

INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM



Central African Republic: Christian and Muslim Religious Leaders Work for Peace

Four years after President Faustin-Archange Touadera won a free and fair election, he and his administration continue to struggle to end conflict in the Central African Republic (CAR). While the number of attacks and persons killed have decreased, deadly strikes on civilians continue as tensions remain high between minority Muslim and majority Christian populations. Armed groups still control large regions of the country in order to exploit rich deposits of valuable natural resources.

In January 2019 the government and 14 armed groups signed an agreement to end the violence and build a stable and sustainable government. The accord was acclaimed by all, yet one year later, few of the agreement's provisions have been fulfilled due to resistance either because too many or too few concessions have been granted. As a result, the credibility of the agreement is fraying, and tensions are rising despite efforts to promote peace and reconciliation. This trend is bound to increase as the country moves towards presidential and parliamentary elections in December 2020.

CAR is one of the poorest countries in the world in terms of per capita gross domestic product (GDP). The eight years of fighting have worsened the situation by forcing 600,000 people to flee the country. Another 580,000 are internally displaced and thousands killed. A total of 2.9 million people, out of a population of 4.9 million, depend on humanitarian assistance.

In 2012 a coalition of rebel groups, called the Seleka, from the predominantly Muslim North launched a rebellion that deposed then-president Francois Bozize in 2013. To counter the Seleka armed groups, non-Muslim rural communities strengthened traditional self-defense militias, called anti-balaka*. Under international pressure and condemnation for crimes against humanity, Seleka rebels relinquished government control in 2014 allowing an African Union force to install an interim government. Thus, even though the conflict started primarily over political power and access to natural resources, the Seleka and anti-balaka forces resorted to banditry and attacks on unarmed Muslim and Christian civilians, making religious identity a driving force.

Religious leaders grieved as the political conflict became a religious war. They remained convinced of the need for reconciliation. In the midst of this civil war, Evangelical Pastor Nicolas Guerekoyame, Catholic Archbishop Dieu-donné Nzapalainga, and Imam Omar Kobine Layama led an interreligious movement to counter rising hatred with reconciliation, and violence with peace. They championed the preservation of their country's diverse social fabric.

The Religious Leaders Platform promoted interreligious dialogue, which successfully stirred the regional and international community into action. The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops and Catholic Relief Services labored alongside the religious leaders in the CAR and together helped launch the Central African Interfaith Peacebuilding Partnership. The Partnership supports trauma healing programs, peacebuilding practices, and other programs to help young people to learn skills, access small scale loans, and start farms and businesses. The Church also provides humanitarian aid to the thousands of wounded and displaced victims.

Pope Francis traveled to CAR in November 2015. He visited a Muslim village to illustrate the interreligious spirit of peace. Within the village's mosque, Pope Francis professed hope that CAR would re-establish "a welcoming home for all its children, regardless of their ethnic origin, political affiliation or religious confession." Christians and Muslims are brothers and sisters, he asserted. The fragile process of rebuilding within the CAR will be unsuccessful as long as the government fails to address grievances, establish representative and inclusive governance across the country, rebuild social services and work with religious leaders to re-establish religious traditions of peace and reconciliation. Religious leaders continue the hard work of healing the trauma of war and rebuilding a new society.

*Since the French term for bullets is "balle," some believe the term "anti-balaka" means "we are resistant to AK 47 bullets (anti-balle-AKA)" or means "anti-Kalashnikov bullets" from a slang term used by youth who called AK-47s "laka"



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