Report

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Analysis of conflict and peacebuilding in the Central African Republic

CONCILIATION RESOURCES
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Contents

Map of the Central African Republic. © United Nations

Executive summary

The ongoing presidential and legislative elections in the Central African Republic (CAR) look set to produce a new government in early 2016. The foremost responsibility of the country's elected leaders and the Central African people will be to stop the violence that has beset the country since the Seleka rebel coalition's coup in 2013 and build the foundations of lasting peace. Since the coup the transitional government, civil society and international partners have launched diverse initiatives to begin the peacebuilding process at the national and local levels, and they have made some gains. Relatively peaceful elections are testament to this. To prevent a backslide, all stakeholders need to learn from their own and others' efforts and address both the drivers and long-term underlying causes of the crisis.

The causes of the crisis lie in the CAR's troubled past, while new dynamics since 2012 have perpetuated violence. The failure of highly centralised and self-interested governments over decades to provide security and basic services to the people has lost the whole political class its legitimacy within Central African society. In the lead-up to the coup, Former President François Bozizé's paranoid weakening of the security forces left the population and eventually his own government vulnerable to Seleka's attack. The rebel movement came from the northeast, a part of the country historically neglected by central government. The entrepreneurs of violence at the helm of ethnically based rebel militia enlisted guns-for-hire from across the border to make their challenge. The government's chronic economic mismanagement also provoked deep resentment among the population while the absence of education or job opportunities made disenfranchised young people particularly vulnerable to recruitment by armed militia or manipulation by politicians.

The representation of the conflict, perpetuated by the international media, as one pitting Christians against Muslims distorts a more nuanced reality. Before 2012, religious identity was not a major source of tensions, although the minority Muslim community had struggled for official recognition for decades with the central government. Central African society was tolerant of religious diversity. But rhetoric by the Bozizé government used to muster support against the advancing Seleka rebellion created a Muslim threat, portraying the northern group as set on an Islamising mission. Non-Muslims, the anti-balaka militia foremost among them, associated the Muslim community with Seleka and blamed them for the crimes the rebels committed while in power. Longstanding jealousy of Muslims' more influential positions in business circles in Bangui and gold and diamond mining areas also lay behind attacks on them and their property. Violence clearly targeted against civilians for their religion stoked sectarian tensions and ignited a cycle of revenge attacks.

Diverse civilian peacebuilding efforts by the government, civil society, international NGOs and the UN have struggled to take hold alongside the disintegration of the state, fragmentation of armed actors, new outbreaks of violence and a rise in crime. The government's efforts to institutionalise reconciliation have not had the desired impact due to internal political quarrels, its loss of credibility among citizens and bureaucratic obstacles. On the other hand, the country's religious leaders have successfully harnessed their symbolic influence to call for restraint, and in the provinces priests have successfully mediated local conflicts.

A plethora of bottom-up local peacebuilding initiatives supported by Central African and international NGOs have helped to stop violence, mitigate its effects and create more trusting relations within and between communities. Local civil society actors such as local peace committees and religious leaders have proved influential frontline mediators due mainly to their proximity to the communities in which they live and their religious identity.

However, the impact of current civil society efforts risks being short-lived. They have largely followed a 'social cohesion' model that aims to bring diverse communities together through mutually beneficial joint activities. These build confidence among participants but do not explicitly create opportunities for communities to jointly analyse local and national conflicts and plan strategies to manage conflict peacefully. They risk concentrating attention on the recent manifestation of violence between communities, without allowing communities to examine the historic causes of the conflict.

To date the transitional government has lacked the credibility and legitimacy in the eyes of Central African society and the political will to play a central peacebuilding role. Instead civil society with international support has taken the lead. However, a newly elected government will have an opportunity in early 2016 to redress this balance. It will need to demonstrate its commitment to peace in the CAR and earn the trust of the

citizens, especially the Muslim community, and international partners. Only by working in partnership with civil society will it break the cycle of violence and create the calm needed to embark on the long process of political and institutional reform.

Introduction

This study seeks to inform peacebuilding in the CAR by explaining the factors that have led to the current situation and analysing peacebuilding initiatives launched since the start of the crisis in 2013. The analysis has informed the complementary policy brief, *Central African Republic: building the peace*,[1] which outlines peacebuilding priorities for the CAR government, civil society and international partners. By using a participatory research methodology the study draws on the perceptions and insights of Central Africans directly affected by the conflict and recognises their agency as frontline peacebuilders.

Background to the crisis

The current crisis began in December 2012 when a coalition of armed groups from the northeast called Seleka marched south towards the capital Bangui. It was stopped before it reached the city. Negotiations hastily convened in Libreville under the auspices of the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS) led to the creation of a transitional government bringing together then President François Bozizé and Seleka leaders. The Libreville power sharing agreement was short-lived: on 24 March 2013, while President Bozizé was dragging his feet to implement the deal, Seleka took control of Bangui, only facing resistance from a South African army contingent urgently deployed in December 2012.[2] Seleka's rule was also short-lived. Its leader, Michel Djotodia, had minimal authority over the commanders of the various militias that made up the Seleka coalition and never managed to establish a functioning government during his nine-month 'presidency'. Instead of governing, Seleka commanders turned to looting and arresting political opponents arbitrarily, among other abuses.

In response to Seleka's abuses, self-defence groups called the 'anti-balaka' formed in the west of the country and on 5 December 2013 attacked Bangui. Meanwhile the French military mission, Sangaris, deployed with a United Nations Security Council validated mandate. The Seleka was ousted and an ECCAS summit in Chad's capital, Ndjamena decided to put in place a new transitional government. Catherine Samba-Panza was elected by the National Transitional Council on 23 January 2014. The Sangaris mission paved the way for the deployment of several peacekeeping forces in 2014. An African Union-led (AU) peacekeeping force, the International Support Mission to the Central African Republic (*Mission internationale de soutien à la Centrafrique sous conduite africaine*, MISCA) was transformed in September 2014 into a full-scale UN peacekeeping mission, the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic (*Mission multidimensionnelle intégrée des Nations Unies pour la stabilisation en République centrafricaine*, MINUSCA). A European bridging mission (EUFOR-CAR) was also deployed from April 2014 to March 2015 in Bangui.

Since then, calmer periods have alternated with outbreaks of violence killing hundreds. At the time of publication, legislative and presidential elections were being organised as one of the steps needed to establish a legitimate government.

Methodology

The study is based on weekly monitoring of the crisis since it began in December 2012, regular visits to the capital and the provinces since 2010, documents produced by organisations and institutional actors as well as the views of a wide range of actors in the CAR, Chad, Cameroon, Europe and New York (UN). Field research was conducted between August and October 2015 at a time when the conflict was reigniting, as shown by the outbreaks of violence in Bambari at the end of August and in Bangui at the end of September, that left about 70 dead and displaced 40,000 in just a few days.[3]

During field visits, the researcher met with a range of stakeholders, including local peace committee members, religious leaders, businessmen, presidential candidates, National Transitional Council (CNT) members, mayors, local and international NGOs, militaries, donors, UN staff and diplomats. The researcher visited Bangui and Paoua, a city in northwestern Ouham-Pende prefecture. While the situation in Bangui is still volatile and tense, Paoua is a post-conflict city where Seleka forces did not commit much violence but where half the Muslim

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1   The policy brief can be accessed at http://www.c-r.org/resources/central-african-republic-policy-brief

2   Helmoed Heitman, The Battle in Bangui: the untold inside story, 2013.

3   Interviews with the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) and humanitarian NGOs.

In late 2012 rebels in northern CAR formed the Seleka alliance which took power by force in March 2013. © Wikimedia Commons

community fled and have not yet returned. Armed groups are still present in rural areas around the city. The researcher conducted interviews in Paoua to hear a grassroots perspective on the implementation of a peacebuilding programme in a remote town and its practical challenges.

The research also included a two-day workshop in Bangui on 22-23 October 2015. The event gathered members of local peace committees supported by Conciliation Resources, representatives of the municipality, the interfaith secretariat, UN and European Union (EU) delegation. Participants jointly analysed the crisis and in particular the September troubles and reflected on ways to prevent violence at the community level. The workshop findings have been incorporated into the conflict and peacebuilding analysis and provided a sound basis for Conciliation Resources' policy brief.

Part I: Conflict analysis

Interviewees emphasised that the current crisis is the result of persistent poor governance by a centralised state over many years before the Seleka rebellion in 2012, especially in the handling of the country's security and economy. Interviewees also emphasised that although religious antagonism was not an underlying cause of the conflict, it has become a driving factor. Following the Seleka coup the disintegration of the state has exacerbated local conflicts and banditry giving rise to constant insecurity in Bangui and the provinces. This violence in itself perpetuates the crisis as bloodshed feeds mistrust, fear and the desire for revenge. Given the breakdown of law and order, the current crisis is a combination of multiple conflicts with national and local dimensions and violent crime.

1. Persistent poor governance and its consequences

Interviewees believed successive governments' longstanding lack of interest and capacity to develop the country and the centralised nature of governance as a primary cause and ongoing driver of the current crisis. By failing to fulfil its sovereign responsibilities, including providing security and

basic services and guaranteeing human rights, the governments of François Bozizé and his predecessor Ange-Félix Patassé created conditions in the provinces ripe for rebellion and lost all trace of legitimacy. This view was expressed strongly during the October 2015 workshop.

Following the Seleka coup, the state disintegrated and the political establishment as a whole has been discredited in citizens' eyes, a perception compounded by the transitional government's failure to implement the conclusions of the May 2015 Bangui Forum and the transition roadmap. Participants in the October workshop saw the transitional government as more of a problem than a solution.

In the provinces, people feel almost completely alienated from politics, seeing them as distant and incomprehensible affairs conducted in the capital, rather than something relevant to them. This is partly because politicians rarely live in the provinces (people in the provinces refer to them as '*Banguissois*') and because of the centralised nature of the governance system. People in the provinces expect nothing from government institutions,

whether they are elected or not, and just hope that political struggles in the capital do not cause trouble locally.
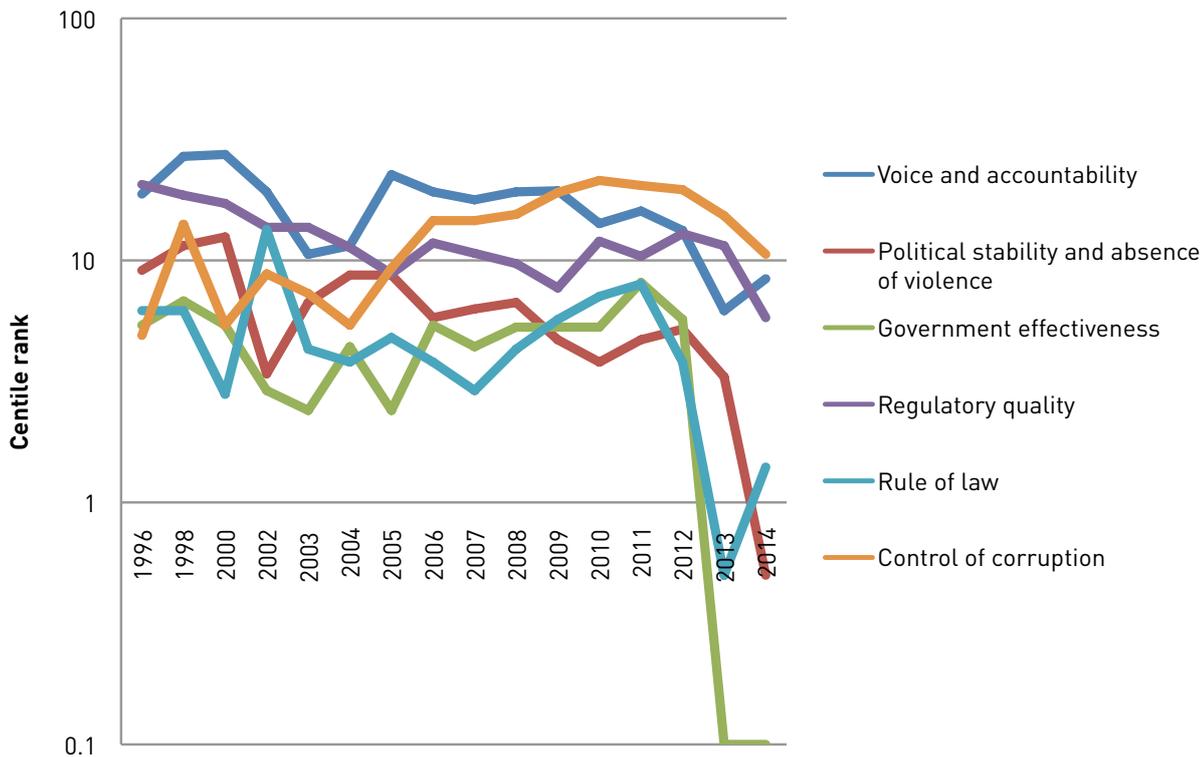
A. Weak and centralised public services unable to deliver

Before Bozizé fell from power in 2013, the civil service had become highly centralised and corrupt and therefore unable to provide basic services including education and health. The number of civil servants was then estimated at about 26,000. At least 40 per cent of these were employed at the interior and defence ministries, while only 4.7 per cent worked on rural development.

The large majority of civil servants worked in Bangui. In the provinces, civil servants were known to abandon their posts. Deplorable working conditions, a lack of sanitation, absence of educational opportunities for children, permanent insecurity and irregular payment of salaries made leaving Bangui highly undesirable. Consequently, civil servants accounted for a significant portion of the Bangui economy.

A young man holds a knife to his throat in Bangui's 5th arrondissement. Intercommunal violence and crime have erupted sporadically in the capital. © AFP PHOTO / Issouf Sanogo

Governance in Central African Republic (WGI) 1996 – 2014 (Source data World Bank)

Chart legend:
- Voice and accountability
- Political stability and absence of violence
- Government effectiveness
- Regulatory quality
- Rule of law
- Control of corruption

Y-axis: Centile rank (logarithmic scale from 0.1 to 100)
X-axis: 1996, 1998, 2000, 2002, 2003, 2004, 2005, 2006, 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014

The mismanagement of public finances and corruption meant that civil servants became accustomed to receiving their salaries only after significant delays. In addition, pay levels remained the same for decades. Faced with low pay and irregular payment, civil servants sought illegal supplementary sources of income, increasing corruption in the public sector and the informal privatisation of public services. This caused civil servants and the wider population of Bangui to resent the government.

The public education system gradually collapsed, leading to a decline in French-speaking and the increased use of vernacular languages rather than Sango, the national language. In 2015 there were only two schools open in the fifth *arrondissement* of Bangui, which has an illiteracy rate close to 70 per cent.[4] Public primary schools manage to operate thanks to the efforts of their teacher-parents, who have no official educational training. Meanwhile, health services have barely any resources. Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) and other medical NGOs including Médecins du Monde, International Medical Corps and Cordaid were already present before the crisis because health indicators in times of peace were more or less the same as in times of war.

B. A security sector weakened from within

Poor governance of the security sector and the government's consequent inability to ensure citizens' security and ultimately the security of the Bozizé regime itself was directly responsible for the onset of the current crisis and Seleka's takeover in March 2013.

Obsessed by the possibility of a coup, Bozizé weakened the army while appointing loyal followers and even members of his own family to positions of command. His son Jean-Francis Bozizé was defence minister until 2013 and several of his other children held posts in the police and gendarmerie. He tried to compensate for the deficiencies of the security forces by seeking assistance from foreign forces: he outsourced security to MICOPAX (ECCAS' peacekeeping force), the French mission Boali, Chadian troops, the mixed tripartite force in northeastern Vakaga prefecture made of Central African, Chadian and Sudanese militaries and finally in 2012 the South African army. Subcontracting the regime's security had its price: dependence on foreign protectors.

Although international partners offered Bozizé help to reform the security sector, he stalled attempts made by the UN and bilateral partners. The most recent security sector reform initiative began in 2007 but silently ground to a halt in 2009 due to national authorities' lack of responsiveness and

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4   Interview with member of the local peace committee.

ownership. Due to the weakening of the security forces, directly organised by the presidency, they became involved in various illicit economic activities including poaching and the trafficking of gold and diamonds, which further undermined their commitment to official duties.

Bozizé kept weakening the security services till the inevitable happened. When Seleka advanced in late 2012 and early 2013, the security forces were unable to stop it. Sent to hold the front against the advancing forces at Damara at the start of 2013, even the presidential guard vanished into thin air without even engaging in combat.

C. The rise of entrepreneurs of violence

The state's inability to provide security across the national territory led to the proliferation of armed groups and the growth of their zones of control. Central government found its influence increasingly confined to the capital and major provincial towns. Before Bozizé's fall, about 60 per cent of the national territory was outside government control. In the northeast (Vakaga, Haute-Kotto and Bamingui-Bangoran prefectures), armed groups (the Convention of Patriots for Justice and Peace, CPJP and the Union of Democratic Forces for Unity, UFDR) took control of rural areas and imposed their own law with the tacit assent of Bozizé's government.[5] The Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), originally from Uganda, established itself in the southeast (Haut-Mbomou and Mbomou prefectures) and still has a presence there despite being pursued by the Ugandan army, supported by American advisers. The north is harassed by road bandits (known as *zaraginas* or *coupeurs de route* – road cutters) who have established permanent bases along the borders with Chad and Cameroon. This structured banditry, closely related to the migration of nomadic herders, is the main threat to rural communities in the area. The most affected of these formed self-defence militias, such as the People's Army for the Restoration of Democracy (*Armée populaire pour la restauration de la démocratie*, APRD) now called Revolution and Justice, in the border region of Paoua, Ouham-Pende prefecture.

Meanwhile, during the dry seasons Sudanese poachers from southern Darfur operated throughout the CAR and as far west as eastern Cameroon. These militarised poaching campaigns lasted for several months and contributed to

insecurity and clashes between armed groups. Their ability to venture further and further west exposed the failure of state security forces to ensure security across the national territory.

D. The northeast geopolitical problem

Although insecurity gradually increased over the entire country from 2006 to 2012, the situation proved especially problematic in the northeast. The combination of ethnically-based rebellions, bandits and self-defence militias gave rise to systemic conflict. Vakaga and Bamingui-Bangoran prefectures were gradually 'Darfurised', that is, absorbed into the Darfur conflict and economic system. The town of Birao in northeast Vakaga prefecture is the economic gateway to southern Darfur: most traders there are Sudanese and the currency used in the market is the Sudanese currency, not that of CAR.

Out of this cross-border conflict system emerged a cartel of rebel movements, which in 2012 joined forces to serve their common interests under the name of Seleka.[6] Some member groups were rivals, but united to become more powerful together and benefit from contacts and resources in Chad and southern Darfur.

The Seleka militias share a common and legitimate grievance, namely the deep poverty of their home provinces and their historic neglect by central government. However, this is not specific to the northeast. Rural areas across the country have suffered decades of neglect and consequent socio-economic problems, which explains why the crisis has seen violence flare up in many parts of the country.

E. Economic mismanagement and decline

Since independence, the CAR state, on which the economy largely depends, has not assumed its role as an agent of development but has acted more as a predator on the citizen body. So much so that it has alienated both institutional donors and private investors. Participants in the Bangui workshop in October 2015 cited poor economic governance and the lack of development as underlying causes of the crisis since mismanagement of public finances and corruption provoked deep resentment among the population towards the government and created conditions in which many people, especially poor and disenfranchised youth, for lack of alternatives

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5   The government and the armed groups signed several peace agreements (Birao in 2007, Libreville in 2008 and one with the CPJP in 2011). These agreements constituted de facto recognition of these groups and gave them the right to operate alongside the state in their zones of influence.

6   The Seleka initially included the Union of Democratic Forces for Unity (UFDR) which played a catalytic role in its formation, the Convention of Patriots for Justice and Peace (CPJP), the Central African People's Democratic Front (FDPC) and the Patriot Convention for Salvation of Kodro (CPSK).

were quick to join the war economy. The two-year old crisis has hastened economic decline and dramatically increased poverty.

Mismanagement of public finances undermining development

The effective management of public finances has been hindered by multiple factors including the quick turnover of senior finance ministry officials (treasurer, office director, general managers) who are generally drawn from the same ethnic group as the president; malfunctions and tensions between the services (treasury, tax, budget, computer services); and corruption.

During Bozizé's rule, the failure to integrate some sources of income (for example, from gold and diamonds) into the national budget and the privatisation of customs operations were detrimental to the state coffers. Many technical attempts to resolve these problems were supported by France, the World Bank and EU, but they have always come up against political obstacles created by those with vested interests in the status quo, including government officials and businessmen.
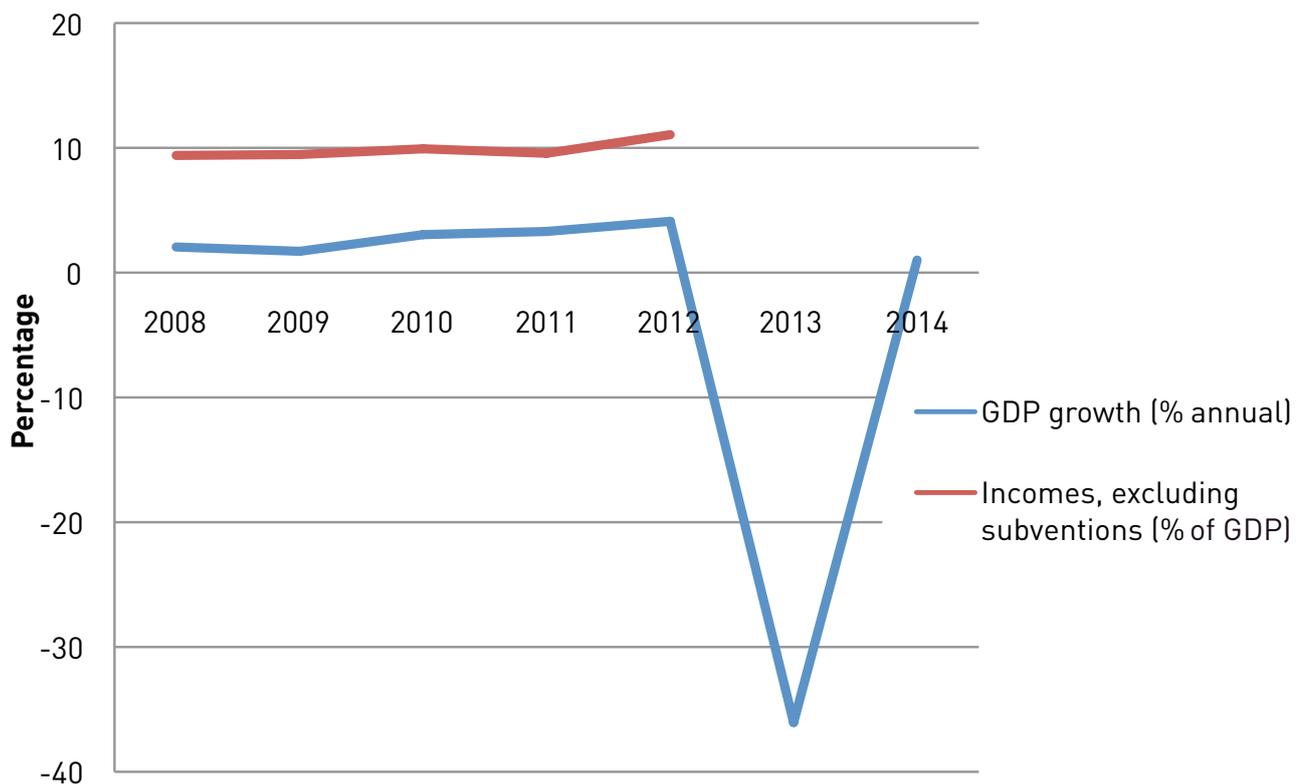
Missed opportunities

Poor economic governance explains why the CAR was one of the few African countries not to benefit from the mining sector boom between 2005 and 2008. Despite the high market prices for minerals and the rush of mining investors to Africa, the CAR mining sector has remained completely artisanal, that is reliant on manual labour. Although a new mining code was adopted in 2004 and the CAR participated in the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI), the sector's management remained centralised and lacked transparency. Mining revenues have typically represented a small share of government income; the sector accounted for just 7 per cent of GDP in 2007. And since mining is mostly informal, smuggling has remained high; up to 80 per cent of gold production has been smuggled and 50 per cent of diamond revenues were lost to illegal trafficking.[7]

The diamond sector faced additional political obstacles as it was under the control of Bozizé and his entourage. During his rule, most foreign mining companies left the country for a variety of

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7   OECD, Central African Republic, INCAF Briefing, April 2015; USAID, 'Property Rights and Artisanal Diamond Development Project, Comparative Study: Legal and Fiscal Regimes for Artisanal Diamond Mining', 2010.

Governance in Central African Republic (WGI) 1996 – 2014 (Source data World Bank)

reasons, including the difficulty of doing business and the government's habit of renegotiating contracts – for example, the contract with Grynberg Petroleum Company was dropped during Bozizé's mandate and in 2007 the government attempted to renegotiate its contract with French multinational nuclear company Areva. By the time of the Seleka rebellion at the end of 2012, there were only two well-known companies with mining rights in the country (Areva and Canada-based Axmin). At publication neither had started industrial mining operations.

Corruption saw the withdrawal of bilateral partners anxious to see good governance and the departure of those private investors more inclined to respect the law. Inversely, the government's relaxed attitude to the law favoured the arrival of new less accountable state partners (and private sector actors who were prepared to ignore the law). Bozizé discreetly signed contracts with such partners for projects that were never completed (for example, the cement works project contracted with Indian businessmen and the construction of an urban complex on the shore of the Ubangi river he contracted with a Gulf state company). These projects were not completed and therefore opportunities lost in creating sustainable sources of jobs and revenue for Central Africans from the projects.

Life expectancy and mortality rate 1992 – 2014 (Source data World Bank)
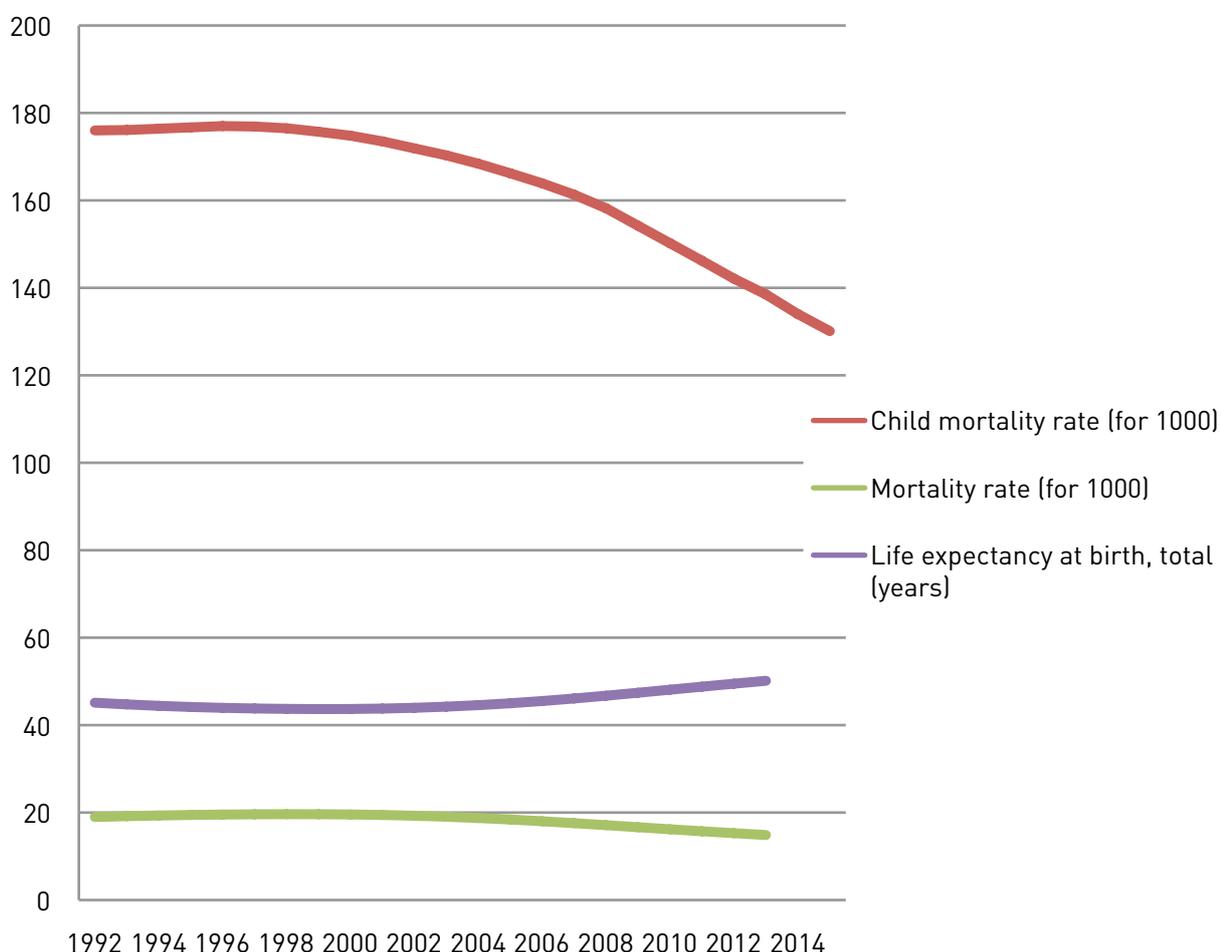
Social indicators of development 1992 – 2014 (Source data World Bank)

Legend:
- Literacy rate 15+ (%)
- Primary school completion rate (%)
- Ratio of poors living with less than $1.25 per day (% of the population)
- Unemployment, total youth (% of the working population aged from 15 to 24 years old)
- Unemployment, total (% of the population)
- Improved and secured sources of drinking water (% of the population accessing)
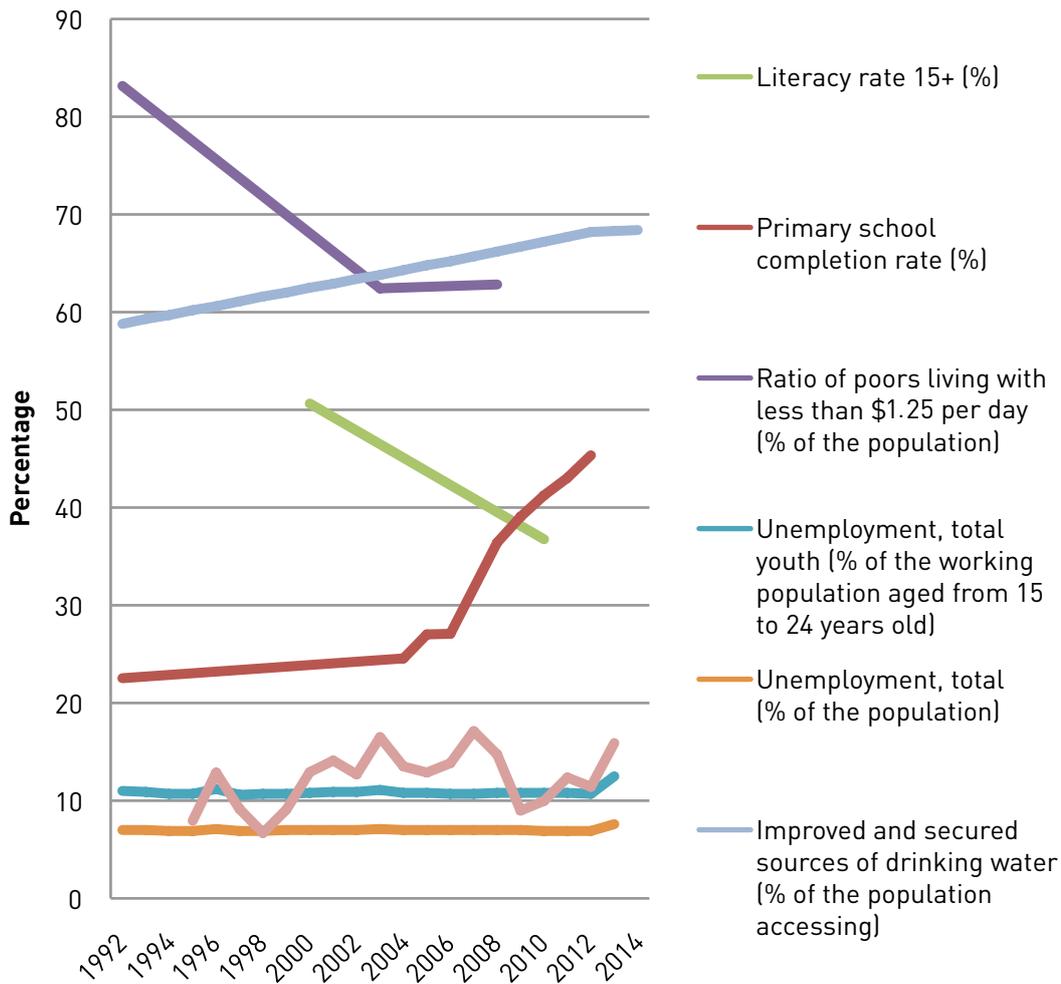
From the informal economy to the war economy

The lack of financial and human resources to maintain the road network, which is composed essentially of tracks (the CAR has only about 700km of asphalted roads), means it is now in a state of advanced dilapidation. In the rainy season, the tracks are impassable and the interior is cut off from the capital. This lack of access in a landlocked country means increased transport costs which make the country unattractive to investors who might be interested in developing domestic production (agriculture, minerals or timber).

The shrinking of the private sector has meant more and more people rely on the informal subsistence economy. The disappearance of some cash crops (cotton, coffee, tobacco) and the breakdown of services for herders mean that subsistence agriculture now prevails,[8] but this village-based economy has itself been hit by the gradual spread of

insecurity since 2006. In the face of such deep and increasing poverty, the war economy became more attractive, especially for young people.

F. Disenfranchised youth

This long-term socio-economic crisis has deprived a large proportion of Central African youth of both education and job opportunities, which interviewees and participants in the Bangui workshop cited as causes of the conflict. Since many young people do not feel represented by political leaders and see few opportunities for education or employment, they have become vulnerable to being recruited into militia or manipulated by politicians. This vulnerability was indicated by the speed with which Seleka and the anti-balaka were able to swell their ranks. Thousands joined Seleka in 2013 (about 6,000 joined in March 2013 while the total number of Seleka combatants was estimated at 25,000 in June 2015) and thousands more joined the anti-balaka in 2014. Several participants of the Bangui workshop said they saw some politicians paying youths to create chaos during the troubles in September 2015.

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8   In 2008, agriculture and livestock farming accounted for almost 55 per cent of GDP and employed 56 per cent of the economically active population.

Transitional President Catherine Samba-Panza has tried to institutionalise peacebuilding initiatives.
© UN Women/Catianne Tijerina

2. Religious identities and socio-economic tensions

Neither religion nor ethnicity are root causes of the conflict. However, religious narratives of the conflict continue to be 'live', including among ordinary Central Africans. The exploitation of religious identities by elites fuelled the longstanding narratives of religious based discrimination that persist in Muslim communities. Violence has been identity based, often multiple and overlapping, including between Muslims and Christians, this perception and real experiences, entrenched fears of the conflict being entangled with religious identities.

The leaders of the main religions characterise the CAR's post-colonial history as one of peaceful coexistence of Christians and Muslims. But not everyone shares this view: according to those Muslims interviewed,[9] there is a long history of discrimination against Muslims by non-Muslims. They highlight the fact that their nationality as Central Africans is questioned. They report that it has been a long struggle for Muslim organisations to achieve recognition by the state that started in

the early 1980s. But a modus vivendi was eventually reached between them in the 1990s.[10] The state's reluctance to recognise Muslim organisations was motivated by the historic vision of the CAR as a country on the frontline of Christian sub-Saharan Africa facing the Muslim north. Non-Muslims remember that the country suffered under the yoke of the sultans in the pre-colonial period and some say it is now the target of an Islamisation plan supported by Chad and Sudan (and Libya during Gaddafi's time in power). This conspiracy theory has been a longstanding feature of the country's political culture.[11]

Elite manipulation of religious identities

In December 2012, as Seleka was marching towards Bangui, Bozizé and his entourage reactivated the latent fear of a Muslim threat. They played the religious card telling the people to be ready to fight against the "Muslim invaders". This populist anti-Muslim discourse spread quickly, especially in the western provinces, Bozizé's home area. Seleka's

9   A meeting with 20 members of the Muslim association of Paoua, meeting with Muslim youth representative in PK5 in Bangui, meeting several Muslim members of the National Transitional Council.

10   See Richard Filakota, *Le renouveau islamique en Afrique noire, l'exemple de la Centrafrique*, 2009.

11   See Observatoire Pharos, 'Comprendre la crise centrafricaine', 2014. Jean-Paul Ngoupandé, *L'Afrique face à l'islam,* 2003.

many atrocities there during 2013 created fertile ground for these seeds of religious prejudice and provoked the emergence of the anti-balaka self-defence groups.

By the end of 2013 this rhetoric had taken hold and the conflict came to oppose not just armed groups but also communities. A popular movement rejecting the Seleka emerged in northwestern Ouham and Ouham-Pende prefectures (the anti-balaka were initially a self-defence movement). It took up arms with support from former members of the army and decided to retake Bangui. In early 2014 residents of the capital and the west considered this ethnic-regional movement[12] to be patriotic and formulated their objectives in brutal pseudo-religious and nationalist terms: hunt down the Seleka and their Muslim supporters, who are not Central Africans and who are trying to forcibly Islamise the country.

After the fall of Seleka, the non-Muslim majority held all Muslims responsible for the violence committed under its rule by association. The perception of the Muslim community's complicity with Seleka was so widespread that in early 2014 there was a wave of anti-Muslim violence that caused significant population displacement[13] and created Muslim enclaves in western cities. Muslim herders in western CAR fled to eastern Cameroon. UN agencies evacuated some Muslims trapped in urban enclaves and some African governments (including Chad and Senegal) provided transport to evacuate their citizens from Bangui.

In response, in 2014, Seleka leaders claimed they were needed to protect Muslims and articulated the idea of partitioning the country. The promotion of this idea by the Seleka delegation at the Brazzaville negotiations led to an immediate suspension of the talks in July 2014 and increased their unpopularity. Seleka leaders continued to use the cause of the defence of Muslims to mobilise support and improve their public image.

Central Africans and outsiders have seen and portrayed the conflict through the lens of a Christian/Muslim confrontation. This is especially true of the international media. An *Al Jazeera* headline in July 2015, for example, characterised the conflict as a "religious war."[14] After a vibrant debate, participants in the Bangui workshop agreed to describe the conflict as a "political conflict with a religious dimension". Some report that, in their neighbourhood, the popular perception is a conflict between Christians and Muslims. During these conversations, the term 'community' was often used to mean religious community. Two Muslim participants said that Islam as a religion was no longer welcome in the CAR and that some people wanted to make the country an Islam-free country. Muslims interviewed in Bangui and Paoua feel strongly that they are discriminated against and that officials in Bangui do not acknowledge this discrimination. For instance, the authorities always deny the narrative of discrimination and marginalisation told by Muslims and minimise their demographic importance within the population.

This perception among some Muslims of anti-Muslim attitude and discrimination has some evidence to support it. Questioning the size of the country's Muslim population and the nationality of Muslims has become common in public and private discourse. It is telling that a former minister estimates the Muslim population to be no more than 5 per cent of the population, while an imam estimates Muslims to make up 20 per cent.[15] The perception of Seleka as "foreigners" – quite common among the anti-balaka – led many to question the nationality of Muslims.[16] During the government's public consultations at the end of 2014 and start of 2015, communities in Ouham and Ouham-Pende prefectures demanded the verification of the nationality of Muslims and the expulsion of those who were found to be foreign. They argued that many Muslims had bought Central African papers from corrupt authorities. The National Transition Council (NTC) initially refused to authorise Central African refugees in neighbouring nations to vote because many such refugees were Muslim and people in Bangui doubted that they were truly Central African. The NTC only backed down following pressure from the UN and the CAR's constitutional court, which declared that the Council's actions were unconstitutional, and Central African refugees have since been able to vote in presidential elections in the CAR. Non-Muslims often perceive Muslims to be foreigners resulting into the general attitude resisting the return of Muslim refugees, hence the idea of imposing a selection procedure on returning refugees based on nationality. The attitude of non-Muslims towards Muslims continues to fluctuate between hostility and distrust.

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12 The anti-balaka were originally drawn from the Gbaya, former president Bozizé's ethnic group, but other ethnic groups from the west (Mandja, Banda, etc.) joined later.

13 In December 2015, UNHCR estimated the number of refugees at 452,000 and the number of internally displaced persons at 447,000. http://data.unhcr.org/car/regional.php

14 Toby Cadman, 'Religious War in Central African Republic', *Al Jazeera*, 01 July 2015. Available here: http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2015/06/religious-war-central-african-republic-150629104901894.html

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15 Interviews with an iman and a former minister for reconciliation.

16 Even if there were some Chadian and Sudanese fighters among Seleka troops, it is quite excessive to say that most of them were foreigners and not Central Africans.

Underlying socio-economic tensions

Driving the questioning of Muslims' nationality lie socio-economic rivalries and conflicts for resources. In rural areas, grievances framed as being against Muslims actually reflect long-term antagonism between farmers and herders (essentially Fulani). This used to not be so prevalent and concerned only certain regions where cattle migration was a recurring source of conflict (notably in Ouham and Ouham-Pende prefectures) and where cattle herding gradually became militarised. Herders now habitually carry AK-47s and are sometimes protected by armed groups.

The problem has worsened over the last two decades. First, herders who have habitually brought large numbers of cattle south from Chad and Sudan to pasture have been going further and further south into the CAR, and some as far as the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Second, mechanisms for regulating conflicts between herders became less and less effective because the herders became increasingly more powerful relative to the farmers. They were carrying better weaponry (they have weapons of war while the farmers have homemade, artisanal weapons) and they could either bribe or intimidate judicial and administrative authorities. They therefore became less inclined to pay the traditional compensation for the damage they caused to farmers' fields.

In western cities, majority non-Muslims have long criticised the predominance of Muslims in commerce (especially Muslims from neighbouring countries: Nigerians, Chadians and Sudanese). Foreign Muslims dominate some sectors of the economy, such as the trade in diamonds and gold.[17] These economic grievances and desire for financial gain have clearly been an equally strong or stronger motivating factor than religious prejudice behind some of the violence. Looters have targeted businesses before mosques; raiders have occupied Muslim houses associated with the diamond trade in Berbérati and Carnot and the anti-balaka have attempted to recover artisanal mines.

Non-Muslims had criticised Muslim traders based in PK5, the economic centre of Bangui, for corrupting the authorities (including customs and tax officials and the police) and for preventing non-Muslim traders from gaining a foothold. According to the president of a business association in Bangui, the flight of Muslim traders from PK5

is not a problem; it finally "opens the commercial sector to non-Muslims". The poor reputation of Muslim traders in PK5 preceded the crisis and there were frequent security problems there before 2012. Moreover, because of the strong presence of Chadians in the Muslim community, Chadian soldiers used to socialise and do business in the district, a further source of tension and one of the main reasons for association of Muslims with Seleka.

Central African elites (that is, civil servants, who are mostly Christian) are prejudiced against Muslim traders in part because the former have lost social status during the last two decades. They are inclined to generalise in their criticism of Muslims and often refer to the period of slavery. Christian elites differentiate between categories of Muslims: the more acceptable genuine Central African Muslims and the less acceptable Chadian Muslims. Most non-Muslim interviewees refused to countenance the return of Chadian Muslims as they regarded them as Seleka supporters. In Paoua, Chadian Muslims left after Seleka's departure and they have not yet returned because they know they are no longer welcome.

For the same reason, refugees interviewed in the Gaoui camp in Ndjamena mostly of Chadian origin have asked the Chadian authorities to resettle them in Ndjamena rather than send them back to the CAR as they fear for their lives. The government is presently working on a resettlement plan. This view is also shared by refugees in eastern Cameroon.[18]

The reluctance of some non-Muslims to accept the return of Muslim refugees, especially those they consider to be foreign, is already a problem as it tends to impact the territorial reorganisation of local communities and could lead to a religious urban segregation with Muslims being forbidden to move or settle in Christian areas and vice-versa.[19] With the security situation still tense in Bangui and western CAR, refugees have not yet come back en masse and their return is neither a priority for UNHCR, the UN agency responsible for internally displaced persons (IDPs) and refugees, nor the transitional government. However, this may change when the security situation improves and a new government is elected. The preparation of local communities for the return of IDPs and refugees (awareness campaigns, administrative issues, reintegration activities, support to community

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17 Some towns have a commercial district called Bornou or Hausa in reference to the Nigerians that live there. The Hausa have a major presence in commerce in western CAR. For example, in Bangui, trade in vehicle parts is almost entirely controlled by Nigerians. West Africans (Mauritanians, Senegalese, Malians, Gambians) have a strong presence in the diamond and gold businesses.

18 Norwegian Refugee Council, 'CAR refugees in East Cameroon, a snapshot of their perceptions through a protection lens', November 2014.

19 This issue as it manifests in Bangui is analysed in detail in Danish Refugee Council, 'Dynamiques de retour des déplacés internes dans les quartiers de Bangui', July 2015.

An advocacy training workshop for local peace committees in Bangui, CAR. February 2015. © Conciliation Resources

structures, etc.) always takes a long time and should, therefore, begin as soon as possible.

The crisis in the CAR has accentuated discrimination and has led many non-Muslims to question the place of Muslims in society. However, religious identity remains only one of the drivers of the conflict and, therefore, a comprehensive approach is needed that tackles all drivers and underlying causes.

3. A cycle of violence and vengeance

Constant insecurity, the inability of the state and MINUSCA to protect civilians, widespread banditry and recurrent waves of violence have themselves become drivers of the crisis fuelling sectarianism, the formation of armed self-defence groups and local conflicts.

Fighting between anti-balaka and ex-Seleka in the centre of the country has been accompanied by fighting between factions within the two militia[20] and between Muslim and non-Muslim communities in divided cities (including Bangui and Bambari). Fighting related to cattle herding and cattle theft

that have been part of rural life in some provinces for decades have increased due to the present crisis. Both anti-balaka and former Seleka prey on local communities to survive.[21] For instance, the Democratic Front of the Central African Republic (FDPC) is committing crimes including kidnapping and robbery along the border with Cameroon.

In the north of Ouham and Ouham-Pende prefectures, border insecurity poses a significant threat to communities. Farming communities have set up their own self-defence groups (anti-balaka and Revolution and Justice) to protect themselves against marauding armed Chadians who carry out cross-border raids to steal cattle; there have been multiple reports of Chadian National Army soldiers attacking villages in the CAR and even kidnapping officials (members of the electoral commission, village chiefs, etc). The incursion of Chadian bandits, armed herders and soldiers in this area is not new but the tension is now very high.[22] Chadian authorities also complain about the raids

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20 For instance, the massive prison break in Bangui during the September 2015 troubles led to the escape of several anti-balaka commanders who are now back in the field. Their return led to a surge in clashes between anti-balaka factions.

21 For instance, kidnapping has become quite common. In early November 2015, militiamen coming from Kaga Bandoro raided the villages of Mbimbi, Bédamou and Ngoro. They stole food and kidnapped about 30 people. 'Des hommes pris en otage dans la prefecture de la Kemo', *Radio Ndéké Luka*, 5 December 2015.

22 On 23 November, some anti-balaka groups attacked the Fulani in the Koui area (70 km from Paoua). The population fled to Bocaranga and Cameroon.

A local peace committee meeting in 7e arrondissement, Bangui, CAR. July 2015. © Conciliation Resources

of the CAR militiamen and cattle theft. As the state is absent and the border is completely unregulated, rural communities around Paoua have developed their own defence system and this is exacerbating tensions between Chadians and Central Africans and between the two states. With no state forces or officials to uphold the rule of law, many communities cope with this constant insecurity by forming armed groups to defend themselves.

In Bangui and the divided towns such as Bambari, Kaga Bandoro and Bantagafo, crime is rife and armed groups commit murders to provoke retaliation by the other community, as shown in Bangui at the end of September 2015. A Christian or Muslim is killed and his body dropped in his

community or at the doorstep of a mosque. Violent reprisals follow almost every time.[23]

Since the crisis began Bangui has suffered surges of violence; in December 2013, October 2014 and at the end of September 2015. These surges have demonstrated the slow response of international forces and extreme weakness of the police. They lead to a gradual radicalisation of communities. As communities feel under threat, they arm themselves, resort to self-defence and consider it legitimate. The surge of communal tension and violence compromises the efforts of peacebuilders to establish communication channels and trust between communities. Peacebuilding initiatives are thus always under threat from crime and chronic banditry in much of the country.

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23 Two days after the Conciliation Resources workshop, a representative of the Union for Peace in Central Africa (UPC) armed group was killed in Bangui and some people from PK5 murdered two other people as retaliation. This led to brutal retaliations against Muslims in the Lakouanga area the following day.

Part II: Analysis of peacebuilding initiatives

Since the crisis began the Central African transitional government, civil society and international partners have striven separately and together to stop the violence and turn the CAR back onto a peaceful course. With the state foundering, its institutions chronically weak and having lost much legitimacy in the eyes of Central Africans, civil society actors – religious leaders prominent among them, given the religious dimension of the conflict – have stepped up with the support of international partners. Examining the relative advantages and impact of their diverse approaches is instructive for directing future peacebuilding efforts.

1. State-led initiatives

Since 2014 the government has tried to institutionalise reconciliation efforts by creating a ministry specifically responsible for the task, by setting up a national mediation agency, *Mediation Nationale* initially funded by Congo-Brazzaville and by organising the Bangui National Forum in May 2015. But these initiatives have had little success in reducing violence or reconciling communities. Their impact has been undermined by operational obstacles, a lack of resources and fundamentally by Central Africans' loss of faith in the political establishment and government structures.

In spite of the official discourse, influential parts of the government did not see reconciliation with Muslims as a necessary component of the peace process. The creation of the reconciliation ministry was further hindered by operational problems including insufficient staff, offices and budget. A national reconciliation strategy was designed but remained confidential, an unusual step given the need for consent and participation for reconciliation to be effective.

In addition, relations between the transitional government in general, and the reconciliation minister, Antoinette Montaigne, in particular and international NGOs were notoriously bad. The former believed that the NGOs were not supporting or funding the government's ideas, but were rather siding too much with the "Muslim cause".[24] The *Mediation Nationale* seems to have been preoccupied by personal squabbles and its president was recently replaced due to an internal power struggle.

Local consultations organised by the government at the end of 2014 and start of 2015 in the sixteen prefectures were an opportunity for local communities to provide input to the Bangui Forum, expressing their grievances and proposing how to plot a path to a more peaceful future. Issues of security, justice and poverty featured prominently. Even if these consultations were rushed, the commitment to participation and the recognition of the need to listen and respond to the priorities of the communities affected by the conflict were important milestones in the peacebuilding process and helped ensure the legitimacy of the Bangui Forum.

The Bangui Forum, a one-week conference that gathered about 600 people, ended with ten armed groups and the transitional government signing on 10 May an agreement on disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) and the adoption of a republican pact for peace, reconciliation and reconstruction. *The Republican Pact* is a declaration of principles that achieved consensus among participants on a wide range of issues. It includes the electoral process, principles for the new constitution, redeployment of civil servants, restoration of basic services, the immediate start of DDR, the creation of a mixed special tribunal and a truth and reconciliation commission, the need for transitional justice and an integrated national development strategy. It also recommends that Muslim celebrations should be made official holidays – a long-term demand by Muslims.[25] The lack of a clear implementation process and of sufficient funds to act on these many resolutions has meant very little tangible impact on security on the ground or progress in institutional or legal reform.

Despite the promise of local consultations and the Bangui Forum, subsequent months proved disappointing. The Forum follow-up commission only met two months later and most of the Forum's recommendations were not implemented. Those that were implemented, including the drafting of a new constitution, passing a law on the mixed special tribunal and redeploying local administrators, did not change the situation on the ground both in terms of intercommunal tensions and the behaviour of armed groups. More importantly, the apparent consensus among stakeholders demonstrated at the Bangui Forum was short-lived: fighting did not stop and the transitional government did not manage to consolidate support. This was shown

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24 For instance, the former reconciliation minister considered that since Muslims represent only 6 per cent of the population, the international community's concentration on their situation was excessive.

25 The authorities rejected this claim several times in the past. See Richard Filakota, *Le renouveau islamique en Afrique noire, l'exemple de la Centrafrique,* 2009.

A Christian priest and Muslim leader offer prayers of unity in Lakuanga, Bangui, where locals protected themselves from inter-communal violence by working together for peace, February 2014. © Conciliation Resources

by unrest in October 2015, opposition to the holding of elections, the call for a third transition without Catherine Samba-Panza as president and the refusal by some signatory armed groups to implement the DDR agreement.[26]

As part of its peacebuilding efforts, the government has been trying to restore state authority across the national territory, including by redeploying civil servants in the provinces as an effort by the government to restore state authority and visibility in the countryside. This process started in 2015 and was coordinated by the prime minister's office and the department of local administration. Although the transitional government, civil society and internationals (MINUSCA, donors, NGOs) all agree that local authorities have an important role to play in easing intercommunal tensions, their contribution has yet to be clearly defined and their capacity is uncertain. Should their role simply be to act as the official reference point for local mediation and agreements or should they take the initiative and act as the engine for reconciliation? Are they in a position to respond to local requests for reconciliation and mediation? The transitional government has not yet thought through or given

guidance on this issue. Prior to the redeployment, there was no discussion with communities about the role local authorities may play in peacebuilding. Such consultations would go some way to answer these questions.

The new local administrators are still establishing themselves and are in a precarious situation, including in terms of security (some of them have been forced to come back to Bangui temporarily).[27] Their potential peacebuilding role would also raise questions about their impartiality. Training and resources would be required to turn them into effective local peacebuilders.

Elections: no panacea

The ongoing legislative and presidential elections aim to establish a legitimate and widely accepted government with greater authority to push forward the peacebuilding process. But hope that the elections funded by the international community will bring immediate change is misplaced. The problems

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26 Nourredine Adam's armed group disavowed the agreement one week after signing.

27 Ex-Seleka commander Nourredine Adam opposed the redeployment of civil servants in the Kaga Bandoro area, except for doctors and teachers. 'RCA: propos de Nourredine Adam pris pour une déclaration de guerre', Centrafrique Presse, 6 December 2015. During the researcher's visit to Paoua in August 2015, the redeployed sous-prefet was present but the redeployed magistrates were absent. Interviewees cited the feeling of insecurity as a cause for their absence.

facing the country now (lack of security, economic collapse, ineffective state services, etc.) will be the same problems facing it after the elections.

Fears that the elections would spark new violence have so far been unfounded. The constitutional referendum on 13 to14 December 2015 was difficult to organise but went off peacefully: there were significant logistical problems and in some areas controlled by armed groups including Kaga Bandoro and Birao, electoral staff were unable to do their work. One of the main ex-Seleka warlords Noureddine Adam warned that he would not allow the legislative and presidential elections to take place in "his" area, but in the event allowed the vote to go ahead.[28] The first round of voting was delayed from 27 to 30 December but went ahead without any major security problems. In the only incident a group of MINUSCA soldiers were shot at in the Fatima neighbourhood of Bangui. The second round is planned for late January 2016.

After the elections, the elected government will face enormous challenges and will be subjected to massive domestic expectations. Its failure to meet these expectations risks a backslide into violence. The risk will be heightened as key international partners, viewing elections as an important milestone in the peace process, are eager to start a gradual withdrawal of their manpower and resources. Leaving a still volatile CAR in the hands of a fledgling government would be a dangerous and irresponsible step. Without first giving adequate support for necessary political reforms and enhanced provision of security and other state services, there is a serious risk that any gains made could be reversed, causing the CAR to fall into renewed conflict.

2. Non-state initiatives

With state structures in disarray and its representatives often discredited, community especially religious leaders, civil society organisations, local peace committees and informal community associations have come to the fore helping individuals and communities seek ways to understand, prevent and mitigate the effects of violence. Gains made by civil society figures and organisations nationally and locally demonstrate that they have legitimacy in the eyes of local communities, in part due to their proximity to the people and religious identity. However, their potential has been limited by a lack of capacity and the challenges of providing support from within communities that are affected by the conflict.

International NGOs and the UN have put their resources behind local actors but also brought in their own models whose impact has often been short-lived – confidence-building gains have been reversed by new outbreaks of violence – and they have struggled to ensure the sustainability of locally-led initiatives.

Religious leaders

Religious leaders have been involved in peacebuilding efforts at the national, international and provincial levels, using their influence to stop and prevent violence by communities and armed groups. Since religious identity has been one of the factors driving violence, these leaders have a particularly important role to play. They have organised ecumenical prayers and joint celebrations of Christian and Muslim festivals as symbols of the imperative and value of religious tolerance and coexistence. At the provincial and local levels, they have also directly mediated conflicts.

The heads of the three principal religious communities in the CAR, imam Oumar Kobine Layama, the Catholic archbishop Dieudonné Nzapalainga and reverend Nicolas Guerekoyame-Gbangou of the evangelical alliance, created an inter-religious platform soon after the crisis began. They have sustained their calls for peace, especially during the unrest in September 2015, and have played a major lobbying role in the CAR and abroad to put reconciliation high on the agenda of the transitional government and international actors (EU, UN, France, USA). They have become the public symbol of religious coexistence and have managed to sensitise international actors to the importance of supporting dialogue and reconciliation initiatives but have been less successful with the transitional government.

The three leaders showed signs of fatigue and loss of influence after the September 2015 troubles, but continued with engagements in the communities to end violence – Guerekoyame-Gbangou was explicitly targeted by an angry mob during these events – and their ability to contain this kind of violence was challenged. However, participants in the workshop said the religious leaders had played an important role in helping to end the September violence and they were re-energised by the visit of the pope to Bangui at the end of November. Being closely associated with the head of the Catholic church boosted both their morale and public profile.

In provincial towns some priests have acted as ad hoc mediators in order to protect Muslim communities under siege. These spontaneous mediation initiatives resulted from the fact

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28 'Central African rebel leader pledges to block elections', Agence France-Presse (AFP), 5 December 2015. Interview with Nourredine Adam, Radio France International (RFI), 22 December 2015.

that Muslims persecuted by anti-balaka often sought refuge near or in churches. Priests found themselves involved in the conflict and became natural mediators in the enclaves where Muslims were and still are surrounded by anti-balaka groups and a hostile population (e.g. Bouar, Boda, Yaloke). At the peak of the anti-Muslim violence in early 2014, some local priests were able to provide assistance to Muslims in jeopardy and protect them from the anti-balaka's rage. During the September troubles, the bishop of Bossangoa took the preventive initiative to gather the anti-balaka leaders of his area and successfully persuaded them not to engage in violence. Christian and Muslim religious leaders also systematically participate in local peace committees, which have increased in number since the beginning of 2014. The interfaith platform in Bangui has now been replicated in twelve of the sixteen provincial capitals.

Civil society organisations and local peace committees

Central African civil society organisations have sought to promote peace including by creating local peace committees, raising public awareness of the need for peace and trying to mediate directly between communities in conflict. For example, the Central African Brothers, a local NGO, has led campaigns for peace in some districts of Bangui using taxis. Vitalité Plus, another local NGO, supports local peace committees by providing training for their members and organised the *caravane de la paix* in Bangui in August 2014.[29] However, larger national and international NGOs are mostly in Bangui and have difficulty extending their activities outside the capital because of a lack of financial and other logistical challenges such as transport and personnel.

An increasingly prevalent mechanism of civilian peacebuilding in Bangui and the provinces are local peace committees. They are composed of prominent local people of goodwill who include traders, religious leaders, youth leaders, respected elders, officials, municipal employees and NGO members. Their role varies but often consists of:

- monitoring security and crime in the neighbourhood;
- raising awareness of security threats and the need for peace;
- facilitating intercommunal dialogue;
- alerting the various bodies responsible for security about imminent risks;
- lobbying for reconstruction initiatives.

In Bangui, where relationships with security forces exist they are generally in contact with international forces (MINUSCA and Sangaris), local authorities and national security forces (police, gendarmerie). They sometimes try to formalise community security plans and to convince the communities and neighbourhood leaders to accept the return of Muslims and, in some cases, support the reconstruction of mosques.

In Paoua, religious leaders created their own structure separate from secular structures (framework for spiritual support to the local authorities) while a separate mediation committee of about twenty people of goodwill emerged out of necessity when Seleka occupied the town. The latter came together to ask Seleka leaders to release district leaders, which they did in return for money.

Local civil society organisations and peace committees can be more effective than other actors because they are more legitimate in the eyes of the public. The September troubles in Bangui triggered a wide range of civil society peace initiatives. Community leaders called for calm and restraint in the 6th *arrondissement*; there were peaceful demonstrations, discussions with troublemakers, messages from religious leaders and liaison with international forces. Participants in the Bangui workshop considered that local NGOs and religious leaders had the legitimacy to intervene and calm down the situation, but the *chefs de quartiers* did not. The latter are tainted in the eyes of the public because they are seen as either corrupt or as the representatives of the government of the day.

While often seen as more legitimate, the ability of civil society organisations and peace committees to stop or prevent violence is limited by a disconnect between their early warning and the response by other actors, especially armed international peacekeepers (MINUSCA, French). In September 2015 civil society actors were aware that militia in Bangui were making preparations to perpetrate violence during the president's visit to New York and they informed state and UN actors. But no preventive action was taken. Participants at the Bangui workshop considered that the lack of intervention by UN peacekeepers explained the scale of the October troubles. Many civil society actors see the peacekeeping force as inaccessible.

The peacebuilding role of local civil society is also complicated by their actual or perceived lack of

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29 The Central African Brothers is a local NGO created in early 2014 by Anatole Koue, a former MP in Bangui. His goal was to mediate between Muslim and Christian communities by organizing sports and musical activities and to provide assistance to victims of the conflict. Vitalité Plus is a local NGO whose executive director is lawyer Koudoubada Emmanuel. Created in 2004, it works in the fields of education, health, rural development, water and sanitation and conflict resolution.

neutrality. Local actors in communities that have suffered atrocities by armed groups naturally see themselves as victims and sometimes want vengeance rather than reconciliation. The same can sometimes be said for religious and local leaders. Some religious leaders (notably Protestants and Muslims) have taken sides. In addition, the legitimate political ambitions of some religious and civil society actors could impact on their neutrality.

Finally, civil society organisations and committees engaged in projects seeded by international NGOs tend to start off (and continue to be) dependent on technical and financial support from outside. Many of the international NGOs interviewed said projects almost always grind to a halt when external support ends. There are several reasons for this including the low-level of education in the CAR; the collective psychological context caused by permanent insecurity; citizens' need to prioritise daily needs over long-term commitments; and the lack of collective capacity to act. Consequently, ensuring the durability of civil society peacebuilding initiatives started by outside actors is a major challenge. In contrast, local and often informal community peacebuilding initiatives to manage security and maintain livelihoods that preceded the arrival of international actors are more independent and are likely to continue with or without external support.

International NGOs

International NGOs have been quick to try to support, complement and broaden these local initiatives in diverse fields.[30] These include:

- support and training for local peace committees;
- media (support for community radios: training and equipment);[31]
- education (peacebuilding modules);
- psycho-medical care (reception centres and referrals);
- reviving the local economy (vocational training, support for agriculture and commerce, etc.);
- sports (reconciliation football matches);
- arts (participatory theatre).

Many peacebuilding organisations and almost all humanitarian NGOs have developed social cohesion programmes aimed at building trust between communities by bringing them together in mutually beneficial or enjoyable activities such as community development projects, labour-intensive construction projects or sporting and musical events.

These social cohesion initiatives can serve as important confidence-building opportunities for communities. However, in the absence of complementary conflict transformation exercises in which diverse or divided communities examine the causes and drivers of conflict and violence and commit to non-violent dispute resolution, any confidence-building gains will likely be short-lived.

NGOs adopting a conflict transformation approach, for example Conciliation Resources, create or support existing forums for dialogue (peace committees) by training their members to use analytical tools (participatory analysis, the conflict tree), funding activities and, more rarely, covering the operational costs of structures that have no resources of their own. For example, Conciliation Resources has supported eleven peace committees (seven in Bangui, two in Bria, one in Carnot and one in Ndélé).

Several NGOs (including Danish Refugee Council (DRC), Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), Agency for Technical Cooperation and Development (ACTED) are developing training programmes for youth (considered primary perpetrators of violence) as a part of a stabilisation and crime prevention strategy. They aim to provide basic skills and equipment so that young people can start their own businesses as a carpenter, bicycle repairer, electrician, etc., make a living and therefore have less interest in joining armed groups. These programmes are very popular among the youth without a formal education and the NGOs struggle to satisfy the demand.[32]

Support to civil society from the UN

The last of the peacebuilding actors to arrive on the scene was MINUSCA. Created by the UN Security Council in 2014 (resolution 2149, 10 April 2014), MINUSCA officially took over from the AU-led peacekeeping mission, MISCA, on 15 September 2014. Peacekeepers and some civilian staff were transferred from MISCA to MINUSCA during a smooth and fast transition. As a result some of the troops in MINUSCA (including those from the DRC, Cameroon, Rwanda, Burundi, Congo-Brazzaville

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30 INGOs operating in the CAR include Conciliation Resources, Search for Common Ground, Center for Humanitarian Dialogue, Cordaid, Fin Church Aid, Catholic Relief Services, Mercy Corps and the Danish Refugee Council. This report does not seek to evaluate the effectiveness of any particular initiative carried out by these or other INGOs.

31 Search for Common Ground works with the national media to promote tolerance and dialogue rather than hate and violence. Several analyses highlight the negative role played by some media in the intercommunal conflicts in 2014. Some radios stopped interviewing people randomly in the streets because of their use of inflammatory language. See *Internews*, 'Les contenus médiatiques dans la crise centrafricaine: état des lieux et pistes pour des interventions relatives à la paix et l'amélioration de la gouvernance', May 2014.

32 In a couple of weeks, about 600 young people applied to the training program implemented by the DRC in Paoua. But the training program cannot accommodate more than 100 people.

and Gabon) are a legacy of the MISCA mission. The rationale behind the transfer of responsibility was that the AU was lacking the financial, human and logistical capacities to sustain a long-term multidimensional mission. Presently the Security Council has authorised a 12,000 man mission but MINUSCA is still experiencing recruitment problems and is about 10,000 strong.[33]

As with all peacekeeping missions, the Civil Affairs Unit is responsible for identifying and supporting civilian peacebuilding interventions in the field and uses a particular instrument: quick impact projects.

This unit has begun to appoint community liaison agents (CLAs) in several towns whose job it is to identify reconciliation initiatives that the UN could support. Some action has been taken, for example, the reconstruction of the Boeing market in Bangui, initiating a local peace agreement for access to the Muslim cemetery and support for a Youth Day in Bambari (a gathering of young Christians and Muslims). These were valuable but small steps in the local peace processes and their sustainability depends on the local security situation remaining sufficiently calm for communities to follow them up.

Conclusion

The above conflict and peacebuilding analysis highlights that while there have been numerous peacebuilding initiatives in the transitional period (2013-2015), they have tended to address the symptoms of the conflict, primarily tensions between religious communities through the social cohesion model. But they have so far failed to address the complex historical causes of the conflict, including poor governance, especially in the security and economic domains. To date the transitional government has lacked the credibility and legitimacy in the eyes of Central African society and the political will to play a central peacebuilding role. Instead civil society with international support has taken the lead.

However, a newly elected government will have an opportunity in early 2016 to redress this balance. It will need to demonstrate its commitment to peace in the CAR and earn the trust of the citizen body, especially the Muslim community, and international partners. Only by working in partnership with civil society will it break the cycle of violence and create the calm needed to embark on the long process of political and institutional reform. The support given by international organisations and the UN Mission MINUSCA is playing a considerable role in supporting a smooth transition to a democratically elected government and they should sustain this support to avoid relapse into violence.

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Conciliation Resources is an independent organisation working with people in conflict to prevent violence and build peace. We provide advice, support and practical resources to help divided communities resolve their differences peacefully. In addition, we take what we learn to government decision-makers and others working to end conflict, to improve policies and peacebuilding practice worldwide.

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