



USCIRF Annual Report 2014 - Other Countries/Regions Monitored: Central African Republic

Publisher [United States Commission on International Religious Freedom](#)

Publication Date 30 April 2014

Cite as United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, *USCIRF Annual Report 2014 - Other Countries/Regions Monitored: Central African Republic*, 30 April 2014, available at: <http://www.refworld.org/docid/5369e5a4d.html> [accessed 12 March 2015]

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Militias formed along opposing Muslim and Christian lines in the Central African Republic (CAR) have engaged in systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of freedom of religion or belief. The country is engulfed in what is now viewed as a religious conflict where these militias kill, torture and rape individuals based on their actual or perceived religious affiliation. Despite its history of interfaith harmony, religious tensions in the country have skyrocketed, with cities and towns segregated into religious enclaves. After the close of this reporting period, the sharp increase in attacks on CAR's Muslim community led several UN and international human rights organizations to warn of genocide or ethnic cleansing in the country. While the severe religious freedom conditions in CAR meet the standards for the country to be designated a "country of particular concern," the March 2013 coup followed by anarchy and a complete breakdown of law and order, has resulted in there being no government to hold accountable under the International Religious Freedom Act.

The 2012-2013 Rebellion and Coup

The Central African Republic has a long history of political strife, coups, and human rights abuses. However, severe religious freedom violations and sectarian violence are new to the majority-Christian country, despite a history of societal discrimination against the Muslim minority. The rise of religious freedom violations and sectarian violence in CAR started with the December 2012 political rebellion by a coalition of armed rebels, the Séléka, from CAR's majority-Muslim Vakaga region and foreign fighters from Chad and Sudan. Chad and the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS) politically intervened before the Séléka captured the capital Bangui,

leading to the signing of a power-sharing agreement in January 2013. This agreement, however, proved short-lived when former CAR President Francois Bozizé failed to implement it. In March 2013, the Séléka took the capital, Bangui, and deposed President Francois Bozizé. Séléka leader Michel Djotodia proclaimed himself President and Minister of Defense.

During their rebellion and after the coup, Séléka fighters attacked Christian priests, pastors, nuns, church buildings, and other Christian institutions. The militias targeted predominantly Christian neighborhoods and businesses for destruction, looted churches but not mosques, and protected Muslim residents while killing or raping Christian residents. In some Séléka-controlled areas, non-Muslims were prohibited from selling foods not eaten by CAR Muslims, including pork, bushmeat, and caterpillars. In response to the Séléka attacks and fears that Djotodia would turn CAR into an Islamic state, militias comprised of Christians, known as the anti-balaka, were formed in September 2013 and started to attack the Séléka, individual Muslims, and/or Muslim villages. Since the formation of the anti-balaka, fighting in the CAR has devolved into a religious conflict.

Current Situation

In an effort to stabilize the country, almost 7,000 African and French peacekeepers are now on the ground in Bangui and outside of the capital; additional African and EU peacekeepers are still expected. On January 10, 2014, interim president Michel Djotodia resigned. The transitional parliament has selected a new interim president, Catherine Samba-Panza, and interim prime minister. Nevertheless, government officials, the police, and judiciary do not have the capacity to stop the fighting, and Muslim-Christian religious violence continues daily and religious tensions remain extraordinarily high. After the close of the reporting period, the increased number of anti-balaka revenge attacks on CAR's minority Muslim population resulted in hundreds of deaths and tens of thousands of Muslims fleeing the country. The United Nations and humanitarian and human rights organizations report only a few remaining, and vulnerable, Muslims in many cities and towns.

Religious Freedom Violations, Sectarian Violence, and Reports of Genocide

Both the Séléka and the anti-balaka have engaged in severe human rights and religious freedom violations. Clashes between anti-balaka and Séléka fighters, as well as between civilian Christians and Muslims, started in September and continuously occurred and multiplied as the year ended. On September 6, anti-balaka fighters killed or captured 20 Séléka fighters and targeted Muslim homes in Benzambé. Séléka fighters then attacked the Christian areas of Bossangoa. On September 9, the anti-balaka attacked a Muslim neighborhood in Bouca. In response, Séléka fighters that same day in Bouca attacked Christian residents. Human Rights Watch estimated several hundred persons were killed in these and other attacks in the Ouham province from September 6-21. Between October 7 and 9, Muslim-Christian fighting in Gaga village killed more than 100 persons. An anti-balaka attack against Muslims in Bangui on December 5 left hundreds dead. Following this attack, both the Séléka and the anti-balaka conducted systematic house searches and summary executions, extrajudicial killings, torture, sexual violence, looting, and destruction of property in different Bangui neighborhoods and elsewhere throughout the country. In all of these actions, Muslims targeted Christians and Christians targeted Muslims. In December 2013 alone, more than 1,000 persons died in Séléka and anti-balaka battles. The Séléka and anti-balaka also routinely engage in executions of individual Christian and Muslim civilians.

Since December, and continuing after the January 31, 2014 end of the reporting period, there was a rise in anti-balaka attacks on newly-disarmed Séléka fighters and CAR Muslims. The United Nations, Doctors Without Borders, Human Rights Watch, and Amnesty International all report unprecedented levels of violence against the Muslim population. Hundreds of Muslim citizens have been killed by the anti-balaka since January 2014, mosques are routinely destroyed, and cities, towns, and villages in western and northwestern CAR are now almost completely devoid of Muslim citizens. More than 100,000 Muslims have fled the country and thousands more remain internally displaced. The UN reported on March 7, 2014, that fewer than 1,000 of the city's 100,000 Muslims remained in CAR's capital Bangui. The International Criminal Court (ICC) and the United Nations are both opening investigations into reports of genocide in CAR. The ICC Prosecutor noted reports of "hundreds of killings, acts of rape and sexual slavery, destruction of property, pillaging, torture, forced displacement and recruitment and use of children in hostilities," in many of which "victims appear to have been deliberately targeted on religious grounds."

Recommendations

The U.S. government has been regularly speaking out against sectarian violence and gross human rights abuses in CAR, encouraging and supporting interfaith dialogue, and providing support to international peacekeepers and humanitarian assistance organizations. USCIRF supports these actions, and additionally recommends that the U.S. government should increase humanitarian assistance funding to aid internally displaced persons and refugees; sanction individual Séléka and anti-balaka leaders and financiers; work with the transitional government to prevent religious discrimination in governance and militia disarmament and demobilization; ensure that international standards of freedom of religion or belief are enshrined in a new constitution; and work with the transitional government to hold Muslim and Christian perpetrators of violence accountable.