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Human Rights and Democracy Report 2014: Central African Republic (CAR) - in-year update December 2015

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The security and humanitarian situation in CAR remains grave, and continues to have a severe impact on the civilian population, their humanitarian needs, and their human rights.

In September, the killing of a 16-year-old boy in Bangui triggered inter-communal strife and clashes between elements of anti-Balaka and ex-Seleka armed groups against civilians. This resulted in approximately 77 deaths, 414 people injured, and 43,000 displaced. All 700 inmates from the only functioning prison in Bangui escaped. Many humanitarian organisations had their compounds raided. The UK worked with international partners to provide consular support to

British Nationals who required assistance to leave CAR. The rapid escalation in violence highlighted the fragility of the situation in CAR.

The UK has continued its strong support for both UN and EU efforts to improve the political and security situation in CAR. The EU Military Advisory Mission (EUMAM CAR) reached full operational capability in July. EUMAM CAR provides the government of CAR with expert advice, with a view to reforming the military to turn it into a professional army, which is democratically accountable and representative of the entire nation. The UN Security Council (UNSC) agreed to the temporary deployment of an additional 300 Senegalese personnel to the UN peacekeeping force (MINUSCA) to provide a quick reaction force for additional security during the election period.

Religious and inter-communal tensions remain high and continue to lead to violent clashes in a number of cities. Some communities remain trapped in enclaves and at risk of sectarian violence. The September violence saw a backlash against such communities, heightened tensions, and obstructions to their freedom of movement imposed by armed groups. Despite the adoption in May 2015 at the Bangui Forum of a Republican Pact calling for reconciliation, no initiative has been undertaken. The few remaining Muslims in western CAR are subject to threats and harassment. Threats against herders are also preventing their movements and heightening tensions between communities.

Gender-based violence, including sexual violence, has continued in the reporting period. By October 2015, more than 60,000 cases of sexual and gender-based violence were registered by an inter-agency group headed by the UN Population Fund (UNFPA). The actual number of cases is likely to be much higher.

The UK is deeply concerned by the allegations of sexual exploitation and abuse made against UN peacekeeping, French, African Union (AU) and EU troops. We welcomed Madame Deschamps' report into the UN's response, and are working closely with the UNSC and international partners to ensure troop-contributing countries and the UN/AU/EU investigate the allegations fully and take appropriate action. FCO Minister for Human Rights Baroness Anelay, the Prime Minister's Special Representative on Preventing Sexual Violence in Conflict, stated "the finding that those who are meant to protect the most vulnerable in society have instead abused them is completely unacceptable. It is equally unacceptable that the UN failed to investigate fully and take appropriate actions on the outcome of that investigation. The UK supports the UN Secretary-General's zero tolerance approach to sexual exploitation and abuse. It is vital that the recommendations in the report are considered carefully and acted upon swiftly".

Armed groups and self-defence groups continued to recruit and use children in large numbers. Children are used in combat, as sex slaves, and as shields, or forced to perform support roles. For example, in the outbreak of violence in September, children were observed manning check points and erecting barricades.

The Lord's Resistance Army continued its activities in eastern CAR affecting, in particular, mining areas. These attacks have involved looting, violence against civilians, destruction of property and abductions.

Violence, instability and insecurity have continued to have a huge impact on basic livelihoods during the last six months, precluding any substantial economic recovery. A food security

assessment found that the percentage of people suffering food insecurity had increased from 29% to 50% in just one year. The lack of economic prospects for young people in CAR contributes to perpetuating armed group recruitment and cycles of violence. The international community and key financial institutions need to ensure a sustainable transition to recovery by increasing revenue generation and employment opportunities in CAR.

Reconstruction of the justice sector is still in its infancy. Police capacity continues to be extremely limited and this, along with the absence of a functioning judicial system, means that little action has been taken to halt or address human rights abuses and bring the perpetrators to justice. We hope that the Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court's investigation (launched in 2014) into war crimes and crimes against humanity committed by the rebel groups since 2012 will help to address this. We welcome efforts by the CAR government and the UN to set up a Special Criminal Court to address war crimes and crimes against humanity committed since 2012. We also welcome MINUSCA's implementation of Urgent Temporary Measures.

The humanitarian situation in CAR continues to be a cause for deep concern. More than 2.3m people are in need of humanitarian assistance, with 452,000 internally displaced people, and 451,100 CAR refugees in neighbouring countries. The number of people suffering from hunger has doubled in a year. With only 6% of the population considered to be food secure, there is a real risk that pockets of famine appear in 2016.

At the high-level meeting on CAR at the UN General Assembly in September, the UK pledged an additional £7m in humanitarian assistance, bringing the total UK aid contribution for the year to CAR and CAR refugees to £25m. The UK remains one of the largest humanitarian donors to CAR, providing £58m through NGOs and international organisations to assist CAR populations and CAR refugees since 2013. This money has helped provide essential healthcare, food and livelihood assistance and protection to populations affected by the conflict.

At the UN Human Rights Council in September, the UK supported the recommendations made by the Independent Expert on the situation of Human Rights in CAR, Marie-Therese Keita Bocoum, and co-sponsored the resolution on technical assistance and capacity building in the field of human rights in CAR.

In November, Pope Francis made a symbolic visit to CAR. The visit helped raise awareness of the role faith leaders and grassroots faith groups can play in bringing reconciliation, reducing religious tensions, and promoting social cohesion.

The list of approved presidential election candidates was issued in the first week of December. A series of violent clashes and demonstrations in Bangui, Bossangoa and Boali followed. The CAR constitutional referendum took place on 13 December. Violence marred the referendum in some areas, with three UN peacekeepers wounded, two civilians killed, and 20 civilians wounded. The first round of presidential and legislative elections took place on 30 December. The elections saw strong voter turnout (79%) and passed off peacefully, but were marred by logistical difficulties. The Constitutional Court has since annulled the results of the legislative elections.

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