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World Report 2016 - Central African Republic

A transitional government led by interim President Catherine Samba-Panza struggled to establish security in the Central African Republic. The Bangui National Forum, held in May, set the country on a path toward elections, but there was little progress on reconciliation, disarmament, and the reassertion of state control.

Although the capital, Bangui, was relatively calm for the first half of the year, renewed sectarian violence gripped the city in late September. In 2015, at least 100 people died, of which at least 45 were civilians, shot at point blank range or stabbed to death or had their throats slit. Over 400 people were injured.

Sectarian violence and attacks on civilians were widespread in central regions of the country, most notably in Ouaka province, where predominantly Muslim Seleka rebels and largely Christian and animist anti-balaka militias continued to fight each other. By the end of 2015, thousands had been killed on both sides and hundreds of villages burned. An estimated 456,000 people, the majority Muslim, remained refugees. A further 447,000 remained displaced internally.

The United Nations peacekeeping mission, MINUSCA, deployed across many parts of the country, after taking over from African Union (AU) peacekeepers in 2014. They worked alongside French peacekeepers, known as Sangaris, to attempt to protect civilians and re-establish order. Their efforts were hampered by accusations that international peacekeepers were involved in sexual abuse of civilians, including children. Special representative of the secretary-general, Babacar Gaye, who led MINUSCA, resigned over the scandal.

Impunity remained a serious challenge, although there was new hope with steps taken toward the establishment of a Special Criminal Court in the national justice system. The International Criminal Court (ICC) prosecutor continued investigations started in September 2014.

Attacks on Civilians

The Seleka (“alliance” in Sango, the country’s principal language), a predominantly Muslim rebellion made up of loosely affiliated factions, fractured into several different groups after infighting over political agendas and resources. The various factions continued to attack civilians, killing hundreds, often under the pretext of searching for and protecting themselves against the anti-balaka.

Seleka rebels also burned or otherwise destroyed villages and engaged in widespread looting. For example, in late 2014 and early 2015, Seleka fighters from the Union for Peace in the Central African Republic (*l’Union pour la Paix en Centrafrique*), a former Seleka group, killed at least 120 people and burned hundreds of homes on the road between Kouango and Bianga, in Ouaka province.

The anti-balaka, a collection of predominately Christian and animist armed fighters who harbor hatred against Muslims, fought the Seleka and targeted Muslim civilians as well as, increasingly, others who were seen as being too close to Muslims or were not supporting the anti-balaka. In central regions, the anti-balaka killed scores of civilians and burned homes. For example, in late March, anti-balaka fighters killed at least 14 ethnic Peuhl herders outside Kaga Bandoro as they were moving their cattle. Ten of the victims were children, aged between one and nine years old, and three were women. The Peuhl scattered into the bush and several others went missing and are presumed dead.

Some anti-balaka fighters also held ethnic Peuhl hostage for ransom, raped Peuhl women and girls and, in some cases, held them as sex slaves. MINUSCA helped to facilitate the rescue of over 90 Peuhl held hostages in the southwest for many months.

Refugees and Internally Displaced Persons

The situation for internally displaced persons and refugees remained difficult and few returned to their homes. After the September violence in Bangui, a further 37,000 people were displaced in the capital. Many displaced people, such as those in Ouaka and Ouham provinces, had little or no humanitarian assistance. Human Rights Watch documented the deaths of 142 people from January to June in Ouaka province who had sought safety in the remote forests and savannah bush and later died from malnutrition and disease. This is likely only a fraction of the total.

In western parts of the country there was some improvement for 36,000 Muslims who resided in enclaves protected by international peacekeepers since the violence of 2013 and 2014. Hundreds of Muslims in Yaloké enclave who lived in dire conditions and were blocked by the transitional government and UN peacekeepers from leaving, were provided with more appropriate humanitarian aid and were finally permitted to leave for refugee camps in Cameroon or elsewhere in April.

During the 16 months they had lived in Yaloké, 53 people had died from malnutrition and disease, the majority children. Muslims in other enclaves had some freedom to move around safely, though the sectarian violence in Bangui in late September was a serious setback.

Elections

In June, the transitional parliament voted to block refugees living outside the country from voting in upcoming national elections, which would have disproportionately affected the minority Muslim population, many of whom remained refugees. This decision was overturned by the transitional constitutional court in July. Registration for refugees began in September.

A constitutional referendum, scheduled to be held on October 4, was delayed due to the violence in Bangui, and was scheduled for December 13. On October 8, the president of the national electoral authority resigned saying credible elections could not be held before the end of 2015. The first round of elections was scheduled to be held on December 27. The former president, Francois Bozizé, on whom the UN imposed sanctions for his role in the 2013-2014 violence, and Patrice Edouard Ngaissona, one of the leaders of the anti-balaka, were among the 44 candidates for president. On December 8, the transitional constitutional court ruled that Bozizé and Ngaissona were not eligible to stand, along with 12 other candidates.

Peacekeeper Abuses

In May, revelations of sexual abuse of children by French and other international peacekeepers strained peacekeeping efforts. The revelations were based on a leaked UN report from 2014 which detailed sexual abuse by peacekeepers, of boys as young as nine. French authorities said they dispatched a team to Bangui soon after learning about the allegations, but had been unable to conclude their investigations due to lack of information. As a result of the public pressure, French authorities ordered a new investigation.

In August, MINUSCA peacekeepers and UN civilian staff were also accused of multiple cases of sexual abuse in the country, including the alleged rape by a UN peacekeeper of a 12-year-old girl. UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon demanded the resignation of Babacar Gaye, then-head of MINUSCA, and reiterated the UN's zero tolerance policy. In June, he also established a panel to review the UN's response to sexual exploitation and abuse and other serious crimes committed by peacekeepers not under the UN's command in the Central African Republic. After a delay the panel was due to release its report on December 17.

In June, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights found that AU peacekeepers from the Republic of Congo were responsible for the enforced disappearance of at least 11 people in Boali in March 2014. In December 2013, AU peacekeepers allegedly beat to death two anti-balaka fighters they had detained in Bossangoa. No action had been taken regarding these findings at time of writing.

National and International Justice Efforts

Impunity remained one of the main challenges in addressing horrific past and ongoing atrocities. In September, some 600 prisoners escaped from the main prison in Bangui with the help of government soldiers. Prison breaks also occurred in other parts of the country.

In June 2015, Samba-Panza promulgated a law creating a Special Criminal Court, a hybrid court within the national justice system that will focus on grave international crimes committed since 2003, and will include both national and international judges and prosecutors. Government authorities and the UN started preparations to secure funding, technical support, and international experts.

The ICC continued investigations into war crimes and crimes against humanity committed since 2012. The ICC's case against the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), a Ugandan rebel movement active in several countries across the region, was given new life in January when commander Dominic Ongwen surrendered in Obo, in the southeast of the country. The LRA had been operating in the country since 2008. Ongwen faces 67 counts of war crimes and crimes against humanity for crimes committed in Uganda. The LRA continued to threaten and abduct civilians in eastern parts of the country, though with less frequency than in past years.

The ICC trial of Jean-Pierre Bemba Gombo, a Congolese national and former vice president of the Democratic Republic of Congo accused of failing to control his militia—allegedly implicated in murder, rape, and pillage in Bangui in 2002 and 2003—rested at the end of 2014, and during 2015 the judges deliberated on the evidence. At time of writing they had not yet rendered a judgement. A second ICC trial against Bemba and three accomplices on charges of tampering with witnesses opened in September 2015.

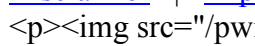
Key International Actors

International actors paid less attention to the crisis than in previous years, although the UN Security Council renewed the mandate of MINUSCA, increased the troop ceiling, and specifically asked the mission to monitor human rights abuses against persons with disabilities. France reduced the number of peacekeepers from 2,000 to 900 troops and urged that elections be held before the end of the year. The European Union, the largest donor, provided €22 (US\$24) million in humanitarian assistance and €141.6 (US\$ 154) million in development assistance. The United States provided US\$116 million to peacekeeping and humanitarian aid.

The Republic of Congo continued to act as the chief mediator in the crisis under the auspices of the Central African Economic and Monetary Community.

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