

FOCUS ON

CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC



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Catherine Ndovokoa lives in a village near Nana Outta, some 250 KM away from Bangui, Central African Republic (CAR)

Credit: CC BY ND 2.0, Malini Morzaria / EC / ECHO

Source: Flickr.com

THE COUNTRY AT A GLANCE

The Central African Republic (CAR) has suffered from political instability and recurrent internal tensions since it became independent in 1960. In recent years, the former French colony of Ubangi-Shari has witnessed an escalation of violence that opposed mainly Muslim Séléka to Christian and animist militias called anti-balaka. Since the fighting began in December 2012, all the 4.6 million habitants of CAR are considered to have been affected in some way. Although no official figures are available for the full period, thousands of civilians have been killed, hundreds of thousands have fled their homes, and nearly half a million people have taken refuge across the borders in neighbouring countries. After the latest peak of violence between 2012 and 2013, the interethnic nature of the conflict and its brutality sparked fear of a potential genocide, and pushed the international community to intervene through a United Nations peacekeeping operation with a strong mandate for Protection of Civilians. Following a series of peace talks and the Bangui Forum on National Reconciliation on 11 May, a Constitutional Referendum as well as the Presidential and Legislative elections were respectively held between December 2015 and March 2016. Overall, the persistent humanitarian needs, fragile overall security situation, and lack of progress in the peace process constitute a major cause for concern, together with the insufficient funding for humanitarian and peacebuilding activities and the climate of impunity due to weak and understaffed national security forces and judicial authorities.

FLAG

NAME	Central African Republic (English) Ködörösêse tî Bêafrîka (Sango) République centrafricaine (French)
CAPITAL	Bangui
OFFICIAL AND VERNACULAR LANGUAGE	French Sangho
POPULATION	4.6 million
ETHNIC GROUPS	Baya Banda Mandjia Sara Fulani Mboum M'Baka Yakoma Others
NEIGHBOURS	Chad Sudan South Sudan Democratic Republic of Congo Congo Cameroon
TOTAL OF CIVILIANS AFFECTED (EST. SINCE 2011)	4,6 million (the whole population)
GDP (2016)	USD 1.5 billion
PEOPLE IN NEED OF ASSISTANCE (2015)	2.3 million ¹
LIFE EXPECTANCY AT BIRTH	49 years
CAR REFUGEES	482.000 ²
HUMAN DEVELOPMENT INDEX	0.34 (185/187)
IDPS	418.000
GLOBAL PEACE INDEX	3.33 (158/162) ³
CORRUPTION PERCEPTION RANKING	144/177 ⁴

¹ OCHA, CAR Humanitarian Bulletin, May 2016 (http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/CAR_HUMANITARIAN_BULLETIN_MAY_2016.pdf, last access: 24.07.2016)

² Id.

³ <http://www.visionofhumanity.org/#/page/indexes/global-peace-index/2015>

⁴ Transparency International, 2014 Report

INTRODUCTION

Geopolitical context

CAR is rich in natural resources, including minerals, large undeveloped reserves of uranium, and potential reserves of oil. Due to its location, CAR has long harboured insurgent groups from neighboring countries, and its crisis is strictly linked to changing geostrategic rivalries on the continent, involving African and global actors driven by their specific interests. Sudan's influence in CAR allegedly includes military training to armed groups. Such groups as Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) have also used northeastern CAR as a safe haven. Chadian president Idris Deby has acted as a mediator and is claimed to have helped François Bozizé come to power in 2003.⁵ In 2013 the Chadian Government provided peacekeeping forces in CAR, but removed its contingent after accusations that it was supporting the alliance of rebel militia factions Séléka.⁶ The Lord's Resistance Army started its operations in CAR after setting up bases in the Garamba National Park in DR Congo in 2008. Further to the exploitation of natural resources such as gold and ivory and illegal trade, LRA has been attacking and looting villages in the eastern and south-eastern prefectures of CAR. LRA combatants, as part of their modus operandi, have abducted and looted an increased number of villagers including children causing forced displacement of civilians in the concerned areas. Between July 2015 and July 2016, reportedly, suspected LRA were responsible for 94 incidents resulting in the abduction of 410 civilians and killing of 17 civilians in CAR.⁷ Financially, the Central African Franc is pegged to the Euro, with deposit funds controlled in Paris. In May 2016, French President Francois Hollande met with the newly elected CAR President Faustin Toudera and announced the end of the French military force known as Sangaris by 2016. The United States are also militarily involved in the country, as they provide logistical support and advisers to the operations against the LRA in eastern and southeastern CAR, as part of the LRA Disarmament and Northern Uganda Recovery Act signed in 2010.

Peacekeeping missions and international presence: Mission interafricaine de surveillance des Accords de Bangui (MISAB, 1997 – 1998), United Nations Mission in the Central African Republic (MINURCA, 1998 – 2000), United Nations Peacebuilding Support Office in the Central African Republic (BONUCA, 2000 – 2009), Force multinationale de la Communauté économique et monétaire de l'Afrique centrale (FOMUC, 2002 – 2008), United Nations Mission in the Central African Republic and Chad (MINURCAT, 2007 – 2009), European Union-led peacekeeping force (EUFOR, 2008- 2009), Mission for the Consolidation of Peace in the Central African Republic (MICOPAX, 2008 – 2013), Bureau intégré des Nations Unies pour la consolidation de la paix en République centrafricaine (BINUCA, 2010 – 2013), Mission internationale de soutien à la Centrafrique sous conduite africaine (MISCA, 2013 – 2014) United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA, 2014 – ongoing)

Since 2013: Operation Sangaris, French forces.

⁵ ACAPS, Central African Republic Country Profile, ACAPS, July 2015 (http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/acaps_country_profile_car_27july2015.pdf, last accessed on 15.09.2015)

⁶ ALJazeera, Chad troops in CAR accused of pro-Seleka bias, 26 December 2013 (<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/africa/2013/12/chad-troops-car-accused-pro-seleka-bias-201312261218569193.html>, last accessed on 15.09.2015)

⁷ The State of LRA in 2016, LRA Crisis Tracker Report 2016 (<https://reports.lracrisistracker.com/pdf/2016-The-State-of-the-LRA.pdf>, last accessed on 24.07.2016).

The genesis of the conflict

The post-independence period was characterized by political instability with the only exception of the decade under President Ange-Félix Patassé (1993 – 2003). In 2003, General Bozizé backed by France and Chad, overthrew President Patassé after six months of fighting. Since the 2002/2003 conflict, there have been allegations about rape systematically used as a weapon of war against women, men and children. According to the situation referred to the International Criminal Court by the Government, over 600 victims of rape were identified within 5 months, pushing the International Criminal Court Prosecutor to open an investigation.⁸ In 2006, renewed internal fighting between Union of Democratic Forces for Unity (UFDR) rebels and government forces in the North displaced tens of thousands, some fleeing across the border to neighbouring Chad, also as a result of cross-border raids by non-state armed groups based in Chad and Sudan, and military operations by French and CAR forces. Despite new peace deals between the Government and some of the warring factions, insecurity and violence, including attacks on civilians and aid workers, continued especially in the North. Since 2008, Government forces had to additionally face members of the Ugandan LRA from the DRC, who killed civilians, abducted children, and provoked massive displacements of population. Authorised by the CAR government, Ugandan forces attacked the LRA on CAR territory, joined in March 2012 by an African Union approved multinational force (CAR, DRC, South Sudan and Uganda). One year later, the Séléka rebel alliance marched south and captured the capital, ousting President Bozizé. The country descended into ethnic and sectarian violence with the formation of Christian and animist militias called Anti-balaka (“antimachete”), opposing the rise of the Séléka forces. The clashes resulted again in mass civilian displacement and ran the high risk of genocide. Between 2013 and 2014, French troops intervened and joined the UN forces that took over the African peacekeeping mission, obtaining the official disbanding of the Séléka forces.⁹ Thanks to Congolese mediation efforts, on 23 July 2014, Séléka and anti-balaka representatives signed a ceasefire agreement in Brazzaville. However, this did not impede the recurrent eruption of violence, also ignited on December 2015 by the declaration by the ex-Séléka rebels (currently named Front populaire pour la renaissance de la Centrafrique) of an autonomous Republic of Logone and the refusal to recognize the general elections.¹⁰

Peace talks and agreements

The first attempt to peace of the democratic era, the Bangui Peace Agreements, was initiated by President Patassé in 1997. On 21 June 2008, the Government of President Bozizé and two of the three major rebel groups signed a comprehensive peace agreement. Although the peace process ground to a halt due to a controversial amnesty law promulgated in the same year, in December an Inclusive National Dialogue led two of the three main opposition groups to sign a new peace agreement with the Government. President Bozizé named a consensus government at the start of 2009 in spite of unmitigated disagreements, especially regarding the implementation of the DDR. On 26 July 2015, 600 Central African Delegates, taking part in the Bangui Forum, reached a historic agreement on national reconciliation, known as the ‘Republican Pact’. The Government of the Central African Republic (CAR) and nine of the country’s armed opposition groups, also reached a ground-breaking accord on DDR of the armed groups’ forces at the forum.

⁸ Situation referred to the ICC by the CAR Government, December 2004 (<https://www.icc-cpi.int/car>, last accessed on 25.7.2016).

⁹ CAR’s new president dissolves rebel group, Al Jazeera, 13.9.2013 (<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/africa/2013/09/201391321058331162.html>, last accessed on 25.7.2016).

¹⁰ Rebel declares autonomous state in Central African Republic, Reuters, 16.12.2015 (<http://af.reuters.com/article/topNews/idAFKBN0TZ0TW20151216>, last accessed on 25.7.2016).

THE VOICE OF THE VICTIMS – STORIES

In CAR's northern region, Marie, 32, and Nadine, 24, are sharing a husband, as allowed by the laws of the country. Between them, they have five children. In May 2014, four armed men barged into their home, while Marie was feeding her toddler and chatting with Nadine who was six-months pregnant. The armed men raped both women and brutally killed their husband in their presence, then burned the family home. The women took their children and fled into the bush, staying there for several months before returning to their village. In the bush, they did not have access to basic social services including healthcare. They slept in the open air exposed to mosquitoes and fed on wild fruits and vegetables. "My rapists took away my dignity as a woman but they did not destroy my soul. I remain hopeful that peace will soon return to my beloved country and this nightmare will end" said Marie.¹¹

Ginette, 24, lives in the central region of CAR. She too, was raped by four armed men, in front of her husband's family. After this incident, his family rejected her, she said, with tears in her eyes. "I was very angry; I had lost all my dignity and human integrity. I was humiliated and I thought that all was lost for me. That it was now useless for me to live. After this dreadful incident, I took ill and moved into a tent with my aunt in a site for internally displaced persons. My aunt took me to the hospital for medical assistance but two weeks later, my illness did not improve even though I was taking my medications religiously". Ginette was not responding well to medical treatment so her doctor referred her for psychosocial support. "They sent me to a listening center where I received psychosocial support, after which I attended a vocational training. After a few months, I am now empowered and respected within my family and in my community. I feel healed and I have gained back my dignity and integrity" stated Ginette.¹²

THE VOICE OF THE VICTIMS – VIDEOS

UNHCR, The Central African Republic Crisis: Hardship and Resilience,
https://youtu.be/qBZWENJGU_E?t=195

UNDP, Central African Republic: The path out of violence,
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hqq5S_FPspE

HUMANITARIAN CONTEXT

The humanitarian situation in the Central African Republic remains extremely critical, with the affected population in continuous need for increasing assistance. Around 2,3 million people need humanitarian assistance for shelter, food, basic healthcare, and access to children education. According to latest estimates, 418.000¹³ civilians are internally displaced, while 482.000 sought refuge in neighboring countries.¹⁴ Humanitarian response capacity is weak to non-existent in CAR, which is considered a forgotten crisis, with only 15% of the 2015 humanitarian funding requirement of USD 613 million available. In addition, the Trust Fund for Victims, supporting assistance programs for victims of crimes under the ICC jurisdiction, particularly with victims of sexual and gender based violence, announced the suspension of its activities in the country until further notice.

¹¹ Story credit to Mercy Corps, as told in OCHA, Shaken but not broken: Women recover from abuse, <http://www.unocha.org/top-stories/all-stories/shaken-not-broken-women-recover-abuse>

¹² Story credit to International Rescue Committee, as told in OCHA, Shaken but not broken: Women recover from abuse, <http://www.unocha.org/top-stories/all-stories/shaken-not-broken-women-recover-abuse>

¹³ OCHA, CAR Humanitarian Bulletin, May 2016 (http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/CAR_HUMANITARIAN_BULLETIN_MAY_2016.pdf, last access: 24.07.2016)

¹⁴ OCHA, CAR Humanitarian Bulletin, May 2016 (http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/CAR_HUMANITARIAN_BULLETIN_MAY_2016.pdf, last access: 24.07.2016)



A view of the camp for internally displaced persons (IDPs) at M'poko Airport in Bangui, capital of the Central African Republic

*Credit: CC BY NC ND 2.0, Catianne Tijerina / UN Photo
Source: Flickr.com*



Mothers and babies aged between 0 and 5 years are lining up in a Health Post at Begoua, a district of Bangui, waiting for the two drops of the oral polio vaccine

*Credit: CC BY 2.0, Pierre Holtz / OCHA
Source: commons.wikimedia.org*



Thirteen-year-old Fadhi and Mairama, aged 25, collect water from a pump at the Ecole Liberty in Bossangoa.

*Credit: CC BY NC, S. Phelps / UNHCR
Source: Flickr.com*

Shelter

Prior to 2013, 85% of the population was a homeowner, with a higher percentage owning homes in rural areas (94%) than urban areas (75%). In urban regions, 17.4% of households were rented. Currently, after years of fighting and with 368.900 IDPs in the country, most of them have lost their property. With the return process ongoing in some areas of the country, and especially in Bangui, households are in need of a different kind of assistance. Returnees receive a settlement grant of 150 USD, mosquito nets, plastic tarpaulins, food and hygiene kits. Other projects involve the reconstruction of their houses, when possible. Those who are still in the camps, such as those of Bangui and Boda, are in urgent need of receiving adequate emergency shelter, especially in periods before the rainy season, as well as of sanitation activities.

Health

The national health system is in dire difficulties, with more than 563.314 people living in priority health zones in those districts excluded from basic health services. In 2012 the mortality rate for children under-five was 129 per 1,000 live births, an improvement compared to the past, but still higher than the average for low-income countries (in 2013, was 76 per 1,000). Life expectancy increased at 49.5 years in 2012, from 43 years in 2003, with malaria, respiratory diseases, and waterborne diseases are the most common causes of death. The frequency and impact of those phenomena is made more likely by poor access to water and sanitation as well as population movement, overcrowding, and open defecation. Low vaccination coverage has led to frequent serious outbreaks of avoidable communicable diseases.

Water and sanitation

Despite some tentative reform of water supply and sanitation systems, in 2016 only 22% of the population has access to drinkable water, and 34% of the population in rural areas has access to safe water.¹⁵ In 2015, around 54% of the rural population and 90% of the urban population has access to water, but only 2% has water piped in their premises. Overall, 66% has other improved sources of water, 29% has some unimproved sources of water, and 3% consume surface water. Water availability is estimated to be between 3L and 12L per capita per day. As of 2012, 22% of households had improved sanitation facilities, 13% had access to shared facilities, 42% had access to other unimproved facilities, and 23% used open defecation. The country still do not count with sewage systems.

¹⁵ OCHA, 2016 Humanitarian Needs Overview (http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/2016_hno_car_final.pdf. last accessed on 26.7.2016)



In Paoua, Peul women communities receive help to set up small businesses.

Credit: CC BY 2.0, Brice Blondel / HDPTCAR
Source: Flickr.com

Food security

The Central African Republic has a high poverty rate, ranking 185 out of 187 countries in the 2014 UNDP Human Development Index.¹⁶ In 2015, more than 77% of the population lived on less than USD 2 per day. In 2016, around 1.3 million people (28% of the population), live in a state of food insecurity. In addition, 1.5 million are at risk of becoming food insecure if their means of subsistence are not strengthened.¹⁷ Protracted displacement has affected agricultural activity and overall access to food. Moreover, insecurity and road conditions affect access to market and prices. Prior to the conflict, one-third of households failed to cover their nutritional needs. People consumed an average of 1.6 meals per day, with children consuming the most. Food stocking is limited in CAR and the conflict has worsened the situation.



A Classroom in CAR

Credit: Public Domain, Pierre Holtz / OCHA
Source: commons.wikimedia.org

Education

In CAR, education is mandatory until the age of 14, but the average population quit school after 4.5 years in the system. The education system is based around eight academic regional inspections. According to official figures, 28% of primary school-aged children are out of school, and only 1.8% of pupils go beyond secondary education. The attendance rate is also dependent from gender and ethnic factors: 46.4% of girls are enrolled in school, against 66.1% of boys, and only 5% of Fulani and pygmy children attend school. In CAR there is one university, in Bangui.



Refugees of the fighting in the Central African Republic observe Rwandan soldiers being dropped off at Bangui M'Poko International Airport in the Central African Republic

Credit: Public Domain, SSgt Ryan Crane
Source: commons.wikimedia.org

Protection

Despite national legislation banning female genital mutilation (FGM) since 1966 (amended in 1996), in 2008 25.7% of women suffered from FGM, of which 52% was aged between 10 and 14. In 2014, 432 children were killed or maimed by violence. The recruitment of children by armed groups has risen from 2,500 at the beginning of the crisis, to an estimation fluctuating between 6,000 and 10,000.

¹⁶ hdr.undp.org/en/countries/profiles/CAF

¹⁷ OCHA, 2016 Humanitarian Needs Overview (http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/2016_hno_car_final.pdf, last accessed on 26.7.2016)



Eland armoured car of the Central African Multinational Force patrols the streets of Bangui in December 2013.

*Credit: Public Domain, Idriss Fall
Source: commons.wikimedia.org*

Access

Humanitarian access continues to be hindered by various constraints, particularly violence against civilians including aid workers and their assets, interference in the implementation of humanitarian activities, active hostilities and lack of acceptance communities. Since January 2014 more than 2,742 security incidents have been recorded, including 400 acts of violence against humanitarian partners. In June 2016, the incidents of violence against aid workers represented 13% of the total number of incidents during the reporting period. The number of reported access incidents increased by 9%, from 49 in May to 54 in June.¹⁸

TRUTH SEEKING PROCESSES

President Bozizé initiated the first National Reconciliation Forum in 2003, with the aim to promote dialogue and reconciliation between different political, social, religious affiliations and make recommendations concerning how the country should be run after the civil war. One of the few results was the establishment of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission tasked to investigate human rights abuses committed during the period 1960 to 2003. The Commission did not just investigate on the past, but also called on all actors, from both civil and military sectors, to publicly recognize the negative impact of their actions, and assume official commitments for the future. Finally, the Commission also called for the establishment of a solidarity fund for the compensation of victims. In fact, In spite of the widespread instability, civil society continued to actively engage in peacebuilding activities such as the EU-funded Interfaith Peace Platform. Established in 2014, the platform reunited NGOs with religious leaders of the three denominations (Catholic, Evangelical and Muslim) to support local interfaith “peace committees” and to promote intercommunity dialogue. A similar initiative was also promoted in 2015 by the NGO Search for Common Ground, Finn Church Aid (FCA), and the KAICIID Dialogue Centre. Also founded in early 2014, the Commission Vérité de Bangassou promotes social cohesion within communities by working directly with traditional and religious community leaders. The Commission’s main goal is to ensure that community leaders play a key role as conflict mediators and agents of peace.

The most recent initiative (in May 2015) has been the Bangui Forum, reuniting 600 Central African Delegates, which brought together the CAR’s transitional authorities, political parties, religious and civil society representatives as well as armed groups. It took place as part of a broader process which seeks to advance the country’s national reconciliation and reconstruction process. The Forum resulted in a historic agreement on national reconciliation, known as the ‘Republican Pact’. Among other things, the agreement included the establishment of a special criminal court and a popular truth and reconciliation process.

¹⁸ OCHA, June 2016 Humanitarian Access Snapshot (http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/RCA_OCHA_1606_AccessHum.pdf. last accessed on 26.7.2016)

Survey on truth seeking

According to a 2010 population-based survey realised by the Human Rights Center of the Berkeley University, In CAR, 89 percent of respondents said it is important to know what happened. They most frequently say it is important because the truth must be known (58%), to understand why the conflicts and violence happened (42%), and to know who is responsible (35%).

FIGHT AGAINST IMPUNITY AND REPARATION

In May 2014, the interim government referred the situation since 2012—when the most recent crisis began—to the International Criminal Court (ICC). In September 2014, the office of the ICC Prosecutor, which had already opened an investigation into an earlier period of violence, started a second investigation increasing hope for justice. On June 3, 2015 Catherine Samba-Panza, interim president of the CAR, promulgated a law creating a national Special Criminal Court to investigate and prosecute grave human rights violations committed in the country since 2003, after a quick nine-month drafting and legislative process. For the first time a sovereign government has created through national law an innovative hybrid court where national, international judges and prosecutors will work together for victims to obtain justice for the atrocities they have suffered.



Bridge over the Congo between the Democratic Republic of Congo and the Central African Republic

Credit: CC BY SA, Julien Harneis

Source: commons.wikimedia.org

PEACEBUILDING

Civilians are experiencing intense violence and trauma causing lasting physical and psychological damage. This danger is particularly concrete for women and girls, and to help them cope, some NGOs such as Médecins Sans Frontières and Mercy Corps runs listening centers in various locations, with the aim to allow people to have access to counseling, legal support and medical care. Finally, there is lots of innovative work being done, such as networks of community radio stations creating listening committees for people to discuss local issues, and helping family members in refugee camps to connect with one another. Another initiative was started by lawyer's groups fighting impunity for those who commit sexual and gender-based violence, and by training institutes providing young people with the skills and knowledge to start their own businesses and leave conflict behind them. At local level, initiatives by groups of widows and rape victims from CAR writing and singing songs of a style called *dwog paco* whilst working at an Internally Displaced Person's camp in northern Uganda have been documented. These songs encouraged child soldiers who had escaped LRA to return home and be forgiven for the atrocities they were forced to commit. This spontaneous initiative was later transformed into a charity called the Voice Project.



Part of the assistance program from the European Commission, which includes reintegrating child soldiers back into their communities

Credit: CC, Ikiriho
Source: Flickr.com

“OUR PARENTS AND GRAND-PARENTS LIVED IN PEACE WITH THE CHRISTIANS BUT WE HAVE MANAGED TO KILL EACH OTHER - SOMETHING WE'VE NEVER SEEN. NOW WE MUST SAY 'NEVER AGAIN.' WE MUST TAKE STOCK OF WHAT HAPPENED. WE MUST FORGIVE EACH OTHER TO LIVE TOGETHER AGAIN AND REBUILD OUR COUNTRY”

(Mahamat Moctar, a 32-year-old Muslim trader who spent 15 months living as a refugee in neighbouring Democratic Republic of Congo) - “A tough homecoming in Central African Republic” Crispin Dembassa-Kette, IrinNews, 23 July 2015¹⁹

¹⁹ <http://www.irinnews.org/report/101780/a-tough-homecoming-in-central-african-republic>, last accessed: 15.09.2015



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