



State of the World's Minorities and Indigenous Peoples 2014 - Central African Republic

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Past years have seen chronic instability in the CAR. Border regions faced spillover conflict from neighbouring countries including Chad, Sudan and the DRC, while in the north in particular, marginalized nomadic pastoralists, including Mbororo (known also as Ful e, Peul, Fula or Fulani), clashed with local farmers over water and grazing rights for their livestock. In some areas their herds were frequently preyed upon by armed bandits. Nevertheless, historically the country's Christian and Muslim populations – comprising around 80 per cent and 15 per cent of the population respectively – have coexisted in peace, despite armed insurgencies in previous years that included Muslim pastoralists and other groups, driven by marginalization, insecurity and inequitable sharing of resources.

At the close of 2012, a coalition ('Séléka') of rebel groups launched a joint military offensive in the north against the forces of then President François Bozizé. Bozizé, a member of the country's largest ethnic group, the Gbaya, had reportedly relied increasingly on family and ethnic ties to consolidate his influence since taking power in a military coup ten years earlier. For their part, the Séléka rebels came mainly from ethnic groups in the north of the country, unified loosely by their opposition to Bozizé and their Muslim faith. Some reportedly came from neighbouring Chad and Sudan.

The rebels advanced rapidly, and in January the government was forced to sign an accord with them. Brokered in Libreville under the auspices of the Economic Community of Central African States, it laid the groundwork for a ceasefire and a three-year power-sharing arrangement. However, it quickly broke down, and in March the rebel alliance took the capital Bangui and ousted Bozizé.

Analysts agree that the Séléka rebellion did not arise around issues of religion. However, as it advanced southwards Séléka looted and burned villages, committing murder and rape – abuses

which were often reportedly motivated by religious and ethnic identity. Christians were particularly targeted, although in several instances members of traditionally forest-dwelling communities were also singled out for attack.

Bozizé's security forces reportedly committed violations of human rights and humanitarian law while trying to halt the rebel advance. As the situation deteriorated, both sides were reported to use increasingly hostile rhetoric. President Bozizé publicly claimed that the rebels were 'mercenary terrorists,' while a government spokesperson accused them of being backed by foreign Islamic extremists and seeking to 'make another Mali' in the CAR. The use of charged rhetoric helped to politicize the question of ethnicity and exacerbate rifts between groups. Some Muslim leaders in Bangui, for instance, criticized the authorities for giving citizens the erroneous impression that they were facing a 'war of religion'. At the same time, pro-government youths set up roadblocks in Bangui, and Séléka reportedly accused state officials of arming them and encouraging them to attack suspected rebel sympathizers.

After taking Bangui, Séléka leader Michel Djotodia, from the Gula tribe of Muslim pastoralists and a former head of the 2007 north-eastern insurgency, installed himself as interim President. He was later confirmed in the post by a transitional government. In the absence of a civilian administration or functioning security forces to counter ongoing Séléka abuses, and in the face of Séléka's refusal to disarm and disband, law and order quickly broke down. Though its victims at times included Muslims, the UN Secretary-General and others noted that Séléka raids and attacks continued to particularly target non-Muslims. In the security vacuum, civilians turned to self-defence. Christian communities set up or activated existing 'anti-balaka' (anti-machete) groups to protect their areas from attack and to oust the now 'ex-Séléka', particularly its foreign fighters, seen as invaders. For their part, some Chadian and Sudanese ex-Séléka sought support among those who shared a common language with them – the CAR's Arabic-speaking Muslim minority. As with the Séléka during its advance, the prevailing climate of violence allowed existing prejudices against ethnic minorities to be acted out with impunity. In numerous instances and locations, anti-balaka militias targeted members of the Muslim pastoralist minority, including Mbororo, for attack.

Hate speech urging revenge against Muslims, in online forums and in the media, gained prominence. In this volatile context, it became easier for members of both communities to regard the other group as collectively responsible for individual acts of violence. Anti-balaka militias began to target not just ex-Séléka combatants, but those believed to be aiding them – and then Muslims in general. In Ouham province, north of Bangui, on 6 September militia carried out coordinated attacks on ex-Séléka forces and Muslim communities around the provincial capital, Bossangoa. Human Rights Watch reported that they massacred several hundred people; survivors said that during the attack they used violently extremist rhetoric, including threats to wipe out all Muslims. In response, ex-Séléka launched its own revenge attacks on Christian communities. There were also reports of ex-Séléka groups distributing weapons to civilian Muslims. In early December, after the UN Security Council authorized a new deployment of French and African troops to use all appropriate measures to protect civilians, house-to-house inter-communal violence in Bangui reportedly caused a large number of deaths, primarily of Christian men, in two days. Reports varied, with the UN citing a figure of over 600 dead and Amnesty International reporting between 800 and 1,200 killed. Widespread targeted sexual violence against women and children, torture and other abuses were also reported, with further atrocities in the countryside. By year's end, over 935,000 people had been internally displaced and an additional 75,000 had fled to neighbouring countries.

According to UN sources around 2.2 million people, close to half the population, needed humanitarian assistance.

Local authorities and international troops were unable to impose law and order in the face of escalating violence, including continuing abuses by ex-Séléka and anti-balaka armed groups alongside, increasingly, inter-communal attacks involving civilians. Particularly following Djotodia's resignation on 10 January 2014 and the withdrawal of many ex-Séléka troops, the violence was increasingly directed against the country's Muslim minority.

In the context of the CAR's weak rule of law, localized acts of violence and hate speech have both rapidly escalated insecurity in the country, with some observers fearing a potential genocide. Recognizing the role that inflammatory rhetoric has played in fuelling the violence, the Forum of Religious Leaders and individual religious leaders have continuously countered it with calls for tolerance and peace. Similarly, in December UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon issued a peace message in French and the local language, Sango, on local television and radio. However, so far these efforts have been unable to alleviate the violence. Over time, initiatives like the International Commission of Inquiry, mandated to investigate abuses by all parties, can provide victims with a peaceful way of seeking justice. However, this can only happen if the state, with international help, can ensure the security of minority members and protect them from further attacks.

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