

Briefing: **Crisis in the Central African Republic** – August 2013

Headlines

- **Security and administrative vacuum in Bangui and rest of country**
- **Tensions between Muslim and Christian communities**
- **Growing tensions within Seleka coalition**
- **Doubts over the effectiveness of regional peacekeeping force**
- **Fertile conditions for humanitarian disaster; limited access for aid organisations**

The following update is drawn from interviews and information gathered during two visits to CAR in May and August 2013 by Conciliation Resources staff and associated consultant, Guus Meijer.

The formation of a coalition of rebel movements in December 2012, Seleka ('coalition' in Sango, the main language of the CAR), its rapid and violent advance from its bases in the north-east towards the capital Bangui in December to January and its capture of Bangui on 24 March 2013 threw the country into another prolonged and multifaceted crisis. This is the most recent episode in a recurrent cycle of *coup d'états*, mutinies, armed rebellions and increasingly dictatorial regimes, which throw the country into chaos around every ten years.

Problems, challenges and risks

Five months after the Seleka take-over, the most urgent problems, challenges and risks are the following:

Military and security situation

The security situation in Bangui and the rest of the country remains fragile. Although the worst violence and abuses by Seleka forces seem to be over, undisciplined and disgruntled former rebels roam the capital and smaller towns at night, looting, raping and killing with impunity. There are also reports that Seleka forces continue to hunt and kill former members of the *Forces armées centrafricaines* (FACA, the 1,500-strong former national army), whom it accuses of preparing a return of ousted President Bozizé. During and after the Seleka seizure of power, the remaining FACA troops, police and gendarmerie, as well as the judicial and other civil authorities mostly fled or disintegrated, leaving a **security and administrative vacuum, both in Bangui and in many parts of the interior**.

The French contingent based in Bangui, which was increased in strength from 250 to 600 at the beginning of the crisis in December, is adhering largely to the mandate assigned to it by President Hollande and Foreign Minister Fabius: to secure Bangui international airport (where the French troops are based), and to protect French and other European citizens and interests. The contingent therefore retains a relatively low profile in the crisis.

There remain doubts about the operational readiness and command of the regional peacekeeping forces. The current peacekeeping mission, the *Mission de Consolidation de la Paix en Centrafrique* (MICOPAX), which operates under the auspices of the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS), consists of around 550 troops from Chad, Gabon and the Republic of Congo. MICOPAX has struggled to raise the 1,500 extra troops promised by the Chiefs of Staff of the ECCAS member states, and deemed necessary to carry out its mission, and is set to be replaced by the African Union (AU) mandated African-led International Support Mission in the Central African Republic (AFISM-CAR). AFISM-CAR, which officially became operational on 1 August for an initial 6-month period, will be a larger force, but will also be largely dependent on UN logistical and financial support which has yet to be agreed upon. The AU and ECCAS will also need to cooperate more closely to ensure there is a consistent security presence on the ground during this peacekeeping transition.

The military and security situation in CAR is the more complex due to the prominent cross-border dynamic of the conflict. Other countries and their militaries are or have been involved one way or another in the CAR, while the

country also serves as a sanctuary for foreign rebel groups, most notably since 2008 the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) in the south-east, but also the *Front Populaire pour le Redressement* (FPR) of the Chadian warlord 'General' Abdel Kader, alias Baba Laddé. The Seleka colation contains several army commanders from Chad and Sudan who do not speak Sango, the national language of Central African Republic. Unable to understand them, CAR citizens, particularly those from the countryside, are both resentful and fearful of their presence.

Since 2008, the Ugandan People's Defence Force (UPDF), nominally integrating elements from FACA and supported by some 100 US military advisers, operate under an African Union (AU) mandate in the far south-eastern corner of the country, tracking and fighting Joseph Kony and his LRA rebels. So far, it seems the Seleka takeover has not greatly affected this operation, though some clashes have been reported between the Ugandan troops and some 'unidentified' rebels who tried to advance to the town of Obo – a commercial centre and trading hub in this most isolated corner of the country which was bypassed during the Seleka push towards Bangui.

The necessary disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) of Seleka combatants and former FACA, and the repatriation of foreign Seleka fighters who are mainly Chadian, Sudanese and other mercenaries who fought alongside Seleka, can probably only be achieved by a strong and professional foreign military force. This should preferably come from, according to sources in the CAR, a more or less 'neutral' background, i.e. not from any of the neighbouring countries or France, but Angola for example. This does not seem to be likely in the near future.

Previous experience of DDR in CAR does not offer much encouragement. DDR under UN and World Bank auspices targeting the FACA and armed movements that had signed a peace agreement with the Government – such as the *Armée Populaire pour la Restauration de la Démocratie* (ARPD) from the north-west and central parts of the CAR and the *Union des Forces Démocratiques pour le Rassemblement* (UFDR) based in the north-east – did not achieve many tangible results. Few arms were ever collected, rebels received little or no money or other forms of support and either returned to their parallel occupation as *coupeurs de route* (or *zaraguinas*) or joined new break-away factions or other armed 'political' rebellions. Security Sector Reform (SSR) was an equally cumbersome process; Bozizé had become increasingly afraid of an insurrection from within the armed forces and FACA forces were kept deliberately weak and poorly equipped.

Politics and governance

Another major concern is the **rapidly decreasing cohesion within the Seleka coalition**. The four main rebel movements and other affiliated groups were united in their goal of ousting the Bozizé regime, but lacked any post-coup plan of action or constructive common programme for the country. Once in power, the cracks in the coalition have widened and each movement is fighting for its own turf. According to a UN source, the respective leaders are in fact only able to visit camps and areas controlled by their own men.

A new inclusive government was finally installed on 12 June. The Prime Minister emerging from the Libreville peace talks in January, former opposition member Maître Nicolas Tiangaye, will continue to lead this 'transitional national unity government' (*Gouvernement d'union nationale et de transition*). Eighteen of the 34 ministers come from 'civil society', the remainder are members of Seleka, the 'democratic opposition', the 'former presidential majority' and the 'non-combatant armed opposition' (*opposition armée non combattante*). Key posts, however, remain in the hands of the former rebels: President Michel Djotodia, leader of the main rebel movement UFDR is in charge of defense, while the other strongman, General Nouredine Adam, leader of Convention des patriotes pour la Justice et la paix (CPJP) is currently the Minister for Security.

It is not clear yet to what extent the lack of internal cohesion within Seleka, either in political or in military terms, will affect the new Government and its ability to lead the country out of its current crisis. To do so would require the (re)establishment of some semblance of law and order and civilian, including juridical, administration across the whole of CAR territory, as well as facilitation for the resumption of economic activity. There are reports that, in the absence of assurances from core Western countries, technical and financial support is being sought not only from

the original patrons of Seleka and its constituent groups (i.e. Chad and Sudan), but also from further afield, in particular from countries such as Morocco and some of the Gulf States.

The power relationship between the various national political structures has yet to crystalise. The National Transitional Council, the advisory and law making body of CAR established by President Bozizé in 2004 to draft a new constitution and prepare for that year's elections, was retained after the Seleka takeover. Despite electing Michel Djotodia as the interim President and the Speaker of the National Transitional Council as the Prime Minister Nicolas Tiangaye, the Council remains weak, with its 105 members divided on how to advance the transition. It is also still unclear how much leverage international bodies, such as the ECCAS, AU, UN and EU, can wield in forging a political resolution. Civil society has traditionally been weak in CAR, but the crisis may provide it with an incentive to join forces and play a constructive role in bringing about necessary political and social change.

The commitment made at the Libreville Agreement to hold democratic elections within 18 months will be difficult to achieve at best, and will at worst exacerbate the political and social fragility that the country is experiencing. Although a standard requirement for international recognition and the resumption of aid, the holding of elections will require large amounts of (foreign) funding and place a huge strain on the limited administrative and organisational capacities of the state. It is also possible that the elections could do harm, heightening tensions and reviving old conflicts and rivalries at a time when they are least needed. A possible way out of this dilemma could be to focus first on the reforming the electoral system, with priority given to local elections and the improved representation of peripheral interests in the centre. In itself, this process, seen as a preparatory stage for democratic elections, would be expected to take longer than the 18 months scheduled to prepare for the elections.

Donor presence

The World Bank has temporarily closed its mission and it is unclear when it will reopen as they assess the situation and the possibility of return. The AU does not recognise the new Government and has suspended CAR's membership, but contacts still continue, for example through the Libreville Monitoring Commission. Similarly, the EU has not recognised the transitional President and Government, and continues to provide primarily humanitarian aid through channels unaffiliated with the government.

Having evacuated all non-essential staff, the UN Mission's scope to influence the situation is limited. The Head of Mission, Margaret Vogt, left her position at the end of June and was replaced by the Senegalese General Babacar Gaye, until now Adjunct Secretary-General of the UN and military adviser to the Department of Peacekeeping Operations. The UN has not officially recognised the new President; the legal basis for its continued operations lies in the Libreville Peace Agreement, signed on 11 January 2013 between then President Bozizé and Seleka. Bozize and Jean Willybiro Sako, one of the signatories, have since left the scene, and some of the articles contained in the agreement have lost their relevance. The agreement, however, continues to stand, and the UN does recognise Prime Minister Tiangaye, as his appointment was agreed in the Libreville Peace Agreement. BINUCA, the UN Integrated Peacebuilding Office in the CAR, has had difficulty adapting to fast-moving developments in the country, and will no doubt need to change its mandate in light of the AU's authorisation of AFISM-CAR.

Broadly, the UN will continue to monitor what it sees as three priority structures for political progress: (i) a Transitional Charter, which defines transitional structures (including the National Transitional Council), time-frames for implementation (e.g. elections in 18 months); (ii) a broad-based Monitoring Commission (*Comité de suivi*), consisting of representatives of the various political tendencies in the CAR plus civil society, all ECCAS member states, BINUCA and the AU-office in Bangui; and (iii) a new inclusive government.

Regional involvement

The body that so far has taken the lead in seeking a way out of the CAR crisis is ECCAS, comprising Angola, Burundi, Cameroon, CAR, Chad, Congo Brazzaville, DRC, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon and São Tomé & Príncipe.

Despite the fact that Chad's President Déby currently holds the ECCAS Presidency, the process seems to be led principally by Congolese President Denis Sassou-Nguesso, another longtime supporter of Bozizé, who chairs the Libreville Monitoring Commission and has appointed an ECCAS Special Representative, based in Bangui, Mr Pierre Moussa.

As stipulated above, **serious doubts as to the effectiveness of ECCAS' regional peacekeeping force MICOPAX**, in terms of its ability to secure law and order, to promote dialogue and reconciliation, or to lead a DDR process have led to the recent announcement of AFISM-CAR's formation. Despite the prominence that this will give to the African Union in terms of stabilising the security situation and reforming the state's security sector, it is clear that, politically speaking, no solution for the CAR can be found without the crucial involvement of ECCAS and its member states. It is too early to say how ECCAS' role will develop, how it will coordinate its diplomatic efforts and direct involvement with other actors (particularly the African Union), and what the outcomes of these efforts will be.

Religious tensions

Ethnic and religious tensions have always been part of the undercurrent of events in the CAR. Seleka fighters, predominantly from the north-east of the country and of Muslim faith, largely targeted non-Muslim neighbourhoods and businesses during their advance on Bangui in December and January, and their eventual capture of the city in March. This trend has continued during Seleka's tenureship, provoking **fears of a sustained Muslim-Christian conflict**.

Although the coexistence of various ethnic and religious groups in the CAR has been largely incident-free, in private religious leaders of all denominations consider religious tensions a real trigger of conflict given the prevailing insecurity, uncertainty and precarious living conditions experienced by the population at large. Publicly, however, religious leaders have tended to deny the existence of any Muslim-Christian conflict prior to the current crisis.

In reality there has been a longstanding undercurrent of tension. Small-scale disputes have traditionally occurred between nomadic cattle-breeding groups or *éleveurs* (often Muslim) and sedentary farmers or *agriculteurs* (often non-Muslim), or between Muslim traders and other people, who often consider the traders as foreigners. Christians (nearly 50 per cent of the population) fear that Muslims (10-15 per cent of the population) will take revenge for decades of marginalization and neglect, and worry that radical Islamist elements may now try to impose their rule. Since the outbreak of the current crisis, many ordinary Muslims fear a backlash from Christians as a result of the often violent tactics employed by Seleka since their takeover.

Hindered by inflammatory remarks made in January by then President Bozizé with regard to the Muslim origin of the Seleka rebels, Djotodia has found it necessary to publicly confirm the secular nature of the Central African state. He has also played down the possibility of a brewing religious conflict, following heated reactions to his strengthening of ties with Muslim countries such as Morocco and his recent visit to Khartoum in June.

So, whilst it might be true that there no systematic religious conflict has occurred, religion has been, and is seen to be, a catalyst for potential social, economic and political conflict. The 'harmonious coexistence' preached by religious leaders has for many years been relative and fragile, and runs the risk of concealing urgent issues that need to be addressed (e.g. centralized government, marginalization of certain regions, absence of security and justice systems). Despite this, religious leaders have a major task and responsibility to try to prevent any further widening and deepening of the Muslim-Christian tensions, and to allay fears within both communities.

Economic and humanitarian consequences

The large-scale destruction and displacement caused by the Seleka campaign and the continuing insecurity in many parts of the country have brought most economic activity to a standstill. Recovery is slow and piecemeal. International aid has largely been suspended and the state coffers are virtually empty, with the new government

unable to pay the salaries of civil and military personnel. It is alleged that the state has been kept afloat by short-term loans from certain ECCAS members and other friendly Muslim states.

The diamond trade, a main source of income for the state, has been hit by CAR's suspension from the Kimberley Process, a decision which has backfired on the diamond dealers who allegedly financed Seleka to overthrow the Bozizé regime. Whatever the truth, it is certain that alluvial diamond mining has a central place in the Central-African political economy, whether for corrupt rulers, cash-strapped rebels or criminalized gangs of unemployed youth, and has the potential to trigger even greater instability in the increasing security and administrative vacuum in the country.

The economic paralysis caused by the displacement of people, destruction of infrastructure and insecurity of movement are **likely to produce a humanitarian disaster in addition to the political and security crises already manifest**. The assistance of aid agencies, more greatly needed than ever, is being hampered by a restrictive operating environment. The political reluctance of major donors such as the EU, the US and the World Bank to recognize the new government is also hindering the ability of aid organisations to comprehensively roll out their operations in the country.

Background to the 2013 crisis

François Bozizé, the President whose regime was ousted by a coalition of rebel groups on 24 March 2013, was a former Chief of Staff (and before, previous leader Jean-Bedel Bokassa's *aide de camp*) who himself had come to power in 2003 by military force, overthrowing the country's first elected President Ange-Félix Patassé. Backed by the Chadian regime of President Idriss Deby, and given the blessing of French President Jacques Chirac, he assumed power in a relatively bloodless coup. Bozizé had already staged an insurrection against President Patassé in 2001, a coup repelled by Patassé and a myriad of military forces, including a 1,000 man Congolese rebel force from the MLC (*Mouvement de Libération du Congo*), whose leader Jean-Pierre Bemba is now on trial at the ICC (International Criminal Court) in The Hague for atrocities committed in defence of Patassé's regime.

In 2005 and again in 2011 Bozizé embedded himself as President through 'democratic' elections, all whilst concentrating power amongst a small group of confidantes from his region of origin and, in particular, his close relatives. In 2008, under political and military pressure to this tightening of control, Bozizé instigated an 'inclusive political dialogue' in which government, political opposition, civil society and armed rebel groups participated. Despite committing to the forming of a government to include all the main political entities involved in the dialogue, Bozizé never trusted the process, and the dialogue died a slow death. This, in addition to the grossly manipulated 2011 election, galvanized the rebel movements from the marginalised north-east and north-west (previously instrumentalised by members of the Bangui elite for political advancement) to form the Seleka coalition and remove Bozizé from power. Bozizé is currently living in exile in Cameroon.

Regional and domestic factors have provided fertile ground for Central African Republic's troubled history. At the domestic level, central government in the capital Bangui has always been in the hands of a small political and military elite, who have benefited from the country's abundant natural resources and the largesse of international aid donors, whilst neglecting its responsibilities to the population at large. This mostly rural population has been left to fend for itself, engaging in subsistence agriculture and cattle-breeding, petty trade and, in some cases, banditry, poaching and illegal gold or diamond-mining. Regionally, the long wars in Sudan, DRC and Uganda have spilled over into the CAR hinterland, with dramatic consequences for the populations concerned, and affecting the balance of power between the centre in Bangui and the dissident movements in the north. In this context, Chad has increasingly become a crucial factor in determining CAR's future – once it had decided to end its backing of Bozizé's regime, assist in the formation of Seleka, and instruct its troops in MICOPAX not to stop Seleka's takeover, Bozizé's fate was all but sealed.

Peacebuilding opportunities

Ensuring cooperation in order to tackle short to mid-term security concerns

The driving seat in ensuring security in Central Africa Republic has up until now been occupied by ECCAS, in particular by Congo's President Sassou-Nguesso, who chairs the Monitoring Commission. ECCAS' Chair, Chadian President Déby plays a crucial supporting role, as do Gabon and Cameroon as most involved regional states. The AU will begin to play an increasingly central role following the deployment of their peacekeeping mission, and this will have implications for the UN, whose mandate in the country will be partly dependent on its level of support for AFISM-CAR. AFISM-CAR's takeover will also have implications for the EU's role, in as far as it has funded the ECCAS peacekeeping force MICOPAX, in addition to its support for essential humanitarian, reconstruction and peacebuilding programmes.

The fast moving situation in CAR has brought a level of uncertainty to regional and international responses, with organisations still evaluating to what extent and in what capacity they attempt to intervene. What is clear, however, is that cooperation between these organisations will be essential in tackling short- and mid-term security issues. This will particularly be the case between AU and ECCAS, with the UN and EU playing crucial supporting roles. The EU in particular should see CAR as a prominent opportunity to act on its ambitions for a comprehensive approach to external action.

Exploring scope to review the electoral system

Committing the state to hold democratic elections within 18 months of the Libreville Agreement will at best be a huge drain on limited resources, and at worst a damaging exercise which further weakens the country's political and social institutions. A possible way out of this commitment could be to focus on the revision of the electoral system, with priority given to local elections and the improved representation of peripheral interests in the centre. In itself, this process, seen as a preparatory stage for democratic elections, would be expected to take longer than the 18 months scheduled to prepare for the elections.

Involving and building consensus among civil society and religious leaders

Civil society should play a leading role in framing the debate and final decision-making by the National Transitional Council. It should not be limited to a circle of activists in Bangui, but crucially involve communities in the whole of the country's territory. Legitimate politics should be responsive to local realities and dynamics, not to abstract 'ideal-types' of democracy, and the best way to serve both democracy and peace is to strengthen both the horizontal and vertical lines of communication within society.

Given their unique country-wide networks, religious leaders could play an active role, as could some of the professional associations and syndicates, provided they receive adequate support. A potential channel for such support, in addition to the Religious Leaders Platform referred to above, is the recently constituted Civil Society Working Group on the Crisis in the CAR (*Groupe de Travail de la Société Civile sur la Crise en RCA*), which has already laid the groundwork for a Peacebuilding Campaign (*Campagne de Consolidation de la Paix*). These bodies and their members in-country could serve as the necessary interfaces between local communities and the political institutions in the centre. They also could play a catalyzing role in creating local structures for dialogue and dispute resolution, thus enhancing the participation of ordinary people in the management of their own affairs. Given the extent to which cross-border, external intervention has dictated CAR's path, a more robust civil society capable of voicing domestic solutions to the country's problems would be a welcome step towards resolving the current crisis.

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