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CENTRAL AFRICA REPUBLIC: FRAGILE PEACE PROVIDES OPPORTUNITY

Donor governments, international agencies, and national leaders should seize the current opportunity to break the cycle of violent conflict and sow the seeds for a steady recovery in the Central African Republic (CAR). The peace process is advancing and thousands of displaced people who had fled violence and highway banditry have been able to return, but an estimated 209,000 Central Africans remain displaced either within the country or in neighboring Cameroon, Chad and Sudan. More than one million people are still living in chronic poverty and insecurity. Only a sustained effort aimed at ending the conflict, mitigating poverty and the weakness of the state and providing socio-economic opportunities will allow Central Africans to return and rebuild their lives peacefully.

THE PEACE PROCESS

After months of negotiations between the different parties to the conflict in the CAR, the provisions of the June 2008 comprehensive peace accord and the resolutions of the December 2008 Inclusive Political Dialogue (IPD) should be implemented immediately in order to establish lasting stability ahead of the presidential and legislative elections scheduled for 2010. In search of a resolution to the conflict that has plagued the country for the past three years, the December 2008 IPD brought together all parties, including the ruling administration, rebels, the legal opposition and civil society leaders. Reconciliation ceremonies in different areas of the northwest and north central parts of the country preceded the dialogue. The Minister of the Interior stressed that he wanted to reassure the people of Ouham-Pendé that peace is real. While in Paoua, the president of the Armée populaire pour la restauration de la démocratie (APRD) asked for forgiveness from the population and promised to lift all the barriers erected by his rebel movement to allow the people to resume their daily lives. All these promises still have to be translated into action in order to stop the waves of new displacement.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- The U.S. and France should use their influence to pressure the parties to translate into action the provisions of the June 2008 peace accord and the resolutions of the December inclusive political dialogue.
- The U.S. should provide sufficient and better balanced funding that in addition to food also includes support for other important sectors such as health, water and sanitation.
- The UN should maintain a separate and independent RC/HC position in order to continue the good work that has been performed so far.
- As the protection cluster lead, UNHCR should be given adequate resources in order to take a more proactive role in strategizing the response and coordinating the development of terms of reference for the cluster with clear benchmarks.

Although during the past year there has been a relative improvement of the security situation in the northwest due to a combination of the peace process and separate operations by the APRD, the Forces Armées Centrafricaines (FACA) and self-defense forces against the bandits, thousands of civilians have been newly displaced. In mid-November 2008, rebels from the Democratic Front for the Central African People (FDPC) reportedly killed nine soldiers in an ambush on the Kabo-Sido road in the north central region. Supported by the Chadian army, the FACA carried out “clean-up” operations in Bokayanga and Danze villages, where they looted and destroyed homes, forcing villagers to flee to the bush, other villages or to the displaced people’s site in Kabo. Renewed activities of the rebels north of Kabo have forced more than 2,500 people to move to the Kabo site. During the same period, the FACA carried out an operation and arrested some 15 members of the APRD in the Bocaranga area, reportedly torturing them, killing two and imprisoning the rest. Other attacks in Sam Ouandja in Vakaga province in the northeast have forced hundreds of people to temporarily flee their homes before coming back later when there was a lull in fighting.

Lawlessness, impunity and the absence of state authority in many parts of the country continue to open doors to incursions of foreign armed groups and acts of banditry, forcing people to flee their villages or remain displaced. In the southeast, attacks by Ugandan Lord’s Resistance Army forced some 5,000 people to flee their homes temporarily. At least 25,000 nomads who had been displaced from their routes by highway bandits are still not able to resume their activities and few of those who had taken refuge in neighbouring countries are returning home. In many areas in the northwest, farmers report that their day-to-day activities are hampered by the presence of bandits, armed herders or armed men.

The disarmament process outlined in the June 2008 agreement should be fully implemented in order to maintain the momentum that has been reached so far. Despite the fact that the fragile gains have opened the door for reconciliation, some recent incidents have raised concerns about the sustainability of the peace process. Although self-defense forces were originally created to protect the communities from the highway bandits and armed herders, in some areas local and national authorities are increasingly supporting, politicizing, and mobilizing them in their fight against rebel groups. This has caused tension with the rebels in areas such as Bozoum and may create difficulties during disarmament because the self-defense groups are not a party to the political process. The latter should be monitored closely in order to prevent them from turning into

destabilizing militia groups, as has happened in other conflict situations.

RETURNING TO NOTHING

While the overall situation has improved, more should be done to ensure the smooth return and integration of displaced people. An estimated 85,000 people have returned home in the north. This return has been mostly spontaneous, with no assistance to communities that have been destroyed. People are returning to villages with houses burnt to the ground, property, schools and health posts looted, pumps destroyed, untilled land and without tools or materials to develop and rebuild.

There have been cases of forced return. In some areas controlled by APRD in Ouham-Pendé province, the rebels have forced people to abandon their settlements and return to their villages in order to present the guise of stability. Refugees International met some community members in Pulao, who told RI that the rebels threatened them with corporal punishment if they did not comply with the order to return. While living in their villages, they maintain their rough homes in the bush settlements in case they have to flee again because of insecurity. Despite the threat from the rebels, some extremely vulnerable people, such as the elderly and disabled, have taken the risk to remain in the bush because they are not capable of moving back and forth between the village and their settlement in the case of renewed attacks.

PROTECTION CONCERNS AND GAPS IN RESPONSE

Despite having an optimistic outlook on the outcome of the peace process, people are still traumatized by the continuing conflict. Protecting the human rights of the displaced communities and other civilians is a priority for the humanitarian community, but resources are insufficient. The level of deliberate targeting of civilians and the burning of villages has significantly decreased, and there have been improvements in the freedom of movement, thanks to trainings provided by aid agencies on human rights and humanitarian law. However, torture, summary executions, looting, extortion, illegal taxing and harassment are common, regardless of which party to the conflict is in control. In Sam Ouandja in Vakaga province, for example, where the government and the rebel group Union des forces pour le rassemblement have signed the April 2007 agreement which still holds, soldiers of both sides continue to exploit the population by extorting money from them on their way to their fields. In areas controlled by APRD, people continue to be harassed and illegally taxed.

For 2009, the Coordinated Aid Program of the humanitarian community has made human rights protection and the restoration of the dignity of victims of violence its second strategic priority. Within this framework, the protection cluster is planning to increase its advocacy for better protection of people affected by the conflict, but the cluster needs to be strengthened. Staff shortages and high turnover have plagued the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees and it has therefore not been in a position to assume adequately its leadership of the protection cluster.

Despite waves of returns and challenges to integration, some aid agencies have complained that there is not yet a national framework for the return of internally displaced people. They also question the reliability of data available on the numbers and the needs of displaced people and those who have returned. The current figure of 85,000 returnees and 108,000 internally displaced people used as a common planning figure for the CAR humanitarian community derives from a common evaluation conducted by the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs with key partners, not a full displacement profile. In 2009, the Norwegian Refugee Council is planning to undertake a six-month project to update the needs of the displaced. The objective is to identify the most vulnerable and map areas of humanitarian needs and development concerns. However, this project will be implemented in only one of the eight provinces affected by displacement.

Aid agencies are concerned about the projected decrease in funding for 2009 due not only to the global economic crisis, but also to the lack of leadership over humanitarian work in CAR. The position of the UN Humanitarian Coordinator/ Resident Coordinator (HC/RC) in CAR has been vacant for the past six months. This vacuum is exacerbating

the lack of visibility from which the CAR suffered for years. RI has learned that the current structure of the UN Country Team with a separate RC/HC may be replaced by an integrated framework within BONUCA, the Department of Political Affairs mission in the CAR. A Deputy Special Representative of the Secretary General would have the responsibilities of an RC/HC.

This possible change, which the UN Security Council will consider at the end of February 2009, would be a huge mistake. It would politicize the function of the RC/HC within a mission that has been ineffective. Further, the structure of an independent RC/HC has proved its worth in the CAR during the past two years. Through active advocacy and leadership at the country level, the RC/HC mobilized new resources, expanded the UN presence in the provinces, and attracted greater involvement of NGOs in responding to humanitarian needs. Discarding a proven approach to integrate humanitarian and development action under the aegis of a political mission would be folly.

As returning displaced people, refugees and host communities are struggling to restart their lives, the need to integrate early recovery and humanitarian action becomes urgent. Funding levels have to be maintained in order to remove the seeds of the conflict sowed by chronic underdevelopment and the complete lack of economic opportunity. Although the 2008 Consolidated Appeals Process (CAP) was the best funded CAP in the world, not all sectors received sufficient funding, especially health, water and sanitation, in which infrastructure has been destroyed throughout the conflict. With little hope to rebuild their lives in towns and urban areas where they had taken refuge, many displaced communities opt to move into Chad or Cameroon where they have better access to basic services.

CAMEROON: ASSURE SUFFICIENT SERVICES FOR CAR REFUGEES AND HOST COMMUNITIES

Due to a relatively peaceful history, Cameroon has been a site of refuge for people fleeing from neighboring countries. Since 2005, thousands of Central Africans fled their country to escape a protracted political conflict and attacks from bandits and rebel groups and take refuge in Cameroon. Currently, there are an estimated 63,000 Central African refugees in Cameroon, of which more than 90% are of

the Peuhl, or Mbororo ethnic group, as they are referred to in Cameroon. Historically, the Mbororo are nomadic pastoralists who support themselves through cattle breeding. However, bandits have been abducting family members and holding them for ransom. This has forced the Mbororo to sell their cattle, their main source of living, and take refuge in Cameroon.

A SAFE HAVEN

UNHCR conducted registration and refugee rights campaigns, identified 66 Central African refugee settlements, and issued identification cards in order to protect them from harassment by Cameroonian police. The Cameroonian government has also deployed a Rapid Intervention Battalion (BIR) to prevent bandits from CAR from crossing the border into Cameroon. The BIR has helped to protect UNHCR operations in less secure border areas. In some instances, however, the BIR is travelling in vehicles displaying the UNHCR logo, which blurs the line between humanitarian and military actors. This practice should not be continued.

ENSURE BALANCED ACCESS TO BASIC SERVICES

Although only isolated cases of tension have been reported between the refugees and host communities, UNHCR and the government of Cameroon must ensure that host communities do not begin to fare worse than the refugees. Cameroon has given Central African refugees *prima facie* status and provided them with land to build their homes, farm, and live with the host communities. UNHCR, together with the World Food Program, UNICEF, and partners, is facilitating access to most basic services for refugees including healthcare, food, education, and income generating activities. UNICEF has identified about 10,000 refugee children that need to be absorbed into the school system, many of whom are attending school for the first time. However, due to a lack of sufficient funding, resources are being directed primarily to schools with at least 50 new refugee pupils.

UNHCR is also supporting health centers in order to provide free healthcare to refugees. However, health and education infrastructures in the Eastern and Adamaoua provinces are weak and need to be strengthened in order to absorb the current flow of refugees and better serve host communities who are currently sharing their limited resources.

SLOW INTEGRATION IN CAR CHALLENGES PROSPECTS FOR RETURN

As the integration process continues to stall for people displaced in CAR, more Central Africans are opting to move into Cameroon. Central African refugees in Cameroon are

undeniably happy in their current situation. All of the refugees that Refugees International interviewed stated unequivocally that no matter the security situation or availability of services in CAR, as long as there was peace in Cameroon, they did not intend to return. Projects have been established in order to train women to become subsistence farmers. Young men have been more reluctant to adapt agricultural lifestyles, but have begun working as traders, even crossing the border into CAR and working for days or weeks before returning to Cameroon.

Refugees International met with internally displaced Central Africans currently living in urban areas in CAR, who were visiting their relatives in Cameroon to see if the situation was better there. This is undeniably due to the fact that CAR is chronically underdeveloped and those who have lost all of their possessions in the midst of conflict find it extremely difficult to resume their lives. Programs in CAR that target this group do not address their concrete needs unlike programs for refugees in Cameroon. In order to minimize disparity in the level of service displaced communities receive, coordination and information sharing between UN agencies in both countries about the security situation and how it affects the flow of refugees and agency operations need to be strengthened.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- UN agencies should work with the Government of Cameroon to devise a strategy for the restoration and development of current public service structures; UNHCR must effectively communicate to refugees that assistance is temporary.
- The U.S. should continue to fund UNHCR programs in Cameroon, especially those aimed at health, education, and nutrition.
- UN offices in Cameroon and CAR should strengthen information sharing in order to effectively gauge the state of conflict in CAR and the impact on refugee flows and agency operations.

Advocate Mpako Foaleng and Advocacy Associate Limnyuy Konglim assessed the situation for displaced Central Africans in the Central African Republic and Cameroon in December 2008.