interview, February 2014). Longer term IDPs, new IDPs, returning IDPs and returning refugees all have very different needs. It will not be possible to address them without better understanding of displacement patterns and greater field presence of response organisations.

The government, local authorities and the international community have the enormous challenge of addressing the immediate needs of people affected by displacement both in and outside Bangui – including by facilitating access to food, health services, sanitation, shelter and education and providing protection. Actors need to factor in IDPs and returnees' longer-term needs and start addressing them now in order to support durable solutions in the long-term. This will require:

- providing people with secure tenure of land and houses they own and rent
- ensuring they are able to obtain civil documentation
- facilitating resumption of provision of basic services
- restoring security and providing policing
- creating an accountable justice system able to resolve grievances and end impunity.

It is important that interventions are guided by do-no-harm principles. The focus must be on promoting social cohesion so as to ease existing tensions between communities. These are monumental challenges, but they are not impossible if there is adequate support from the international community for the work of the CAR authorities and international, humanitarian and development organisations as well as the local civil society.

As of mid-March 2014 the funding response to the [CAR Strategic Response Plan 2014](#) remains poor – only 19 per cent coverage of the humanitarian requirements per sector identified by the United Nations ([Financial Tracking Service OCHA](#), 14 March 2014). Many donors are yet to fulfil pledges they made at a donor funding conference in Brussels in January ([Oxfam et al.](#), February 2014). Most funds have been allocated to UN agencies or to the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) ([Oxfam et al.](#), February 2014; IDMC interviews, February 2014). However, there are competent international non-government organisations (INGOs) already operational and others are arriving. In order that all stakeholders can cooperate to successfully plan and implement appropriate response strategies funding must be more predictable and sustainable.

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