

## Briefing: **Central African Republic: Inter-communal dialogue key to long-term stability** – December 2013

### Headlines

- **Peacekeeping forces need to coordinate with community and religious leaders in order to create space for peacebuilding**
- **Creating space for dialogue can help lead to a credible political framework**
- **Ongoing community-led work is creating space for dialogue and mitigating tensions**

### *Situation update and analysis*

The current upsurge in violence in the Central African Republic (CAR) has not come out of the blue – the country has suffered years of cyclical crises, as well as neglect by the international community. Its vulnerability to regional cross-border conflicts and the involvement of external fighters adds to the complexity of the situation.

Since March 2013, when the Seleka Coalition seized power from President Bozizé, deadly clashes have been taking place across the country between self-defence groups and the soldiers of Seleka (the ‘transitional authorities’). However, the internal conflict is now escalating and an urgent response is needed both to stabilise the situation and to create space for humanitarian and peacebuilding support.

### *Inter-communal and religious tensions*

A decades-long legacy of poor provision of security by the state and the centralisation of power in the hands of a few has fed inter-communal tensions along religious and tribal lines, which some political actors are now manipulating for their own ends.

Predominantly Muslim armed groups (known as ‘Zaraguinas’) are now loosely aligned with forces from the now disbanded Seleka coalition, whilst community self-defence groups, predominantly from Christian communities, are mobilising into ‘anti-balaka’ (‘anti-machete’) forces, with the tacit approval of exiled former President Bozizé.

Although interim President Djotodia is quick to characterise the violence as simple political score-settling, it is clear that religious tensions are being exacerbated for political gain; left unaddressed, this could develop into systematic inter-communal violence played out along religious and ethnic lines.

### *Cross-border dynamics of CAR’s instability*

CAR’s instability has long been vulnerable to regional insecurity and cross-border conflict. Yet an effective response that addresses the broader regional conflict dynamics has not been forthcoming.

CAR’s relationship with Chad, whose severing of support to President Bozizé was instrumental in the success of the Seleka coup, is a case in point. The ranks of the former Seleka coalition also included fighters from Sudan.

The Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) has taken advantage of the ongoing political impasse to increase its presence in the east of the country. Recent reports of LRA leader Joseph Kony’s contacts with President Djotodia with a view to surrender are misleading, and have probably been exaggerated by the transitional authorities to improve their image in the eyes of the international community. Contact is likely to have been limited to a demand by the LRA for medical supplies and a request for land, and the group has continued to wage terror on local populations, recently abducting 25 people during raids.

## Assessment of planned international response and recommendations

### *Peacekeeping*

The French military presence is currently being increased from 400 to 1,200 soldiers. A 3,600-strong African Union peacekeeping force (MISCA) is set to become operational by mid-December. The UN Security Council is due to vote this week on a draft resolution that would transform the AU mission into a much larger UN mission.

A well coordinated peacekeeping mission, which prioritises civilian protection and which restores a semblance of order within Bangui and the rest of the country is essential. But it is not enough. Troop numbers will be too few to provide security for communities in distant and hard-to-reach parts of the country.

A peacekeeping force therefore, needs to create the space for both humanitarian relief but also importantly for peacebuilding action to take place. Any security mission should also liaise closely in its planning with those who are trying to mitigate tensions and violence on the ground, including religious and community leaders.

### *Political framework*

CAR's long-term stability will not be resolved as long as a credible political framework that effectively engages the social and political structures of the country remains elusive.

The absence of such a framework has had a paralysing effect on civil society peacebuilding responses. Unable to link into a formal process to gain momentum or participation, local initiatives have been rare and short-lived.

A recent proposal by the Economic Community of Central African States to form a national dialogue was emphatically rejected by civil society, who cited the inaccessibility of large swathes of the country, the low trust held by civil society in its current transitional government, and the need for such an initiative to take place following the transitional phase of government.

However, if a swift peacekeeping response can calm the violence and create the space for a dialogue process to take place, then there is more likelihood that it could take hold.

### *Civil society*

Conciliation Resources and others have been supporting dialogue amongst religious leaders on the ground both prior to and during the current crises. These individuals have leverage to help reduce inter-communal tensions. It is vital that this work continues, both to create fora for inter-religious dialogue and as a mechanism to mitigate inter-communal tensions.

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**Conciliation Resources** has been working in East and Central Africa on the Lord's Resistance Army conflict since 1997. We support civil society organisations in the region to find innovative responses to address the day-to-day challenges brought about by the conflict, but also engage with decision-makers to encourage them to prioritise issues surrounding the LRA conflict, and to look for non-military solutions. Our work in CAR began with the LRA's incursions into the country in 2010, but has broadened since December 2012 to respond to the wider political crisis now facing the country.