



Department of Justice, Peace and Human Development Office of International Justice and Peace

Background on the Central African Republic January 2014

“Grant peace, dear Child, to the Central African Republic, often forgotten and overlooked. Yet you, Lord, forget no one! And you also want to bring peace to that land, torn apart by a spiral of violence and poverty, where so many people are homeless, lacking water, food and the bare necessities of life.” --Pope Francis, December 25, 2013

BACKGROUND

The Central African Republic (CAR) is a country of 4.5 million people in the center of the African Continent. In March CAR experienced a coup d'état led by Michel Djotodia. For its entire 63 year post-colonial history, CAR has been ruled by a series of military coup leaders and negligent politicians who have plundered the country of its rich natural resources and neglected the needs of their people. As a result, CAR ranks near the bottom of United Nations Human Development Index (180 out of 186 countries). Life expectancy is 49 years. Adults have a mean average of only 3.5 years of education.

This most recent political crisis is, however, very different and more threatening to the country and its people than past political upheavals. For years an alliance of four political parties, called Seleka, opposed the rule of former President Francois Bozize. After a failed election and years of political deadlock, Seleka turned into a rebel group that grew from about 5,000 rebels to 25,000 when the current interim president, Michel Djotodia, recruited large numbers of mercenary forces from Darfur and southern Chad. At present, the Chadian and Sudanese forces in Seleka make up 90% of the Seleka militia. These foreign mercenaries, who put President Djotodia in power and are unpaid, now run rampant across the country, attacking villages, stealing property and livestock, raping and killing many people. Although President Djotodia has formally dissolved Seleka in an attempt to end the violence, he had no formal army to enforce peace and security.

The four main groups of the Seleka militia have established a de facto foreign occupation in CAR. Seleka forces do not speak the local language, come from different ethnic backgrounds, and are largely Muslim. They occupy a country that is 80% Christian and 15% Muslim. Traditionally, Christians and Muslims in CAR enjoyed good relations. Seleka's violent attacks have targeted Christian homes, schools and places of worship while sparing local Muslim communities and mosques, often only a short distance away, sometimes exacting a payment in funds or goods for their “protection.” Christian communities have now set up self-defense militia to fight back. Thus, although the violent conflict started out as a battle over access to political and economic power, it has now taken on an additional and dangerous Muslim-Christian sectarian character that the country has never previously experienced.

Another important factor in this conflict is the presence of gold, diamonds and untapped oil reserves in CAR. Seleka militia groups are already in control of gold and diamond mining areas. The potential revenue from this illegal mining could strengthen Seleka forces and attract other outside forces creating in CAR a crisis similar to the situation in eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo.

The regional and international communities have begun to organize in an attempt to stop the violence. In December, a U.N. resolution granted the African Union peacekeeping force, MISCA, a strong Chapter VII mandate and authorized more troops on the ground. MISCA troops may increase to as many as 6,000 with the international community pledging financial and logistical support. MISCA troops will also be supported by up to 1,600 French troops. Still, the December resolution does not address the local Church's call to en-

sure impartiality in the peacekeeping force by only selecting troops from countries outside the region. Despite these recent international efforts, violence is still on the rise in CAR and it has become increasingly difficult to provide humanitarian relief to the 935,000 internally displaced persons in the country.

In this situation of chaos, the Catholic Church stands as virtually the only national institution that still functions. Zenit reports that in the diocese of Bossangoa, the worst hit area, about 2,000 homes have been destroyed. Bishop Nestor-Desire Nongo Aziabia of Bossangoa is organizing care for 40,000 people. Archbishop Dieudonné Nzapalainga of Bangui, the capital of CAR, teamed up with local Muslim leaders to call on the President and Seleka leaders to end the violence. They are also traveling the country to urge national Muslim and Christian leaders, and their communities, to refrain from violence and counter attacks. President Djotodia stepped down in January under pressure from the heads of States of the Central African region. The National Transition Council elected Catherine Samba-Panza, the former Mayor of Bangui, as transitional president in the hopes of bringing stability.

Catholic Relief Services has worked in CAR since 1999, running development and community empowerment programs. Since the crisis, CRS has started relief programs in the Lobaye district that assist over 10,000 people and has provided Bishop Nongo help with the needs of 40,000 people. CRS is also helping the Church and the Religious Leaders' Platform strengthen peacebuilding efforts.

USCCB RESPONSE

In July, Bishop Richard Pates participated in the General Assembly of the Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar. During that meeting, Bishop Nongo gave Bishop Pates a briefing on the crisis. In September, Bishop Nongo traveled to the United States in a four-person delegation to meet with UN officials and missions. They pleaded their case for humanitarian and military assistance to end the violence. Bishop Nongo also visited Washington where USCCB staff organized meetings with Congressional leaders and the State Department. That same month, Bishop Pates wrote to Secretary of State John Kerry to highlight the urgency and severity of the situation in CAR. He asked the United States to work with international partners to end the fighting and provide urgent emergency assistance.

In November, Bishop Nongo returned to the United States to testify before the House Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, Global Human Rights and International Organizations on the crisis in CAR. He advocated for international support to end the violence, specifically for increased and properly equipped peacekeeping troops with a Chapter VII Mandate. He pointed to the need for the troops to be monitored by the UN and selected from neutral African countries outside the immediate region of CAR to ensure impartiality. Bishop Nongo also advocated for increased funding for humanitarian assistance and the transition to a legitimate, democratically elected government. As the Church is the only national institution still operating and serving the needs of victims, he urged the U.S. to take advantage of the effective partnerships between the Church and Catholic Relief Services to help meet the overwhelming needs of the people of CAR.

The Religious Leaders' Platform of CAR submitted written testimony to the Senate Sub-Committee on African Affairs in December that drew attention to the need for conflict prevention and the important role religious leaders play in maintaining social cohesion and promoting reconciliation in CAR. They also advocated for more humanitarian assistance to the country, particularly through organizations that already have a good reputation for their work in CAR, such as Catholic Relief Services.

In January Committee staff participated in a State Department teleconference with the Religious Leaders Platform to express USCCB solidarity and support for their efforts. The USCCB continues to monitor the crisis in CAR and to work with the Church to bring an end to the violence and suffering.

RESOURCES: Visit <http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/human-life-and-dignity/global-issues/africa/central-african-republic/> Contact: *Steve Hilbert*, USCCB Office of International Justice and Peace, 202-541-3149, shilbert@usccb.org.