

State of the World's Minorities and Indigenous Peoples 2015 - Central African Republic

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In 2013, a loose coalition (*Seleka*) of largely Muslim insurgent groups, angered by what they perceived as the marginalization and exclusion of northern Muslims from the benefits of CAR's vast resource wealth, advanced south, dislodging François Bozizé's government in March. *Seleka* forces were accused of egregious abuses against the mainly Christian civilian population in their path, including massacres, sexual violence, recruitment of children and mass displacement. In December 2013, on the eve of the arrival of a French force sent to quell the violence, armed Christian and animist self-defence 'anti-balaka' ('anti-machete') militia, with some support from soldiers of the defeated army, took the offensive. They staged revenge attacks in Bangui, not only on suspected rebels but also indiscriminately on the local Muslim population, perceived due to their religion and language as sympathizing with the insurgency.

In January 2014, *Seleka* leader Michel Djotodia ceded power under international pressure. Catherine Samba-Panza, a Christian who had been appointed mayor of Bangui by Djotodia, was elected president of the interim government. The French force disarmed some *Seleka* fighters, who then withdrew from the south and west of the country, regrouping in the north and east. Anti-balaka forces took advantage of its retreat to conduct further attacks on Muslim communities. Muslim foreign nationals and many from CAR's previously well-established Muslim minority fled for their lives. Despite its roots in political and economic issues, the conflict took on an increasingly sectarian tone, with abuses and reprisal attacks escalating and spreading throughout the country. As the then UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Navi Pillay condemned the television broadcasting of hate speech against Muslims by anti-balaka militia, the latter moved from staging revenge attacks to what some described as a deliberate campaign to clear the country of all Muslims, either through killings or forced displacement.

The presence of African Union (AU), French and subsequently European Union troops was not enough to stop the violence. Humanitarian workers and international troops themselves came increasingly under attack. In some instances, Chadian and other soldiers among the AU

peacekeepers were accused of targeted violations against suspected anti-*balaka*. Entire neighbourhoods of Bangui were emptied of Muslims, as were towns in western CAR that had been home to thousands of Muslims, with columns of evacuating civilians deliberately attacked by anti-*balaka* fighters. Anti-*balaka* were also reported to prey increasingly on non-Muslims, particularly among the displaced populations. Some abuses and retaliatory violence against Christian communities by *Seleka* during and after their retreat were also reported. As the year went on, splits were reported within both *Seleka* and anti-*balaka* forces, adding an intra-communal element to some of the violence. In July, *Seleka* and anti-*balaka* leaders signed a ceasefire, along with CAR's Christian archbishop and leading imam, both strong advocates of tolerance. However, no agreement was reached on disarmament, and clashes continued.

A new UN force was deployed to replace the AU force in September 2014. However, it was unable to prevent ongoing violence, as all armed groups targeted civilians who they believed supported opposing sides. While much of the violence was following the *Seleka* onslaught and its subsequent collapse, some of it was reportedly rooted in long-standing tensions between farmers and pastoralists, including the nomadic Muslim Peuhl (Fulani) minority, who in the current climate were perceived as supporting *Seleka*. Past instances of encroachment onto farmland as well as crop damage by pastoralists' herds added to the more immediate resentments that drove the anti-*balaka* violence. Moreover, some Peuhl were themselves responsible for attacks on Christians, often in revenge for violence against their own community. In any event, according to HRW, by the end of 2014, Peuhl made up a very large majority of the inhabitants in almost all of the CAR refugee camps in Cameroon.

CAR's Muslims, who had made up about 15 per cent of the national population, were divided between pastoral farmers and herders, living mainly in the country's north-east, and a largely urban merchant class based in Bangui and other provincial towns such as Bria, a centre of the diamond trade. Particularly in urban areas, it was noted that anti-*balaka* and communal violence against Muslims was fuelled not just by sectarian feeling but also by political grievances, economic opportunism and resentment against wealthier Muslims. Muslim Arab traders were particularly vulnerable, as their perceived wealth and relative control over the gold and diamond trades spread anger among poorer communities. Their homes and places of business were typically methodically looted before being destroyed or, at times, occupied by Christians. By mid-year, a reported 80 per cent of Bangui's Muslims had fled. In other areas, the destruction of Muslim homes after looting by anti-*balaka* may be intended to ensure that Muslims cannot return to the area: that is, as part of a concerted effort to segregate and cement control over the territory.

An early exception to the widespread sectarian violence was the central town of Bambari. As violence spread elsewhere, Christian and Muslim leaders worked together to keep the peace in the mixed town, including through messages of tolerance on local radio. However, the peace had collapsed by the end of May when Bambari became part of an unofficial front line between the warring sides, with retaliatory killings carried out by both. The presence of French peacekeepers in the town may have reduced but could not altogether prevent the violence. Attacks by *Seleka* and anti-*balaka* forces reported in and around the city continued: in early July, for instance, *Seleka* reportedly attacked displaced people sheltering in Bambari's cathedral, killing more than 26 people and wounding others. By the end of the year, only a fraction of Bambari's 60,000 residents remained in the town, living in dire circumstances.

By December, over 187,000 refugees, primarily Muslims, had fled the country in 2014 alone, bringing the total number of CAR refugees in the region to more than 423,000. These figures included nearly all of the estimated 130,000 Muslim residents of Bangui. Some Muslims remained, primarily in the east and north; thousands more were isolated in anti-*balaka*-surrounded enclaves across the country, under protection of international troops. Since April, transitional authorities had refused to allow them to leave the country in order to avoid accomplishing the anti-*balaka* aim of the 'ethnic cleansing' of the west. Around 430,000 people were reported to be internally displaced at year's end. Refugees and internally displaced together amounted to nearly one-fifth of the country's population of 4.5 million.

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