



CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC: AN UNKNOWN EMERGENCY IN A DANGEROUS REGION

A Refugees International team recently conducted an assessment mission in the Central African Republic (CAR) and southern Chad to evaluate humanitarian conditions for displaced people in northwest CAR and for refugees living in camps around Gore, southern Chad.

KEY FINDINGS

One Million People in Need

Out of the four million people living in the Central African Republic, about one million are in need of humanitarian assistance, according to the United Nations. Decades of political and economic instability, and coups d'état, the latest of which was in 2003 when current President Bozizé toppled former president Patassé, have had terrible consequences for the population. The government cannot provide security or services and fighting between government and rebel forces results in attacks and human rights violations against civilians. The north is in a state of crisis as civilians are currently caught between rebels, government forces and armed bandits. This has resulted in the displacement of an estimated 150,000 people, though this number may be higher now. In addition, 20,000 people have fled to neighboring Cameroon and 50,000 are in refugee camps in southern Chad. With the continued fighting and insecurity in northern CAR, the number of displaced people is expected to increase.

A History of Political Crisis in a Dangerous Region

There have been more coups d'état than free and fair democratic elections in CAR. The country has been plagued by political instability and mutinies originating from development, security and economic crises. Currently, the political climate in CAR is tense—the government is pursuing a military solution against at least two rebel groups whose political agenda is to overthrow elected President François Bozizé. Government control and services outside of the capital Bangui range from minimal to non-existent. Lacking the authority to govern and protect its borders, CAR is an easy launching pad, training ground or rest and relaxation spot for armed groups from neighboring countries. In particular, the northeast Vakaga province is a haven for irregular armed groups from the neighboring countries of Chad and Sudan. Indeed, the attempted coup in Chad in April was reportedly launched from this area. In the past, foreign forces have also come into CAR from its southern porous border with the Democratic Republic of Congo.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. International NGOs and UN agencies with a humanitarian mandate should respond to the crisis in northern CAR.
2. Donors should respond to the UN Consolidated Appeal for CAR which was largely ignored for years. For more information go to <http://ochaonline.un.org/cap/webpage.asp?Page=1491>
3. The Government of CAR has a primary responsibility to protect its civilian population and must therefore stop the army, including the presidential guard, from committing human rights abuses, and must hold perpetrators accountable.
4. Human rights agencies should establish a presence in the CAR, investigate abuses, and advocate on behalf of the victims.
5. UN agencies must be allowed to operate without escorts so that they may significantly increase coverage of the humanitarian and protection needs in the north.

Civilian Population Traumatized

The sound of approaching vehicles immediately signals danger and possible attack. Most villages are along roads, so they are easy targets for bandits, rebels and the government army who come to pursue their various agendas: stealing food and other goods, kidnapping children, attacking villagers. The presidential guard is especially brutal and has burned hundreds of homes. Villagers explained that sometimes the army parks their vehicles a few kilometers outside the villages so that they can launch a surprise attack on foot. People leave their belongings and run off from the main dirt road or their villages into nearby fields. Many are so scared that they have been living in the bush for the past eleven months.

Humanitarian Agencies Not Responding to this Crisis

The Government of CAR has very limited control of the country and is not providing the population outside of Bangui with security, much less access to potable water, electricity, healthcare, or education. The only international agencies responding to the needs in the affected areas are the International Committee of the Red Cross, Médecins Sans Frontières, and Cooperazione Internazionale (COOPI), along with CARITAS and Catholic missionaries. Major American NGOs that usually respond to humanitarian emergencies are not even in the country. The UN has no sustained presence in the affected area, although the World Food Program is providing food through COOPI and the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees recently trained local humanitarian observers. The UN has mostly traveled with government armed escorts which are susceptible to ambush by rebels and renders the UN incapable of accessing the most vulnerable people.

A Humanitarian Emergency in an Impoverished Country

To put the crisis into context, consider the following statistics. Central Africans can expect to live until only 41 years of age; life expectancy has decreased in the last decade. CAR is ranked 169 out of 175 countries on the Human Development Index and 73% of the population struggles to survive on less than one dollar a day. More than 57 % of the population is illiterate, 82 % in the case of rural women. The maternal mortality rate is shocking (1,355 per 100,000 in 2003), as is the infant mortality rate (132 per 1,000 in 2003). The HIV/AIDS rate is also staggering: 15% is the national average, which rises to 30% in some areas.

With these poverty indicators, and more than five percent of the population displaced, one would normally expect a significant response from international aid organizations, yet CAR has never received much attention. In recent years it has become fashionable to speak of “forgotten emergencies.” But the act of forgetting implies prior knowledge. The crisis in the CAR is not a forgotten emergency; it is virtually unknown and unrecognized.

Urgent Needs in Every Sector

Fleeing abuse or attacks by bandits, rebels and government troops, people live in makeshift dwellings in the forest far behind their villages, which are along the roads. Conditions are dire: people desperately need shelter, food, healthcare, clothing, blankets, soap, and potable water. The absence or limited availability of clean water and medical care aggravates diseases such as malaria, typhoid, and meningitis. People are subsisting on mostly cassava and wild roots since some of the markets have been destroyed by bandits and agriculture has been interrupted by the insecurity. Though the country has plenty of arable land, an estimated 30% of children under five years of age in the conflict areas have chronic malnutrition.

Preying on Children

Children are especially vulnerable to one of the money-making tactics used by the rebels: kidnapping. Some people are held hostage for months at a time while they perform forced labor until their families can pay the hefty ransom. Families explained that they lost all of their cattle in order to pay for the safe return of a family member. For others, “If you don’t pay with money, then you pay with your skin.” Refugees International met with one family that said they sold everything to retrieve their five-year-old daughter and two boys, ages six and eight. While held captive for three months, the children were told by the rebels that if their papa did not pay the ransom, they would be killed. Their mother told RI, “They are afraid of all strangers now.”

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