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UNITED STATES COMMISSION *on* INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

FACTSHEET

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RELIGIOUS FREEDOM IN CENTRAL AFRICA

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*To advance international
freedom of religion or
belief, by independently
assessing and unflinchingly
confronting threats to this
fundamental right.*

Religious Freedom Concerns in Central Africa

Introduction

The politicization of religious identity and infrastructure in civil conflicts in Central Africa poses significant risks for religious freedom in the region. Ethnoreligious tensions in Central African Republic have yielded human rights abuses based on ethnoreligious identity. In the context of Cameroon's secessionist conflict, both government and rebel actors have targeted houses of worship and religious leaders with violence and intimidation. In Democratic Republic of Congo, religious and non-religious armed groups in the east of the country have attacked houses of worship, while the government has failed to protect vulnerable religious actors from violence. This factsheet highlights challenges facing freedom of religion or belief in several countries in Central Africa.

Central African Republic

Central African Republic (CAR), a landlocked country in the middle of the African continent, is home to just under [5.5 million people](#), roughly 89 percent of whom identify as Christian. Nine percent of Central Africans are Muslim, while roughly one percent practice folk religions.

In 2012, militias in CAR's predominantly Muslim north formed an alliance, known as the Séléka, and marched on the capital to revolutionize the government's negligent approach to governing its periphery and minority communities. In response, predominantly Christian and animist militias, known as anti-balaka, mobilized for self-protection and began retaliating against Muslim civilian communities. This triggered more than a half decade of violent conflict with disastrous impacts on religious freedom, including attacks on individuals based on their religious identity, deliberate attacks on houses of worship and religious enclaves, and the exodus of 80 percent of the country's Muslim minority.

Violence subsided in 2019 after the signing of a [peace agreement](#), national elections scheduled for December 2020, and the presence of foreign fighters from the Russian-affiliated Wagner Group. Following contested elections at the end of 2020, however, a new interfaith rebel group mobilized under the Coalition of Patriots for Change (CPC), and military conflict resumed. National security forces supplemented by foreign fighters and local vigilante groups launched military campaigns to retake territory from the CPC as well as several small holdouts and defectors from the peace



agreement, including former ex-Séléka faction “Union for Peace in CAR” (UPC) in the southeast and ethnic self-defense militia “Return, Reclamation, Rehabilitation” (3R) in the west.

During the most recent military campaigns, both government-backed and rebel fighters have committed human rights abuses, some based on religion or ethnoreligious identity. In 2021, the [UN Secretary General](#) found that targeted arrests of alleged rebel collaborators “disproportionately affected religious and ethnic minorities such as Muslims and Fulanis,” while a [UN human rights investigation](#) reported a notable “increase in targeted attacks against the civilian population, especially Muslims,” in several prefectures and found that CAR authorities used a state of emergency in early 2021 to commit abuses that “specifically targeted certain communities (Muslims and Peuhl).” Abuses have included arbitrary arrests and detentions, torture and inhumane treatment, and extrajudicial execution of Muslim civilians perceived to be affiliated with Muslim armed groups.

In [December 2021](#), government-backed former anti-balaka fighters held several hundred civilians for three days in a mosque and threatened to kill them during an attack in Boyo. The attack was seemingly conducted to target and punish the Muslim community of Boyo, which was perceived as being supportive of the UPC. In [May 2022](#), UPC fighters killed five Christian civilians during an attack on a national defense force check point in Bokolobo. The following day, presumed national defense forces and anti-balaka combatants carried out a reprisal attack on a Muslim community, killing nine civilians.

Fighters have also attacked religious leaders and houses of worship. In [February 2021](#), national security forces and foreign fighters overran a mosque in Bambari and shot dead at least three Muslims. In [June 2021](#), foreign fighters reportedly stormed the home of the Sultan of Kouï and killed him and two companions. A [few months later](#), foreign fighters reportedly raided the home of the second most influential Muslim cleric in Kouï, the imam of Kouï central mosque, and disappeared him after harassing him for weeks to stop teaching children in the Quranic School.

Given the role government-backed fighters have played in religious freedom violations in CAR, USCIRF has long recommended that the U.S. Department of State place CAR on its [Special Watchlist](#) for engaging in and tolerating severe violations of international religious freedom, which it did in [December 2022](#).

Cameroon

Cameroon, a central African country bordering the Gulf of Guinea, is home to over [29 million people](#), nearly 71 percent of whom identify as Christian, 24 percent as Muslim, and others as animist or other religions.

Following harsh government suppression of demonstrations protesting discrimination against minority English-speaking regions of south- and north-west Cameroon in 2016, Anglophone separatists took up arms and attempted to violently secede from the country. Met with military force by the predominantly French-speaking federal Cameroonian government, the proceeding conflict has [killed thousands](#) of Cameroonians and displaced over half a million people.

During the conflict, government forces have [used houses of worship](#) to conduct warfare, abusing parishioners and desecrating spiritual sites and artifacts. Soldiers [shot and killed](#) a timekeeper as he rang a church bell, accusing him of ringing the bell to alert separatists of the soldiers’ arrival. In [Mautu](#), soldiers reportedly arrested, interrogated, and

killed a pastor and several others, alleging that the church was flying a separatist flag. Separatist fighters have also [attacked worshippers](#) and [vandalized churches](#). In 2022 unknown assailants [burned](#) St. Mary's Catholic Church in Nchang, kidnapping five priests, a nun, and two lay people.

Meanwhile, both government and rebel fighters have [intimidated, harassed, and even abducted](#) religious leaders who used their platforms to call for peace. Actors have predominantly engaged in these violations in the pursuit of political objectives, not religious or ideological motives. However, the impact that such tactics have on a sense of security for worshippers and religious leaders to practice their faith in peace threatens religious freedom.

Additionally, [Boko Haram](#) remains a threat to religious freedom in northern Cameroon as it conducts military activities to overthrow democratic governance in the region and establish an Islamic state that enforces its interpretation of Islam. Boko Haram violence [increased](#) in northern Cameroon in 2022, with Christian leaders in the country's northern most provinces reporting that parishes are ["paralyzed"](#) by Boko Haram violence. In August 2020, alleged Boko Haram fighters killed 14 people in an attack in Cameroon that targeted community leaders in their homes and at [prayer at a mosque](#). The local chiefs had reportedly invoked the Qur'an at a town hall meeting to discourage villagers from aiding jihadist fighters. The Cameroonian government's response has been heavy handed and yielded further human rights concerns, including [unlawful killings](#) and arbitrary arrests. Cameroon also hosts [thousands](#) of Nigerian refugees who fled Boko Haram and Islamic State violence and who face poor living conditions and threat of violence and human rights abuses in this unstable region.

Democratic Republic of Congo

The largest country by geography in sub-Saharan Africa, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) extends from its Atlantic port west of Kinshasa to the Great Lakes Region in east Africa. Of its roughly [108 million](#) people, 96 percent identify as Christian, with minority beliefs including Islam as well as syncretic sects and indigenous beliefs.

Civil conflict and armed insurgency have plagued DRC for decades, with much of the violence concentrating along the country's eastern border. More than [100 armed groups](#) operate in the country's north- and south-east provinces, with objectives ranging among criminal, resource control, self-protection, and ideology. The prolonged civilian security crisis in the region has entrenched [intractable](#)

[cycles of violence](#), triggered [extended humanitarian crisis](#), and created a self-reinforcing [war economy](#), all of which inhibit efforts to establish sustainable peace.

Among the region's armed groups, the [Allied Defense Forces \(ADF\)](#) represents the only one with explicitly religious objectives. Founded by Ugandan Islamists seeking to violently establish Salafi Islamic rule in neighboring Uganda, ADF leaders fled to eastern DRC in the late 1990s. The ADF's [objectives](#) have evolved throughout its two and a half decades of existence, with the significance of its religious ideology oscillating considerably. For much of its tenure, the ADF attacked communities indiscriminate of religion, and even partnered with Christian and other non-Muslim groups. However, in 2019 the group's leader [pledged allegiance](#) to the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), signaling a renewed elevation of religious objectives.

In May 2020 the ADF participated in ISIS's global ["Battle of Attrition,"](#) specifically targeting Christian communities in seven neighborhoods throughout northeast DRC. In 2021, a prominent local Muslim leader received death threats from the ADF, and he was later [gunned down](#) during evening prayers in Beni's central Mosque. In 2023, the ADF bombed services at a Pentecostal church in [Kasindi](#), killing 14 people. Inside its camps, the ADF reportedly enforces a [strict interpretation](#) of Islamic law and places restrictions on freedom of religion or belief, including [forced prayer](#), forced conversions of prisoners, and forced marriage.

In addition to the ADF, some armed groups in eastern DRC have politicized religion, targeting religious infrastructure as a part of their insurgency strategy despite not espousing religious objectives explicitly. In March 2022 the Cooperative for Development of the Congo (CODECO), an agricultural collective turned ethnic militia defending Lendu interests in northeast DRC, [attacked a church compound](#) and killed 18 civilians seeking refuge there. In December, combatants associated with the Rwandan-backed armed group [M23](#) massacred an estimated 270 people in violence that included an [attack on worshippers](#) at an Adventist church.

While the DRC government has demonstrated strong intentions to address the impacts of armed group violence in the east, other recent developments call into question the government's commitment to safeguarding religious freedom specifically. In August 2021, officials publicly [antagonized](#) Catholic leaders through government media channels for dissenting to the selection of the Chair



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of the National Electoral Committee. When vandals [attacked](#) the residence of the country's Archbishop, authorities failed to bring any charges against those responsible. Meanwhile, Jehovah's Witnesses report that government authorities have ignored requests for strategically timed official statements to quell cyclical violence against members of their community who conscientiously abstain from participating in local rituals and initiation ceremonies. Such violence frequently leads to fatalities, injuries, and property destruction. While these government actions may not meet the threshold of systematic, ongoing, and egregious religious freedom violations to be designated a country of particular concern (CPC) within the definition of the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA), they do raise concerns regarding threats to the rights of Congolese to freely and safely worship and practice their faith going forward.

Conclusion

The U.S. government engages with CAR, Cameroon, and DRC through several mechanisms, including diplomatic relations, development and humanitarian assistance, and, in the case of [CAR](#) and [DRC](#), through UN peacekeeping missions. This engagement includes programmatic funding for [humanitarian](#), development, [public health](#), and [peacebuilding initiatives](#), as well as military support and training. In December 2022, the Biden Administration invited high level representatives from the CAR, Cameroon, and DRC governments to participation in the U.S.-[Africa Leaders Summit](#).

While the U.S. government provides significant resources to these countries, armed actors have politicized religion and conducted violence based on religion or violence against religious leaders and infrastructure. These trends are a threat to freedom of religion or belief in Central Africa. In addition to the U.S. government continuing engagement to prioritize policies to address religious freedom in the region, U.S. embassies and the U.S. Department of State regional bureaus setting policy in the region should strengthen efforts to promote freedom of religion or belief in the context of these political crises and violent conflicts.

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The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) is an independent, bipartisan federal government entity established by the U.S. Congress to monitor, analyze, and report on religious freedom abroad. USCIRF makes foreign policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State, and Congress intended to deter religious persecution and promote freedom of religion and belief.