

# The Voice of Peace

News and views from conflict-affected areas of Central African Republic (CAR),  
Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), South Sudan and Uganda



Imam Kobine Layama and Archbishop Dieudonné Nzapalainga discuss how to rebuild trust between Muslims and Christians in CAR. © Aid to the Church in Need

## Peace is possible in CAR

**Despite the ever-growing casualty lists in the Central African Republic (CAR), Hamed's story shows that peace is possible. Hamed is a Muslim living in Bangui, the capital, who has worked tirelessly to help his community live in harmony with Christians. He is a member of one of the local peace committees (LPCs), community groups set up by international NGO Conciliation Resources to promote dialogue and ease tensions between the faiths.**

*"We have traversed great distances promoting the ideology of peaceful coexistence, but our efforts are often outdone by politicians who preach toxic sectarianism," Hamed said.*

The inflammatory words of politicians have opened up a great divide between Christians and Muslims, so much so that some Christians could not bear to see Muslims living and praying nearby. Christian gangs, known as anti-Balaka, used violence to scare away Muslims, destroying their homes, businesses and mosques. This forced most Muslims to seek refuge elsewhere; but Hamed stayed.

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“Because it’s my home,” he says, “and as an act of defiance against the politicians, because their aim is to divide and conquer. When there’s disunity among the people, it’s the politicians’ victory. They can gain godlike status, claiming they are the only ones who hold the key to peace. I wasn’t going to allow that!”

### A Muslim in a church

Hamed and other peace committee members devised strategies to counter the divisive rhetoric. They took it upon themselves to go from church to church, explaining the importance of dialogue, reconciliation and tolerance.

The initiative provoked mixed reactions. The first time he stepped into a church Hamed was insulted. “This is blasphemy,” they said. Some threatened to do away with him. But he and the Christian peace committee members explained in detail their mission and Hamed was granted audience in a church: a first in the country since the fighting began.

Hamed pointed out the similarities between Christians and Muslims and helped the Christians

understand that Muslims are human too. He also advised the congregation not to let politicians make religious identity a matter of political competition and to guard against sectarianism.

*“Political ambition!”, Hamed said, “That’s what has dragged us into this war.”*

### Christians building a mosque

Hamed’s message sunk in deep. After his speech he received a standing ovation. Those who heckled him before hugged him and shook his hand. These events inspired him to visit all the churches in Bangui and even to ask Christians to contribute towards the building of a new mosque.

The response was overwhelming. Christians contributed generously with money and materials and now the mosque in Ngaragba, an area of Bangui, is almost complete.

The work done by LPCs in Bangui and elsewhere in CAR to rebuild trust is really commendable. It goes to show that with determination and perseverance, even in the most divided communities, peace is possible.

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## Editorial

Welcome to this new edition of *The Voice of Peace*.

In this issue we highlight the tremendous work LPCs are doing to restore peace in the war-ravaged regions of CAR and DRC. In CAR, where political manipulation of religious identity has torn communities apart, LPCs are gluing them back together. In DRC, the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) forced thousands from their homes and caused tensions between displaced people, refugees and host communities. LPCs are stepping in to resolve disputes peacefully.

In South Sudan, President Salva Kiir and rebel leader Riek Machar have at last signed a peace agreement. But reports of new violence in Western Equatoria State warn that the conflict could be spreading. In Uganda, civil society organisations are lending their support to the families of persons who went missing during the LRA conflict as they call on government to find out what happened to them and make amends.

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*Dixon Odur, Editor in Chief*

# Regional Security Review: July-October 2015

## Central African Republic

Fresh outbreaks of violence in CAR in the past four months in Bangui and the countryside have strained tensions between communities still further and mark a serious setback to the peace process. Presidential and parliamentary elections were supposed to start in October but have been postponed due to the volatile security situation. Since no new timetable has been agreed, the peace process is stalled until 13 December, with a run-off presidential vote on 24 January 2016 if needed.

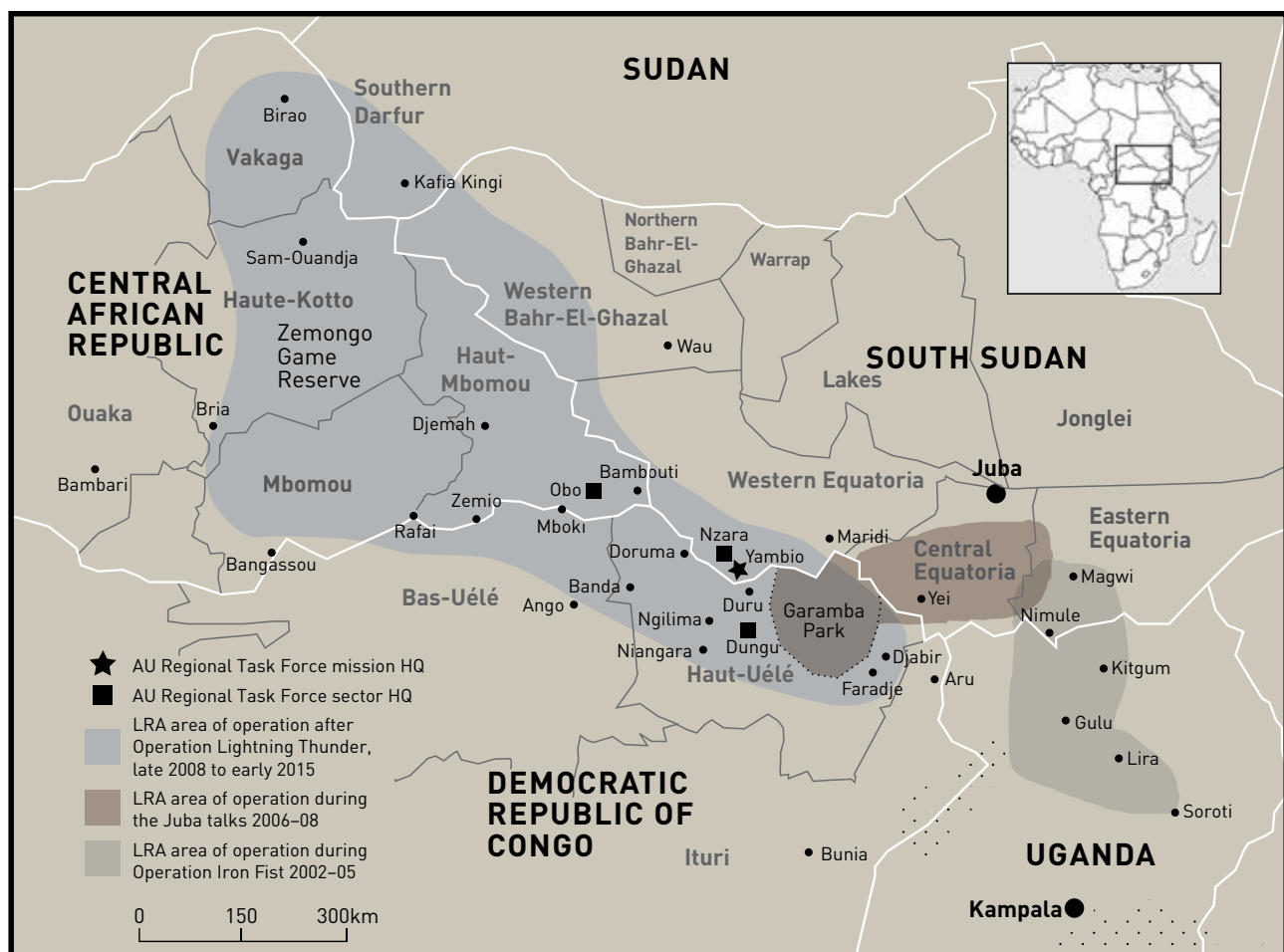
In late July clashes at Markoundia in the northwest left 26 killed and a failed operation by UN peacekeepers in PK-5 district of Bangui left 5 dead, including one peacekeeper. The killing of a Muslim motorbike taxi driver in Bangui sparked a surge in violence from 25 to 29 September between armed militia in Bangui. At least 70 were killed, 200 injured, 30,000 displaced and 500 inmates escaped from prison.

Many Central Africans have lost trust in the UN peacekeeping mission, MINUSCA, and in international actors in general. Following repeated

allegations of sex abuses committed by UN peacekeepers, the head of MINUSCA was replaced on 12 August. Thousands demonstrated against international forces on 27-28 September and called on the government to assure their security. During the recent violence in Bangui, youths looted the offices of many international NGOs.

## Democratic Republic of Congo

The political atmosphere is increasingly tense as President Kabila comes to the end of his second term in 2016 and has not yet declared his willingness to step down, as the constitution demands. His former allies are signalling their opposition to his continued rule. Seven members of parliament, known as the G7, sent Kabila a letter warning against his stay in power, for which he expelled them from the Presidential Majority. The charismatic and powerful governor of Katanga Province, Moise Katumbi, also quit the alliance. Concern is growing that it will be impossible to hold elections on time. The electoral commission has accused the government of not making available enough funds. The resignation of the



Map of LRA affected areas. © Conciliation Resources

commission's president and vice president has also complicated the process.

The security situation remains volatile especially in the east. In the Kivus, the Democratic Liberation Forces of Rwanda (FDLR) and Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) militia have continued to cause civilian suffering, killing 18 and forcing some 200 households to flee. In Ituri province, the Front for Patriotic Resistance in Ituri (FRPI) militia has terrorised the communities of Irumu and Mambasa. In the Uélés, Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) fighters have continued to abduct civilians to carry stolen goods, especially around Niangara. In some cases fighters have only released captives once they have fetched goods from market. Elephant poaching continues in Garamba National Park and in early October poachers clashed with a ranger patrol, killing three rangers and one army colonel. Mbororo cattle herders have also killed two locals and wounded seven.

### Uganda

In Apaa village, Amuru district in northern Uganda, the violent land dispute that began in 2010 continues. Locals, the leadership of Adjumani and Amuru districts and the Uganda Wildlife Authority are still at loggerheads. On 7 September, over 100 government forces set off for Apaa to implement a contentious government resolution and lay down marker stones to divide Amuru and Adjumani districts. Fighting broke out and residents were injured. One had to have his arm amputated while there were also unconfirmed reports of three deaths. The area Member of

Parliament was arrested but released after a week.

The Acholi religious leaders and other stakeholders, including senior army officials, organised a fact-finding mission. One Apaa resident expressed their dissatisfaction with the government's management of the dispute; "I wish Kony was still here. Nothing like this would have happened! Kony was protecting our land."

### South Sudan

President Salva Kiir and rebel leader Riek Machar finally signed the Compromise Peace Agreement on 26 August to end 20 months of conflict, but fighting has continued and both sides have accused the other of breaking the ceasefire. On 2 October President Kiir created another source of conflict by unilaterally declaring the division of the ten existing states into 28. South Sudanese have divided into three groups; those who support the decision, those including Riek Machar who oppose it and those who call for even more states to be formed. The decision has caused frustration among many ethnic groups: the Luach Jang of Tonj demand their own state after recent confrontation with the Rek of Rieng Nhong; the Twice Mayardit threaten each other with violence over the relocation of the capital to Mayen Abun; the Fratit of Raja demand detachment from the Dinka of Malwal; the Bul Nuer are dissatisfied with their new annexation; the Shilluk reject division of their kingdom between West and East Nile States and the Acholi and Madi demand separate states.

## Peace committees improve security in Congo

**The creation of local peace committees (LPCs) in areas of DRC affected by the brutal LRA has given communities a way to overcome the effects of the conflict and improve security despite the weakness of government bodies.**

The LRA arrived in DRC in 2005. In the early years it existed peacefully but since 2008 it began preying on the local population and has become a permanent source of insecurity in Haut-Uélé and Bas-Uélé Provinces. It has killed, abducted, pillaged and raped, causing many to flee their homes. This unchecked population flux has put pressure on host communities and strained the social fabric.

Not enough space or natural resources for subsistence living and the mixing of different

cultural groups has exacerbated identity and land conflicts between displaced people and locals. Host families were frustrated that humanitarian aid was distributed only to displaced persons.

Power struggles have also flared up between chiefs of displaced and host communities. The absence of formal governance structures capable of managing these conflicts and the weakness of state authority have allowed the situation to worsen, slipping at times into humanitarian crises.

### Civil society steps up

In 2010, determined to tackle these problems, local civil society organisations the Diocesan Commission for Justice, Peace and Reconciliation (CDJPR) and Solidarity and Assistance for



*The local peace committee of Faradje, Haut-Uélé Province enjoys a photo moment with visitors from CAR's peace committee during an exchange visit organised by Conciliation Resources. (Image courtesy of JPC-Gulu)*

Destitute People (SAIPED) resolved to set up LPCs.

Their mission is to build peace in and between communities by monitoring insecurity and providing early warning alerts, raising awareness of conflict risks, mobilising the community and peacefully resolving conflicts. They also conduct advocacy, passing the community's security concerns to security forces and state authorities and hold the latter to account if they abuse their power. The committees publicly condemn rape, extortion, arbitrary arrests and other offences and demand redress at local and provincial levels.

### Concrete results

Thanks to the encouraging work of LPCs in hard-hit areas of Haut-Uélé and Bas-Uélé Provinces (including Faradje, Djabir, Limay, Duru and Ngilima) displaced people now live together with host communities and have found ways to share limited resources amicably. Refugees, internally displaced people, former abductees and LRA fighters who have returned to their villages

are not stigmatised as in the past. Instead they are received with open arms and helped to reintegrate into the social and political life of the community.

### Life saved in Lema

The value of the LPCs was demonstrated in March 2015 when an LRA fighter came out of the bush and arrived in the village of Lema. Instead of killing him, which might have happened in previous years, the LPC and the chief's family welcomed him and escorted him to security forces at Djabir so that he could return to his home country. Close cooperation between the LPC, local chiefs and security forces allows for an effective monitoring and early warning system that safeguards the physical protection of civilians.

There has also been a noticeable reduction in rights violations and sexual violence, thanks in part to the hard work and personal risks taken by members of local peace committees.

# Alarming new violence in South Sudan



*In South Sudan the line between self-defence and rebellion has become blurred. © Wikipedia/Creative Commons*

**Until recently it seemed like Western Equatoria State (WES) in South Sudan's southwestern corner had escaped the country's civil war. But political manoeuvrings by the "Big Men" in Juba and clashes between some elements of the national army and local youths in Mundri, Maridi and Yambio counties have brought the war to WES. Recent outbreaks of violence are a warning that the security situation could quickly deteriorate.**

On 16 August, government officials unexpectedly arrested and detained WES Governor Joseph Bakosoro and later replaced him with an interim Governor. President Kiir's motivations are still unclear but Bakosoro had spoken out about army abuses. Bakosoro was released after a public outcry but not reinstated. Western Equatorians, who largely respect the former governor, were frustrated by his dismissal and anxious about the central government's intentions in WES.

## Skirmishes and roadblocks

In September and October, unidentified armed groups have sprung up in several parts of WES, especially Mundri and Maridi counties. Clashes have been reported between local youth and national army forces, the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA). There are also reports of armed groups forcefully recruiting youth and setting up training camps.

In some parts of the state, armed groups have set up illegal roadblocks to loot passengers of valuables and food items, abduct civilians and take them to the bush. Yambio residents do not travel to either Maridi or Tambura for fear of being robbed or abducted.

## Self-defence or rebellion?

WES state authorities identified the armed groups as Arrow Boys, local self-defence groups who mobilised to defend their families from attack by the LRA, who they say are now demanding payment for their work. The central government, however, describes the violence as a new rebellion. It sent more troops to suppress the alleged rebellion, which led to more death and displacement in Mundri and Maridi.

Many people in WES fear the government security forces because they are mostly from the president's Dinka tribe. Some are therefore thought to be partisan in disputes between Dinka and local ethnic groups. In early October the SPLA reportedly fired on civilians with helicopter gunships and burnt down a large portion of Mundri town. In Yambio, following clashes between civilians and soldiers, the SPLA unit was removed and replaced by another for the sake of peace. Another SPLA unit was replaced in Birisi town for the same reason. The security forces accuse the population of not cooperating in identifying the gunmen who abduct, ambush and loot people on the roads.

## Elders call for peace

Local elders called on the perpetrators of violence to stop and calm is slowly returning. But since the increase in violent incidents and the introduction of a curfew in Yambio people are living in fear. Most villages have been abandoned since residents have evacuated to towns for safety. Before the violence escalates further, national and local politicians, the military and civil society leaders should commit to peaceful resolution of disputes and disarmament.

## A march to remember the missing

**In northern Uganda the war with the LRA is over but families across the region are still feeling the loss of loved ones taken away by Kony's forces. In August 2015, families of the missing and civil society supporters marched in Lira to commemorate the International Day of the Disappeared and push the government to make amends.**

Okello left his home in northern Uganda for a better education in Kampala. After three months he was on his way home for a visit, but never reached his destination. LRA rebels abducted him at Karuma Bridge. Today, his mother Norah holds onto an old photo and an undying hope that one day she will hold her son again. Asked what life has been like since Okello's disappearance, Norah said "Meaningless".

### Mobilising for the missing

Norah is not alone. She joined families of other missing persons and civil society organisations

from the four sub-regions West Nile, Teso, Acholi and Lango on a march through Lira town on 28 August. At the district hall discussions after the march, other family members echoed Norah's sadness.

The event was a commemoration of the missing loved ones and a call to the people of northern Uganda to stand beside the families as they seek to hold the government to account for its failure to protect its citizens. The families and civil society allies are pushing for the national Transitional Justice policy, currently being drafted, to include the issue of missing persons and set out ways to find out what has happened to them.

With parliamentary and presidential elections approaching in early 2016, they want this to be a key issue. They still hope to find a way to bring their children back home. Only then would people like Norah find some peace.



Families of missing people and civil society allies march through the streets of Lira, northern Uganda to commemorate the International Day of the Disappeared. (Image courtesy of JPC-Gulu)

# About The Voice of Peace

**The Voice of Peace is a quarterly newsletter that provides grassroots reporting and analysis from conflict-affected areas of CAR, DRC, South Sudan and Uganda. It gives local civil society a voice on problems that have a profound impact on the lives of their communities and an opportunity to inform the solutions.**

It aims to increase understanding of conflict dynamics among those who live in these areas and national and international policymakers and demonstrate the essential role that local level initiatives play in resolving and preventing conflict. It is written and produced by civil society groups with support from Conciliation Resources, a UK-based peacebuilding organisation.

Contributing civil society organisations:

- Solidarité et Assistance Intégrale aux Personnes Démunies (SAIPED), DRC
- Commission Diocésaine de Justice, Paix et Réconciliation (CDJPR), DRC
- Réseau des Organisations Féminines des Uélés (ROFU), DRC
- Femme Homme Action Plus (FHAP), CAR
- La Coopérative Amen (CO-AMEN), CAR
- Inter Church Committee (ICC), South Sudan
- Self Help Women's Development Association (SHWDA), South Sudan
- Justice and Peace Commission, Gulu (JPC-Gulu), Uganda
- Acholi Religious Leaders Peace Initiative (ARLPI), Uganda

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