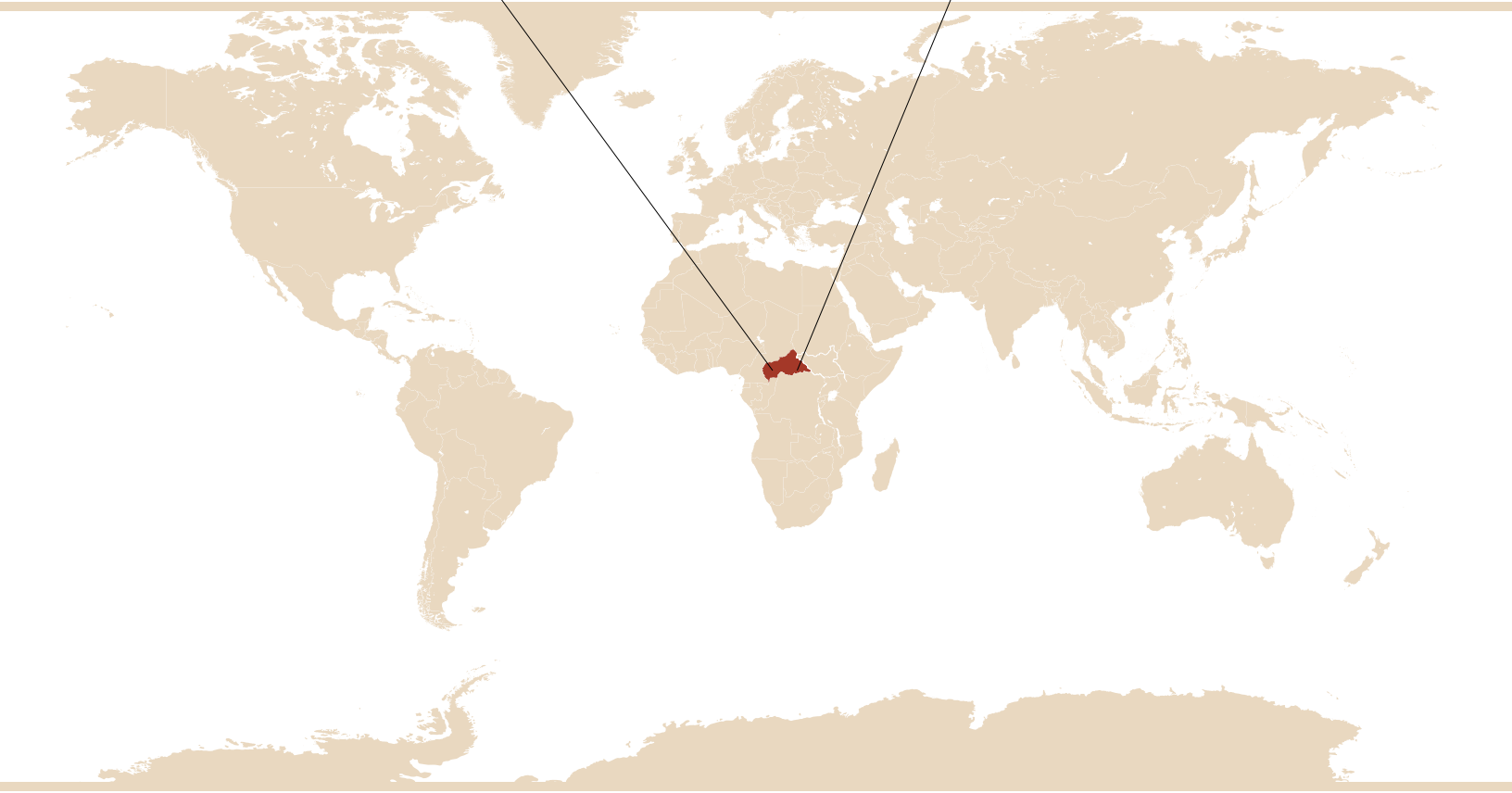
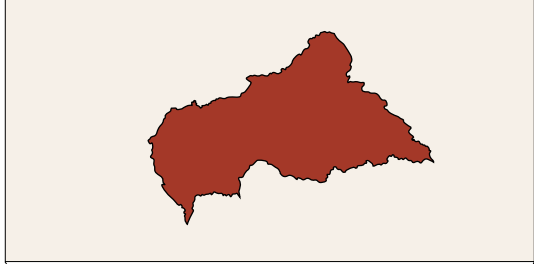


CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC



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Key Findings

Militias formed along opposing Muslim and Christian lines in the Central African Republic (CAR) have engaged in systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of freedom of religion or belief. For much of 2014, CAR was engulfed in a religious conflict after a 2013 coup resulted in rampant lawlessness and the complete collapse of government control. The ethnic cleansing of Muslims and the sectarian violence in CAR in this reporting period meet the International Religious Freedom Act's (IRFA) definition of particularly severe violations of religious freedom meriting "country of particular concern," or CPC, designation. While IRFA's language focuses CPC designations on governmental action or inaction, its spirit is to bring U.S. pressure and attention to bear to end egregious violations of religious freedom and broaden the U.S. government's ability to engage the actual drivers of persecution. As such, USCIRF recommends CPC designation for the Central African Republic in 2015.

Background

The Central African Republic has a long history of political strife, coups, and severe human rights abuses. However, severe religious freedom violations and sectarian violence are new to the majority-Christian country. The rise of religious freedom violations and sectarian violence in the CAR started with the December 2012 political rebellion by a coalition of majority-Muslim armed rebels, the Séléka. The Séléka rebel alliance united four northern rebel groups angered by the government's failure to implement previous peace deals calling for economic development for the country's marginalized northeast and army jobs for former rebel fighters. Large numbers of Chadian and Sudanese foreign fighters and diamond sellers also supported the rebels, hoping to increase their access to CAR's lucrative natural resources. Despite a brief peace agreement, the Séléka took the capital, Bangui, in March 2013 and deposed President François

Bozizé. Subsequently, Séléka leader Michel Djotodia proclaimed himself President. As rulers, Séléka leaders and soldiers committed crimes against humanity, including enforced disappearances, illegal detention, torture, and extrajudicial killings of political opponents, many of whom ended up in mass graves. The Séléka also, at times, engaged in targeted attacks on churches and Christian communities while sparing mosques and Muslims.

In June 2013, deposed president Bozizé, former Central African Armed Forces (FACA) soldiers, and members of Bozizé's inner circle met in Cameroon and France to plan his return to power. They recruited existing self-defense militias (known as the anti-balaka), FACA soldiers, and other aggrieved non-Muslims to carry out their plans. As part of their effort to return to power, Bozizé and his supporters framed the upcoming fighting as an opportunity to avenge Séléka attacks on non-Muslims. Christian fears about their rights under a Muslim leader were compounded by military aircrafts transporting wounded Séléka to Khartoum and a letter from President Djotodia to the Organization of Islamic Cooperation asking for support in return for helping to institute Islamic governments in CAR and other regional countries.

The fighting between the Séléka and anti-balaka started in September 2013. The situation dramatically deteriorated on December 5, 2013, when the anti-balaka attacked Muslim neighborhoods in Bangui. The ensuing fighting led to a large-scale conflict in which civilians were targeted based on their religious identity. In January 2014, at a meeting of Central African and neighboring states, President Djotodia was forced to resign. Two weeks later, Catherine Samba Panza, then mayor of Bangui, was voted in as Interim President by the country's Parliament. Sectarian violence continued to escalate for the first half of 2014, but slowed after the country's de facto partition between the Séléka and the anti-balaka and the signing of the Brazzaville peace accords on July 23.

The fighting now is largely within and between the militias for land and resource control. However, after over

a year of violence between Muslims and Christians, the country has become religiously divided. Muslims who took refuge in peacekeeper-protected enclaves remain there for fear of being attacked by the anti-balaka should they leave. Sporadic killings and skirmishes based on religious identity continue. The ethnic cleansing campaign in Muslim areas resulted in 99 percent of the capital's Muslim residents leaving Bangui, 80 percent of CAR's Muslim population fleeing to neighboring countries, and 417 of the country's 436 mosques being destroyed in 2014.

In an effort to stabilize the country, the African Union (AU), European Union, and France deployed peacekeepers to Bangui and outside of the capital in late 2013 and early 2014. The AU troops were absorbed into the enhanced 10,000 troop United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA) peacekeeper mission on September 15, 2014. Government officials, the police, and judiciary have neither the infrastructure nor the resources to stop the fighting or to bring to justice the perpetrators of violence. CAR transitional authorities are in the process of drafting a new constitution.

Religious Freedom Conditions 2014–2015

Violations by the anti-balaka

The International Criminal Court (ICC) and the United Nations both opened investigations into reports of genocide in the CAR in this reporting period. In December 2014, the United Nations Commission of Inquiry on the Central African Republic (COI) issued a report finding a “pattern of ethnic cleansing committed by the anti-balaka in the areas in which Muslims had been living.” The anti-balaka began their ethnic cleansing campaign with the December 5, 2013 attack on Bangui. The COI found that, although purportedly fighting to return Bozizé to power, the anti-balaka deliberately targeted Muslims and forcibly transferred them out of their villages. Bozizé is reported to have told supporters to kill Muslims.

The anti-balaka have killed hundreds of Muslim civilians since January 2014. The arrival of French and AU troops in Bangui and their Séléka demobilization efforts in early 2014 left the Muslim population without protection and vulnerable to attack. Within months, CAR's western and northwestern cities, towns, and villages were emptied of their Muslim residents. Anti-balaka fighters deliberately killed Muslims because of their religious

identity or told them to leave the country or die. The anti-balaka even killed Muslims fleeing the violence, including those in humanitarian-assisted evacuation convoys. In March, the United Nations and Chadian peacekeepers operated convoys to help Muslims safely leave the country. The program was stopped by transitional president Catherine Samba-Panza, who did not want the government to be held responsible for the ethnic cleansing of Muslims. The UN reports that 99 percent of the capital's Muslim residents have left Bangui, and 80 percent of the entire country's Muslim population has fled to Cameroon or Chad. Prior to the start of the conflict in December 2012, Muslims comprised 15 percent of CAR's population. According to Human Rights Watch, the remaining Muslims live in peacekeeper-protected enclaves and are vulnerable to attack if they leave.

In addition to the targeted killing of Muslims, the anti-balaka systematically destroyed mosques and Muslim homes and businesses. U.S. Permanent Representative to the United Nations Samantha Power reported, after her trip to the Central African Republic in March 2015, that 417 of the country's 436 mosques have been destroyed.

Violations by the Séléka

The UN Commission of Inquiry determined that Séléka soldiers engaged in widespread rape, looting of non-Muslim properties, targeted killing of Christians, and the systematic killing of non-Muslim civilians in Bossangoa in 2013. During their rebellion and after the March 2013 coup, Séléka fighters attacked Christian priests, pastors, nuns, church buildings, and other Christian institutions. The militia specifically looted churches but not mosques, and protected Muslim residents while killing or raping Christian residents. However, the COI did not find that the Séléka engaged in the ethnic cleansing of CAR's Christian community.

U.S. Policy

U.S.-Central African Republic relations historically have been limited. USAID does not have a presence in the country. U.S. Embassy Bangui has closed multiple times due to instability. Current U.S. policy focuses on assisting the CAR and supporting international efforts to prevent mass atrocities and provide security, humanitarian assistance, justice, rule of law, and national reconciliation. The U.S. government supports the transitional

government, UN peacekeeping mission, and African and international mediating efforts.

As part of U.S. and international efforts to bring justice to the CAR, on May 13, 2014, President Barack Obama issued Executive Order 13667 sanctioning the following persons for threatening the stability of the Central African Republic: former president François Bozizé, former transitional president Michel Djotodia, Séléka leaders Nourredine Adam and Abdoulaye Miskine, and anti-balaka “political coordinator” Levy Yakite. The sanctions block these individuals’ property and financial interests in the United States.

In 2014, the United States provided more than \$145 million in humanitarian assistance, \$100 million to support international peacekeepers, and \$7.5 million in conflict mitigation, interfaith messaging, and human rights programs. U.S. Permanent Representative to the United Nations Samantha Power and Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs Linda Thomas-Greenfield travelled to the Central African Republic in 2014, and the United States facilitated high-level inter-religious exchanges in this reporting period all aimed to prevent and end mass atrocities, increase interfaith dialogue, and encourage national reconciliation efforts.

Future U.S. programming, based on the State Department’s FY2016 budget request to Congress, will focus on re-establishing and professionalizing a functioning criminal justice system; supporting efforts to end impunity for serious crimes; training and professionalizing the CAR’s law enforcement forces and prison system; training the CAR’s military; and building capacity for military and police from contributing countries deploying to the country.

U.S. policy in the CAR is led by Special Representative for the Central African Republic Ambassador W. Stuart Symington and U.S. Embassy Bangui Chargé d’Affaires David Brown, who previously served as a Special Advisor on CAR in Washington, D.C. Prior to Brown’s appointment as Chargé in September 2014, the Embassy had been closed since the start of the conflict in December 2012.

Recommendations

In addition to recommending that the United States designate the Central African Republic a “country of particular concern” for systematic, ongoing and

egregious violations of freedom of religion or belief, USCIRF recommends that the U.S. government should:

- Include issues related to ending sectarian violence, reducing interfaith tensions, and ensuring the rights of religious freedom and religious minorities in all engagements with CAR authorities, UN officials, and MINUSCA contributing countries;
- Continue to speak out regularly against sectarian violence and gross human rights abuses by the Séléka and the anti-balaka;
- Sanction additional Séléka and anti-balaka members responsible for organizing and/or engaging in sectarian violence, ethnic cleansing, and crimes against humanity;
- Support rule of law reform and continue funding programs to re-establish and professionalize the CAR’s judiciary;
- Support and fund the formation of the Special Criminal Court, a hybrid court composed of CAR judges and international judges, to prosecute persons accused of committing ethnic cleansing, crimes against humanity, and other gross human rights abuses;
- Work with CAR transitional authorities, religious leaders, and other civil society representatives to ensure that international standards of freedom of religion or belief are included in the CAR’s new constitution;
- Encourage CAR transitional authorities and interfaith leaders to undertake initiatives to ensure that CAR Muslims have a future in the country, by issuing statements that Muslims are full and equal citizens, including Muslims in constitution drafting and national reconciliation dialogues, and aiding the rebuilding of destroyed mosques and Muslim properties;
- Continue to support interfaith dialogues and efforts by religious leaders and their U.S. faith-based partners to rebuild social cohesion; and
- Continue to support humanitarian assistance for refugees and displaced persons, as well as rebuilding projects.