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2013 International Religious Freedom Report - Central African Republic

Executive Summary

There was a marked deterioration in government respect for religious freedom after rebel forces known as the Seleka overthrew the government of President Francois Bozize in March, suspended the constitution, and dissolved the national assembly. There were widespread abuses by Seleka forces and other armed groups, and the new government headed by Seleka rebel leader Michel Djotodia was unable to exercise control over much of its territory. The new government failed to prevent or punish widespread lawlessness and violence, including violence against and between Christians and Muslims.

There were reports of societal discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. Societal respect for religious freedom worsened over the year as the fighting took on an increasingly religious character.

The U.S. embassy suspended operations and evacuated U.S. staff from the country in December 2012. U.S. officials, however, continued to maintain close contact with host government officials, civil society, UN officials, members of the diplomatic community who remained in Bangui, and locally employed U.S. embassy staff, who continued to carry out limited functions. On November 8, the U.S. State Department Senior Advisor for the Central African Republic (CAR) discussed religious freedom with religious group leaders and government officials in Bangui.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 5.2 million (July 2013 estimate). According to the 2003 census, the population is 51 percent Protestant, 29 percent Roman Catholic, 10 percent Muslim, and 4.5 percent other religions, while 5.5 percent have no religious beliefs. Some Christians and Muslims incorporate aspects of indigenous beliefs into their religious practices.

Seleka forces that overthrew the government in March are predominantly Muslim and include fighters from neighboring African countries.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

Prior to the violent removal of the Bozize government and suspension of the constitution in March, the constitution and other laws and policies generally protected religious freedom. The constitution also prohibited religious intolerance, as defined by the courts. The interim constitution, known as the Transitional National Charter, provides for freedom of religion and equal protection under the law regardless of religion.

Religious groups, except for indigenous religious groups, are required to register with the Ministry of Territorial Administration. To register, religious groups have to prove they have a minimum of 1,000 members and leaders whose religious education the government deems adequate.

The law permits the ministry to deny registration to any religious group it deems offensive to public morale or likely to disturb social peace and to suspend the operation of registered religious groups if it finds their activities subversive. Registration is free and confers official recognition and certain limited benefits, such as customs duty exemptions for vehicles or equipment.

The government does not explicitly prohibit religious instruction in public schools, but it is not part of the public school curriculum.

Government Practices

The crisis in the CAR began in December 2012 when rebel forces calling themselves Seleka started their advance toward the capital. On March 24, Seleka captured the capital city of Bangui by force. After the fall of the capital, President Bozize fled the country and rebel leader Djotodia declared himself president, suspended the constitution, and dissolved the national assembly. Various armed groups engaged in combat during the year, and civilians often were killed, abducted, displaced from their homes, or generally restricted in their movements as a result of continuing internal conflict stemming from the Seleka rebellion. Transitional government officials had limited capability to exercise control or influence in most of the country.

Prior to the fall of the Bozize-led government, Muslims continued to face discrimination in gaining access to government services because low-level bureaucrats reportedly created informal barriers. Under the suspended constitution, a provision prohibiting religious intolerance was widely perceived as designed to protect Muslims; however, implementing legislation did not support the provision.

Government Inaction

After taking power, the Djotodia government failed to establish its authority over most of the country or to guarantee the safety of its inhabitants, especially outside of Bangui. The new government never exerted strong command and control of Seleka forces and in September Djotodia

declared the former rebel group dissolved. Relatively autonomous Seleka commanders, some of whom were Chadian or Sudanese, continued to operate and prey on local populations, however. The mostly Muslim Seleka often targeted Christian communities and Christian-owned businesses and carried out murders, rapes, robberies, looting, and burning of villages. The Seleka abuses gave rise in turn to Christian self-defense groups that sought to kill Seleka fighters and Muslims more generally. The government consistently failed to stop or punish abuses by either Seleka or Christian militias.

According to reports from the press and Catholic groups, in August Seleka targeted a Christian community around the town of Bohong and killed 50 individuals and burned down 4,500 homes. On September 7 and 8, Seleka reportedly killed between 50 and 200 civilians, including two staffers of a humanitarian organization, after an unknown group attacked them around the town of Bossangoa. Christians were targeted in these killings, which in turn led to up to 40,000 persons, mostly Christians but also Muslims, to seek shelter in Bossangoa, often in places of worship.

Fighting spread to villages near the town of Bouca, about 55 miles from Bossangoa. The number of casualties in the Bouca region was unknown, but UN officials estimated that fighting there displaced 170,000 people and the international nongovernmental organization (NGO) Medecins Sans Frontieres (Doctors without Borders) reported treating 26 individuals, including women and children, for gunshot and machete wounds. On September 16, a Christian force attacked Muslims in Bouca, reportedly killing some 40 people, mostly women and children.

In October international NGOs received reports of Christian militia attacks against Muslim communities in the northwest of the country in which the militias killed 10-12 Muslims.

On December 5, primarily Christian forces believed to be loyal to ousted president Bozize attacked Bangui. There were reports that the attackers targeted Seleka and killed some 100 persons.

Other attacks in Bangui carried out by Seleka and primarily Christian forces known as anti-Balaka resulted in additional deaths. The Seleka targeted Christians while the anti-Balaka targeted Muslims. The upsurge in sectarian violence in December reportedly resulted in more than 1,000 deaths in Bangui and the displacement of more than one million people throughout the country, exacerbating an already dire humanitarian situation.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were reports of societal discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

The growing violence carried out by the mostly Muslim Seleka forces and mostly Christian anti-Balaka self-defense forces created a dynamic of growing inter-religious tension and hatred that threatened to spiral out of control.

Muslims faced consistent social discrimination and in many cases were presumed to be sympathetic to Seleka. Muslim-owned shops were frequently vandalized and vigilantes sometimes subjected Muslims to harassment, beatings, and detention.

In March the Episcopal Conference of the Central African Republic reported that the main Catholic cathedral of Bangui, which housed the Caritas Charity, was targeted by armed men who appeared to be members of Seleka. On March 11, Christians from Gambo and Bangassou reported that Seleka forces attacked them. According to the Bishop of Bangassou, the attackers stole vehicles belonging to the church and destroyed the Catholic college and the home of the rector. In December Christian militia and Muslims clashed in the streets of Bangui. On December 8, a Christian mob hacked a man and his son to death when it discovered they were Muslims.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

State Department representatives discussed religious freedom concerns with the government and met with the leaders of religious groups. In December 2012 the U.S. government suspended embassy operations due to security concerns but continued to maintain close contact with UN officials and members of the diplomatic community who remained in Bangui. They also remained in daily contact with locally employed U.S. embassy staff. The Department of State established a monitoring group which served as a central clearinghouse for information and coordination and tracked the sectarian violence between the Christian and Muslim communities.

On November 8, the State Department's Senior Adviser for CAR met in Bangui with religious group leaders and representatives of the transitional government and discussed religious freedom issues. After visiting Bangui on December 19, the U.S. Permanent Representative to the UN and the U.S. Assistant Secretary for African Affairs stressed the severity of the crisis and the importance of supporting the African Union and French peacekeeping forces, as well as moderate voices in the country, so that the country's tradition of religious coexistence might prevail.

The Department of State announced plans to provide up to \$100 million in support of an African Union peacekeeping mission to help protect civilians, including from religiously motivated violence.

The U.S. government requested local radio stations and other media in the country to transmit messages from local Christian and Muslim religious leaders urging peace and reconciliation. President Obama recorded a statement to the people of the CAR on December 9, urging restraint and calling for reconciliation. The statement was translated into French and Sango and broadcast repeatedly on multiple radio stations throughout the country.