

Central African Republic: Background Brief and Analysis of the Crisis

SUMMARY

- Background brief on the Central African Republic crisis, covering events, position of neighbours, interests of wider international community, an interpretation of the current violence and a look at prospects.
- The insurgent group, Seleka, which took over in March 2013, is responsible for brutal human rights abuses, and local populations have created self-defence militia in response. This has created a humanitarian disaster. Seleka has fragmented. (paras 4 to 8).
- Neighbours all have a stake in what happens. Chad and Sudan have a particularly important role (paras 9 to 12). Seleka are substantially Chadian and Sudanese, and are probably seen so by local populations. The international response has pulled in an array of multilateral and bilateral actors, whose interests are not always the same (paras 13 – 15)
- Interpretations of the violence underline: the historical weakness of the state; the impact of regional wars and roving guns for hire; underlying antagonisms fuelled by desertification; and international engagement which incentivises armed groups; and changing geo-politics (paras 16 – 23).
- It is not clear whether Seleka represent an important marginalised constituency, but their behaviour should caution against seeing them as representing a “cause”. The situation has been described as a risk of genocide because ethnicity and religion are used as markers of “us” and “them” in brutal reprisal attacks. But there is little evidence of central orchestration (paras 24 – 28).
- As larger French and African forces deploy, there is a good chance that Bangui will stabilise. But violence could spread across the north as Seleka leave the capital. If the situation does stabilise, attention will turn to the possibility of a “political settlement”. This will be hampered by antagonistic communal and confessional relations and a chronic lack of trust among the political class (paras 29 – 31)

What has happened?

1. Central African Republic (CAR) is an exceptionally weak state. It is larger than France, with a population of 4.6 million. Its leaders have typically been authoritarian but weak, with little power outside the capital. Armed groups have emerged, especially in the north, over the last ten years.

2. The rapidly weakening regime of President Bozize was overthrown at the end of March by a disparate coalition of northern and foreign rebel groups under the umbrella of convenience “Seleka” (Seleka means alliance in the national language Sango, an indication of the group’s desire to present a national image). Its leader, Michel Djotodia, assumed power and an eighteen month transition was internationally agreed, with neither Djotodia nor any member of the transitional government to run in elections.

3. Since this time widespread violence has been reported, either related to pillaging of civilians, or fighting between Seleka and local self-defence militia. Seleka are considered to be around 20,000 strong, including a core, plus opportunistic or forced recruits, including children. The national army effectively dissolved as they advanced. They have proven to be exceptionally brutal.

4. It has become clear that Djotodia has very little control if any over a coalition fragmented into local warlords. He officially dissolved Seleka in September and has since been trying to insert its members into the national army, as a form of pay-off. Bangui has been effected by violent looting, while in the centre, west and north of the country the conflict has generated some 600,000 new refugees and IDPs. DfID announced on 30 November a new £10 million on top of an on-going £5 million spend.

5. A newly uplifted regional force, now under the AU, and a newly boosted French force are currently deploying. Extensive violence has occurred in Bangui as the French have deployed and Seleka and anti-Seleka groups have continued to fight.

What do the neighbours think?

6. All have a strong interest. Chad's main concern is to ensure a friendly government and counter its own rebels who have used CAR as a rear base in the past. This is all the more important as Chad's oil fields lie close to the CAR border. Chad supported Bozize on his arrival in power in 2003, but since fell out with him. Chad has supplied the largest contingent to the regional peace keeping force (FOMUC) whose soldiers are being folded into the new AU mission. These soldiers are often badly seen by the population as they are assimilated with Seleka, many of whom are Chadian.

7. Sudan supported Chadian Rebels in their advance through CAR to attack Ndjamena in 2006. Flights of substantial amounts of weapons were reported entering CAR from Sudan to support them. Djotodia spent most of the last decade in Nyala in South Darfur, and that his first visit as transitional president was to Khartoum. Many members of Seleka are from Darfur.

8. Democratic Republic of Congo hosts CAR refugees, but there are no signs of political involvement. Cameroon, already affected by highway bandits and kidnappers from its neighbours, has been drawn in through clashes along the CAR border in November. The LRA are present in the east of CAR, being tracked by a predominantly Ugandan AU task force. This obviously makes events in CAR of interest to the regional anti-LRA coalition, but given the small numbers involved and their dispersal over very wide areas, we should not assume linkages with events in Bangui.

Wider International Engagement

9. The basics are as follows:

– A regional force of the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS, often CEEAC in French) has been on the ground since 2008. The force is called FOMUC, and the mission it is under is called MICOPAX. It has around two thousand troops, nearly half of whom are Chadian. Sassou N'Gessou of the Republic of Congo is also a driver of the ECCAS position, as a regional mediator.

- A South African force, in place under a 2007 bilateral arrangement with former president Bozize, was defeated by Seleka as it advanced on Bangui, with thirteen officially killed.

- The ECCAS mission will become an AU mission in late December. The AU's leadership, wants to step up on CAR. But they are hampered by a weak response from potential troop contributing countries. Aside from already positioned ECCAS troops, Burundi are planning to deploy troops, and Rwanda have indicated some willing. ECCAS countries (starting with Republic of Congo) are currently increasing their deployments to make up shortfall.

- The UN has a political office in Bangui, BINUCA, involved in mediation and some DDR/SSR. The UN security council this week will welcome the AU deployment, on a twelve month basis. Transfer to a UNPKO following that is possible, dependent in part on developments on the ground.

- The French are increasing their current deployment of 420 to 1,200. They have a deployment of around 1,000 troops in Chad, which gives them a strategic foothold in the area, and is used for lift.

10. So what do all these actors want? A mixture of not always complementary things, including peace on their doorstep (Cameroon); controlled trouble on their doorstep (possibly Sudan); secure (ish) borders with a compliant government in Bangui (Chad, others); to deal with and contain an emerging security crisis, and to be seen to do so (France, AU); to lay the ground work for future work eg on DDR (French, EU, much of the UN system); to counter traditional rivals (possibly ECCAS states).

11. CAR has some mineral and prospective oil resources. They are undeveloped, and although they may be a factor in some international thinking, at present they only fund insurgent groups, not international engagement. Armed groups which formed Seleka have been involved in the trade of diamonds from the north eastern part of CAR.

Interpretation: why this violence?

12. Several (non-competing) interpretations are possible for the timing and intensity of the CAR crisis. Firstly, the state in CAR has been historically very weak, with low levels of penetration into society. This does not necessarily generate violence, but makes it harder to manage. In addition, the colonial state in CAR was particularly brutal, so there is a continuity of rule by force.

13. Secondly that it is the result of a regional conflict cycle at least two decades old. At the macro level, Sudan, Chad and CAR, have been involved in a fluctuating war by proxy which has generated dozens of armed groups in search of state sponsors. Darfur has borne the brunt of this. At the micro level, it has seen a proliferation of regional mercenaries – young men who know nothing but the gun and have become de-sensitised to the brutality of war against civilians.

14. Many of the core fighters in Seleka are from Chad or Sudan, and it is likely that those from CAR have spent time with roving multinational armed groups. We can't measure precisely the foreign component of Seleka, but there is some indication that citizens in the centre and the south of CAR see them as foreign invaders. This could be important as the fate of Seleka unfolds in coming weeks and months.

15. Thirdly, the violence expresses underlying antagonisms and a fight for dwindling resources, exacerbated by desertification. There is undoubtedly a agriculturalist-pastoralist dynamic to current violence (eg one Seleka leader, Adoum Takaji, was previously the head of CAR's Association of Pastoralists).

16. Fourthly, current violence flows from the failures of the Bozize government (not to mention its predecessors). Specifically, he stoked regional, ethnic and religious tensions; promoted impunity for his allies; and resisted meaningful SSR. Under him, state control over the hinterlands weakened, leading to the emergence of armed self-defence groups, laying the ground for the cycle of violence we see today.

17. However, to say that the state has failed does not mean that we should simply aim to build its capacity in a simplistic way, as the following useful insight from CAR expert Louise Lombard makes clear “DDR [has been] based on a faulty assumption that if the state regains its monopoly on violence, it will secure peace in CAR”.

18. Alongside these domestic failures, international engagement on DDR/SSR and political dialogue have had two effects with detrimental impacts on peace prospects. Firstly they have incentivised the creation of armed groups seeking pay off or inclusion in DDR programmes. Secondly they have unintentionally legitimised and emboldened the Bozize regime lowering the prospects of it seeking either meaningful elite pacts or more inclusive governance.

19. Finally, events in CAR are in part a reflection of fluctuating geo-politics. Sudanese involvement in CAR is relatively new, as is the involvement of South Africa. On the other hand, France’s withdrawal from its Africa commitments over the last ten years played a part in emboldening Seleka as they advanced on Bangui (they took the correct view that, unlike previously, the French would not stand in their way).

20. Two further questions arise in reporting on CAR: does Seleka have a “cause” or an “ideology”; and why has the term genocide been used (UN and French references to a “pre-genocidal situation” or “a risk of Genocide”)? Seleka, or at least the CAR citizens among them, come from very deprived areas of CAR that President Bozize marginalised even further. The violence compares in that (limited) sense to Mali and the marginalised Tuareg. However, like in Mali, all communities are extremely poor, and the marginalisation is more perceptions than comparative reality (but important none the less).

21. It is not clear whether Seleka represent such marginalised communities. It is also not clear to what extent such communities will need to be brought into any eventual national political deal for it to hold. But some aspects of how they have behaved should caution against seeing them as an expression of regional, ethnic or religious discontent: their lack of internal cohesion and lack of declared political base (no doubt related to the desire to be seen as a CAR political force not a regional, nor a foreign one); their brutality; and their history as roving bandits.

22. That said, Islam has, to some extent, provided cohesion for the group and, conversely, Christianity has played a role in the formation of local self-defence groups. Religion has become an identity marker in the conflict, a way of judging whether someone is on your “side” or not, and therefore important in reprisal attacks. Religion matches, although imperfectly, ethnic and pastoralist-agriculturalist divides. Overtly jihadist groups are not present, although CAR’s position in the Sahel gives cause for concern.

23. The violence of the past nine months has been predominantly inter-communal (ethnic and religious) tat-for-tat violence. In that context, ethnic identity has been a factor in killings.

Human Rights Watch report fighters talking of killing off ethnic groups.¹ In addition, much of the violence has been seemingly gratuitous and very brutal, for example when pillagers have shot fleeing villagers in the back. Hence the use of the word genocide, which may drive international and media interest for some time. However, there is no evidence of central orchestration to ethnic killings, although we must again qualify that with the paucity of our information concerning events outside the capital. It is also not clear whether the current crisis is due exclusively to Seleka and the emergence of anti-Seleka groups, or whether the violence is broader.

Prospects

24. On the security front, the new deployments are likely to change the dynamic in Bangui. Going on comparable past experiences they may then secure (and create) humanitarian centres or camps near provincial towns. But as Seleka units disperse around the country further insecurity could be generated at local levels, and inter-community score settling is sure to continue. Recent violence, on the back of years of insecurity, have nearly destroyed law enforcement and justice in much of the country.

25. On the political front it is hard at present to envisage a politically negotiated settlement. Seleka have taken ground by sheer force of arms, and are seen by many CAR citizens as foreign invaders. As ICG points out: “no reform or recovery of the state is possible as long as the balance of forces between the authorities and Seleka is tilted so far in favour of the latter”.

26. Relations between the northern regions where Seleka originated and CAR more broadly have been poisoned by recent violence (again in this limited sense comparable to Mali). But if Seleka are ousted, what of the chances of a broader “political settlement”? There may be some opportunity, and there is at least something to work with in the political class in Bangui. But years of misrule have created significant problems: a chronic lack of trust; an abusive security sector; the unresolved legacy of Bozize himself; the support some of Bozize’s opponents initially gave to Seleka; and in general a violent and winner takes all approach to politics.

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¹ HRW “I Can Still Smell the Dead, Forgotten Human Rights Crisis in the Central African Republic” September 2013, especially p. 59.