



2013 Human Rights and Democracy Report - Central African Republic

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The human rights situation in the Central African Republic (CAR) deteriorated greatly in the course of 2013 due to conflict and widespread abuses against civilians. Of principle concern were extrajudicial executions by security forces and insurgent groups; the widespread recruitment of child soldiers; sexual violence in the context of conflict; acts of collective punishment; torture; deprivation of livelihood; forced displacement; abuses targeted at religious groups; and sexual and gender-based violence. There has been almost complete impunity for these acts. Despite some progress in the ratification of human rights instruments and the establishment of human rights institutions, the state has for some years been unable to ensure the respect of rights throughout the country. The new authorities, from the Seleka rebel group, who acquired power through a coup d'état in March 2013, have been unable or unwilling to enforce the respect for human rights, including by their own armed forces. A national commission of enquiry was set up in May to investigate cases of human rights abuses, but has made little progress. The CAR's Universal Periodic Review took place at the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) on 25 October 2013. This focused primarily on how to establish greater security in CAR. Child soldiers, sexual violence and violence against women were common themes during member states' interventions.

In 2013, the UK has worked with fellow members of the International Contact Group on CAR to bring an end to the violence, to highlight what is happening, and to deter further abuses. The UK has offered diplomatic and financial support to the African-led international support mission, and has provided logistical help for the deployment of French troops. We have supported and encouraged attempts by UN bodies to follow up reports of human rights abuses. We have worked within the UN towards an arms embargo, an individual sanctions regime to deter human rights abuse, and the reinforcement of the UN office in CAR (known by its French acronym BINUCA), especially for monitoring human rights abuses and identifying offenders. We hope to put these measures in place through the UN Security Council (UNSC) in early 2014.

We spoke at the 25 September UNHRC about the need to protect civilians and the need for the culture of impunity to come to an end. We also co-sponsored a UNHRC resolution, which appointed an independent expert to monitor human rights and make recommendations concerning technical assistance and capacity building. We supported a mission in December from the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. The Foreign & Commonwealth Office (FCO) has given diplomatic support to domestic human rights defenders, including those calling for religious harmony. Through its humanitarian aid, the Department for International Development (DFID), one of the largest bilateral humanitarian donors to the country, has supported vulnerable populations and mitigated the impact of forced displacement and deprivation of livelihoods.

However, we recognise that these efforts had only very limited impact on human rights in the country during 2013. Obstacles have included ongoing conflict, poor infrastructure, the remoteness of many areas impeding the work of human rights monitors, and the inability or unwillingness of state authorities to enforce respect for rights. Improvement in 2014 will depend on the success of the international peace support mission which, at the end of 2013, is attempting to pacify Bangui and stop an emerging cycle of revenge killings. We will continue to offer support to this mission, and keep the appropriateness of the international response under regular review in the UN. We will also continue to provide humanitarian aid to help vulnerable populations, and are encouraging our international partners to increase their own contributions.

Torture

Throughout 2013 there have been many credible reports of torture by all sides in the conflict. These include extrajudicial executions; the killing of injured civilians who were taken out of hospitals; and torture under questioning by state security forces.

The new authorities in place since March have taken little effective action to halt these abuses and bring the perpetrators to justice, a great many of whom fought in their ranks. Some arrests have been made, but it is far from clear that they include those chiefly responsible. The concern is that many of the main culprits belonging to the Seleka forces appear, at the end of 2013, to be leaving Bangui in the wake of persistent attacks against them by the "anti-Balaka" militia, leaving their civilian fellow Muslims to bear the brunt of the anger. Reports by human rights organisations such as Human Rights Watch during 2013 also point to abuses committed by the government of President Bozize, who was ousted in March.

The UK will support the work of BINUCA to investigate cases of torture and identify perpetrators. As a strong supporter of the International Criminal Court, we note that the court's prosecutor stated on 9 December that she is observing events in the country, and that the abuses that have occurred may fall within her mandate.

Conflict and protection of civilians

Civilians have suffered enormously in the conflict in CAR throughout the year. In the first three months of the year, the advance of the Seleka insurgent group from the north east towards Bangui led to widespread displacement, the loss of livelihood and means of sustenance either through the evacuation of farmland or the theft of livestock and seed stock. This has led to people dying of hunger and disease in the bush, and is likely to have long-term humanitarian consequences. There are multiple reports that members of Seleka have engaged in pillaging, burning of villages and

indiscriminate and targeted killings of civilians. The UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) estimated the number of CAR citizens either seeking refuge abroad or internally displaced at 430,000. This number swelled in the second half of the year and the UNHCR reported in December that there were three quarters of a million internally displaced people.

Members or ex-members of Seleka continued to perpetrate similar abuses to those described above, since they came to power at the end of March. Since then, fighting between Seleka forces and the anti-Balaka militia in the capital Bangui has in many cases deteriorated into reprisals against civilians considered supporters of one side or another. Cases of deliberate attacks on civilian areas have also been documented, for example by Amnesty International, who noted the failure by combating forces to make sufficient efforts to distinguish between civilians and armed groups. All sides to the conflict have engaged in communal punishment killings.

The UK deplored the abuses committed against civilians in CAR, including through two UN resolutions in 2013 which, inter alia, strongly condemned continued violations of international humanitarian law. The UK supported the deployment of the African-led peace support mission, both through bilateral contribution and through the EU's Africa Peace Facility.

Freedom of religion or belief

The conflict in CAR has taken on an increasing religious dimension throughout 2013. Although religion is unlikely to have been a primary motivating factor in the initial violence, because the Seleka insurgent group are identified with Muslims, violence has polarised Christian and Muslim communities. Both churches and mosques have been attacked, as have those seeking shelter within them. Religious articles have been desecrated and people have been humiliated on religious grounds. Freedom of worship has been severely curtailed as open religious affiliation has been used by armed groups as a way of identifying and targeting civilians.

The UK has unequivocally condemned this religious violence, including through a UNSC resolution in September which condemned "all violence targeting members of ethnic and religious groups". The FCO has offered diplomatic support to initiatives aimed at encouraging religious cohesion. DFID is supporting a number of NGOs working in CAR, including those working with community and religious leaders to encourage reconciliation.

Women's rights

The conflict in CAR has been accompanied by widespread rape and sexual violence, including the use of rape as a weapon of war. A UN team visiting in December included representatives from the UN office of the Special Representative on Sexual Violence in Conflict, and relayed reports of rapes, forced marriages and mutilations. The displacement of the population due to conflict has also had a significant gender-based impact through disrupting food supplies and farm labour, as women often have main or sole charge over children, and are responsible for subsistence agriculture.

The UK noted its serious concern over sexual violence against women and children and over rape in a UNSC resolution in September. The UK is working to ensure that identifying and investigating perpetrators of such acts will be part of a beefed-up UN country presence in 2014.

Children's rights

All sides to the conflict in CAR have been accused of recruiting child soldiers. In addition, educational establishments have been attacked throughout the country.

The international peacekeeping effort in the country is a vital first step to ensuring the release of child soldiers from armed groups, and we are working through the UN to ensure that the structures are in place to demobilise them and reunite them with their families.

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