

UNHCR
Emergency and Security Service



WRITENET Paper No. 14 / 2001

CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC
– UNCERTAIN PROSPECTS

By Paul Melly

Independent Researcher, UK

Revised May 2002

**WriteNet is a Network of Researchers and Writers on
Human Rights, Forced Migration, Ethnic and Political Conflict**

**WriteNet is a Subsidiary of Practical Management (UK)
E-mail: writenet@gn.apc.org**

THIS PAPER WAS PREPARED MAINLY ON THE BASIS OF PUBLICLY AVAILABLE INFORMATION, ANALYSIS AND COMMENT. ALL SOURCES ARE CITED. THE PAPER IS NOT, AND DOES NOT PURPORT TO BE, EITHER EXHAUSTIVE WITH REGARD TO CONDITIONS IN THE COUNTRY SURVEYED, OR CONCLUSIVE AS TO THE MERITS OF ANY PARTICULAR CLAIM TO REFUGEE STATUS OR ASYLUM. THE VIEWS EXPRESSED IN THE PAPER ARE THOSE OF THE AUTHOR AND ARE NOT NECESSARILY THOSE OF WRITENET OR UNHCR.

ISSN 1020-8429

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1	Introduction.....	1
2	Historical and Cultural Background	1
3	The Patassé Government and Military Instability	4
3.1	The Patassé Administration: Political and Economic Tensions	4
3.2	The 1996-1997 Mutiny Crisis and Its Consequences	5
4	The Crisis of 2001	8
4.1	Failed Coup of May and Aftermath.....	8
4.2	The Aftermath and Consequences	14
5	Factors Shaping the Future	18
5.1	The Strengths and Weaknesses of the Patassé Government.....	18
5.2	The Opposition Parties	22
5.3	Civil Society, the Churches, Trade Unions and Human Rights Groups.....	24
5.4	Security Issues and Potential Armed Opponents – the Risk of a Rural Bush War.....	26
5.5	Rural Security and Potential Rural Guerrilla War.....	26
5.6	African Diplomatic Pressure.....	28
5.7	Social and Economic Pressures	29
6	External Players.....	31
6.1	CEMAC	32
6.2	Democratic Republic of Congo.....	32
6.3	Cameroon	33
6.4	Chad	34
6.5	Sudan.....	34
6.6	Libya	34
6.7	France	35
6.8	Bretton Woods Institutions and the United Nations.....	35
7	Scenarios	35
7.1	Political Reconciliation and Gradual Economic Recovery	36
7.2	A Slide into Deepening Conflict and Economic Collapse.....	36
7.3	Continued Instability, Undermining Sporadic Reconciliation Moves and Economic Recovery Efforts.....	37
8	Conclusion	38
9	Bibliography	39

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
CP 2500, CH-1211 Geneva 2, Switzerland

Web Site: <http://www.unhcr.org>

1 Introduction¹

The Central African Republic (CAR) is in an extremely fragile condition. Stability was already at risk before the failed attempt at a coup d'état of May-June 2001. The failure to rebuild a national consensus after the violence of mid-year has left the country on the verge of civil war, with incipient rebellions in both northern and southern regions and a tense ambiance in the capital, Bangui. A wave of extra-judicial killings by security forces after the coup attempt caused widespread fear, especially among the Yakoma, a southern ethnic group.² The trial of the former defence minister and others accused of complicity in the coup has begun, but the fairness of its preparation has been widely criticized by human rights organizations.³ On the other hand neighbouring countries have been trying to promote a settlement between the government and the emergent northern armed opposition and the sending of a peace-keeping force has been raised.⁴

2 Historical and Cultural Background

The history of the CAR has been marked by exploitation and under-development, weak state institutions and sporadic violent episodes. Although the country has avoided full-scale civil war or ethnic conflict since independence in 1960, it has enjoyed few periods of stable, accountable government and economic growth.

Geography has had an important impact on the evolution of the area that comprises today's Central African Republic. Although the country is at the centre of the continent, straddling the boundary between the sub-Saharan savanna and the rainforests of the Congo basin, it lies

¹ **Note on sourcing:** The author has been writing extensively on Central African affairs, French policy and African matters generally since the 1980s and during this time developed a wide range of contacts, with whom frequent communication is maintained. Most of the individuals concerned will only speak on condition of non-attribution. Material from these regular discussions has been incorporated into this report. As far as possible an indication of the sourcing has been given in the footnotes. For obvious reasons of personal safety it is sometimes not possible to identify sources exactly. Those mentioned as "sources" are mainly based on direct interviews by the author rather than published printed material; publications are referred to as such. It is possible to give an indication of the type of personal sources drawn on at some key institutions, over the past few years.

World Bank: Successive vice-presidents for Africa, regional directors for central African region, country directors for CAR/Cameroon/Chad, country officers and economists, sector specialists for banking, agriculture, energy etc, the HIPC (Highly Indebted Poor Country) debt initiative team, officials working on poverty reduction.

IMF: Directors of the Africa department and deputies, deputy managing director, heads of unit for equatorial Africa region, country officers.

French Government: Development policy specialists at Agence française de développement and Ministère de la Coopération, Africa advisory team at the presidency, Ministère des affaires étrangères, Africa region officials, ministry of defence officials, peace-keeping planners and analysts in defence ministry and general staff, diplomats, director of the treasury, Banque de France department for relations with the franc zone.

² Fédération Internationale des Ligues des Droits de l'Homme, *Droits de l'homme en République centrafricaine: discours et réalité: un fossé béant*, Paris, 13 February 2002

³ Fédération Internationale des Ligues des Droits de l'Homme, *République centrafricaine: une parodie de justice*, Paris, 13 February 2002 (press release)

⁴ Agence France Presse [Tripoli/Paris], 28 January 2002, reporting interviews given by CAR foreign minister Agba Otikpo Mé Zo Dè and Libya's minister for African Unity, Ali Abdessalam Triki, to CAR national radio in Tripoli

apart from many of the traditional trade routes. Right into the modern era, its history has been shaped by its landlocked location, far from easily accessible economic opportunities. Most of the territory enjoys good rainfall and ample cultivable land, but isolation or, in the modern era, high transport costs, have hampered its ability to take full advantage of these assets. This may partly explain why it is so thinly populated – many eastern regions are barely inhabited at all.

At a basic level, the CAR has the potential to be economically viable. It can feed itself in basic products, produce cash crops for export and support a substantial livestock herd; these agricultural assets are complemented by substantial reserves of high quality alluvial diamonds, which are mostly mined by local people, using artisanal techniques. This provides a source of cash income for many rural areas. There are significant rainforest timber reserves and timber recently overtook diamonds as the main official export earner (although diamonds would still be ahead if the large volumes of smuggled stones were taken into account). The formal sector economy is small, concentrated largely in Bangui and dominated by local commerce and the public sector.

There are up to 30 major ethnic groups in a population estimated at around 3.8 million in mid-2001. There is a significant distinction between those ethnic groups concentrated in the savannah regions of the north and north-west and the “river peoples” of the forested south. Among the main savannah groups are the Sara, Gbaya, Mandja and Bamda, while southern peoples include the Sango, Banziri and Yakoma, as well as the Aka pygmies (who live in the forests of the south-west).⁵

Traumatic historical experience still has an impact on the nature of today’s CAR. The savannah regions were the target of slave raiding, both by Arab raiders from Sudan – which may partly explain why the north-east is today so thinly populated – and by the southern river peoples, who sold captives on to traders in contact with Europeans on the coast. This contributed to a degree of mistrust and tension between forest and savannah groups that still finds some reflection in modern politics: at least until recently, President Ange-Félix Patassé has been able to count on mass popular support in the populous savannah cotton belt, while he remains widely distrusted by southerners.⁶

The CAR was also scarred by its experience of colonialism. The French set up a base at Bangui in 1889, gradually extending their control to create the territory of Oubangui-Chari. But in contrast to for instance Senegal, Dahomey (today’s Benin) or what is now southern Congo-Brazzaville, this was a backwater of the empire: administration was weak and effective day to day control was largely in the hands of plantation operators who imposed a brutal forced labour system; there was little spending on infrastructure and development.⁷

Independence came in 1960, but the new state suffered a catastrophic loss with the death in a plane crash of its inspirational and statesmanlike nationalist leader Barthelemy Boganda. It has never subsequently enjoyed a sustained period of stable, democratic and effective government. The first elected administration, led by President David Dacko, proved unable to

⁵ Economist Intelligence Unit, *Central African Republic: Country Profile 2001*, London 2001

⁶ O’Toole, T., *The Central African Republic: the Continent’s Hidden Heart*, Boulder CO: Westview Press, 1986

⁷ *Ibid*

articulate a path forward; on New Year's night 1965 it was overthrown by the army, under the command of chief of staff Jean-Bedel Bokassa, a onetime sergeant in the colonial army who had risen through the ranks.⁸ His authoritarian regime – in which Ange-Félix Patassé, the present head of state, served as prime minister – became increasingly brutal, erratic, corrupt and personalized; in 1977 he proclaimed himself “emperor” and staged a lavishly tasteless coronation that made his country an international laughing stock. For France, Bokassa was a “useful idiot”, the friendly ruler of a country in a key strategic location, at the heart of Africa, and a vital military back-up to French efforts to curb Libyan involvement in Chad; but his increasingly controversial human rights record was becoming an embarrassment and in 1979 he was ousted in a French-backed putsch that restored David Dacko to the presidency.

Amidst all too evident government failings, the civilian administration was once again removed by the army, led by General André Kolingba, in 1981. Kolingba's rule, while authoritarian and significantly influenced by ethnic loyalties and reliance on fellow members of his Yakoma ethnic group,⁹ was not overtly brutal: he generally attempted to co-opt potential opponents into the power structure rather than imprison them.¹⁰ At last the CAR had a stable government that devoted some effort to meeting development needs; constitutional rule was restored in 1986 – although in one-party form, with the creation of the Rassemblement démocratique centrafricain (RDC). However, ethnic factors were beginning to colour the distribution of power and privilege and General Kolingba's security was assured by an Israeli-trained presidential guard recruited essentially from his own ethnic group, the Yakoma; the Kolingba family came to acquire substantial real estate holdings in central Bangui. An influential backroom role was played by General Kolingba's security adviser, the French colonel Jean-Claude Manton – who seems to have been recruited privately, but with the quiet acquiescence of Paris. During this period France continued to play a key role, maintaining major military bases at Bangui (the Beal and M'poko airport barracks) and the western town of Bouar, where it maintained a major airbase and land operations training base; at any one time, there were generally around 1,250 French troops in the CAR.

Under President Kolingba, government began to address the need for economic reform, for example, auditing the public service payroll and trying to diversify the agricultural base through the development of sugar and oil palm plantations. But development was hampered by the CAR's landlocked location, which imposed heavy costs on the cotton and coffee export trade, undermining its ability to produce at a profit in periods when world commodity prices were low.¹¹

By the early 1990s popular pressure for democratization was spreading across francophone Africa. As in several other countries, opposition groups, public sector trade unions, human rights activists and students mounted a peaceful mass campaign for reform, with demonstrations and ghost city strikes. This alliance later formed the basis for one of the main political blocs of the subsequent democratic era, CODEPO (Conseil démocratique des partis politiques de l'opposition – later renamed Union des forces acquises à la paix, UFAP).

⁸ *Ibid*

⁹ Fédération Internationale des Ligues des Droits de l'Homme, *Droits de l'homme en République centrafricaine*

¹⁰ Economist Intelligence Unit, *Central African Republic: Quarterly Country Reports*, London, 1986-1990, *passim*

¹¹ *Idem*

During this period of growing mass activism, former prime minister Ange-Félix Patassé was living abroad, although the internal wing of his Mouvement pour la libération du peuple centrafricain (MLPC) was active, under the leadership of Hugues Doboze. Gradually, President Kolingba allowed the establishment of a multi-party system, a free press and eventually free presidential elections.

Ange-Félix Patassé flew home just in time for the 1993 presidential election in which, in the second-round run-off, he emerged victorious, thanks to the grassroots strength of the MLPC, particularly in the populous north-western cotton belt. But his victory provoked profound resentment among the home-based opposition figures, such as Abel Goumba, who had stayed in the country and taken the political risk of leading the democracy campaign. André Kolingba performed poorly in the election but accepted defeat with apparent good grace: having peacefully acquiesced in democratic change, he was allowed to retreat to a respected semi-retirement as leader of the RDC, with all the correct privileges accorded to a former head of state. His apparently intense resentment of the Patassé regime appears to have developed rather later (see below). Gradually, relations between the former leaders of the democracy campaign in CODEPO and the recently defeated RDC began to improve, while CODEPO grew increasingly resentful of the Patassé government and began almost to question its legitimacy, adopting obstructive parliamentary tactics. A decisive factor in changing the political climate was President Patassé's decision to push through a regional decentralization programme, widely opposed by other parties (although it has never actually been implemented).¹²

But more significant in the long term was the failure to address economic challenges and the increasing reliance on an ethnically-based pattern of military recruitment. These were crucial factors in creating the conditions for the mutinous violent upheavals of 1996-1997.

3 The Patassé Government and Military Instability

3.1 The Patassé Administration: Political and Economic Tensions

Ange-Félix Patassé came into a difficult but not impossible inheritance when he won the 1993 presidential election. The transition to multi-party democracy had been broadly peaceful (although one demonstrator is known to have been killed). The economy was in a sluggish condition. However, as a democratically elected new leader, President Patassé enjoyed internationally recognized political legitimacy and potential access to significant volumes of foreign aid. Moreover, at a basic level, the formal economy was financially viable, potentially able to generate enough local fiscal revenue to cover the current costs of core public services. The new president had the opportunity to embark on a slow but steady process of development and growth. This was particularly the case after the 50% devaluation of the CFA franc in January 1994.¹³

But the devaluation proved to be a missed opportunity. The CFA, the common currency of most former French colonies south of the Sahara, had long held a fixed parity against the French franc, guaranteed at 50:1 by the French treasury. The strength of the French franc and low world prices for their cash crop exports had rendered the African franc zone economies uncompetitive – but the zone-wide devaluation, to 100:1, dramatically restored this

¹² *Idem*, 1993-1994

¹³ Senior IMF and World Bank officials, Madrid and Washington. Personal interviews, 1994-1995

competitiveness. The sudden parity change was accompanied by the offer of substantial French debt relief and the offer of new aid from France, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund.¹⁴ But this assistance was made conditional on African governments embracing financial rigour and economic liberalization. Most other franc zone countries rapidly accepted and soon began to reap the benefits in the form of economic growth, increased government revenue and even a slow rise in living standards.¹⁵ But President Patassé and his first prime minister, Jean-Luc Mandaba, procrastinated; they were reluctant to accept the financial strictures demanded by the IMF, apparently fearful that these would undermine the patronage structures on which the administration was increasingly reliant.

Despite his democratic mandate, President Patassé ruled as if he could not count on the legitimacy of the ballot box and instead chose to rely heavily on a close circle of allies, particularly fellow northerners. His tendency to isolate himself in this way, trusting closely to supporters who had been with him in exile, provoked resentment among the grassroots of the MLPC and deepened his alienation from the opposition, and even elements in his own party – to the point where the national assembly, in which the MLPC was the largest party, forced the resignation of prime minister Jean-Luc Mandaba over corruption allegations.¹⁶ Meanwhile, government finances were undermined by patronage, most notably at the national fuel company Petroca: the company was supposed to provide a third of government domestic revenues but, under the control of presidential allies, it failed to transmit any funding to the government for months on end. The inveterate oppositionist stance of Abel Goumba and other CODEPO leaders only encouraged the President to rely ever more closely on a coterie of key associates.

This approach was also reflected in the organization of the military: the mainly Yakoma soldiers of the old Kolingba presidential guard were transferred back to the regular army (the Forces Armées Centrafricaines – “le FACA”), to be replaced by recruits mainly from President Patassé’s own home region in Ouham Pendé in the northwest. More than 70 per cent of the presidential guard are now Gbaya and Kaba. The presidential guard, traditionally just a few hundred men strong, was enlarged and treated much better than the regular troops, who often went months without pay. As state finances deteriorated, civil service pay arrears also piled up, stirring widespread resentment among the many Bangui families dependent on a public service wage earner. These factors contributed to the deepening anger of southerners, notably the Yakoma. The Government’s international relationships were also deteriorating, thanks to its erratic economic management and failure to honour promises made to the IMF and World Bank; President Patassé’s taste for noisy verbal broadsides against France and demands for the departure of French troops were not best calculated to maintain the goodwill of the CAR’s main bilateral aid donor.¹⁷

3.2 The 1996-1997 Mutiny Crisis and Its Consequences

This catalogue of mismanagement and ethnic division bore fruit in 1996, when troops of the regular army mutinied in support of demands for pay and better conditions. Having allowed revenue collection to sink to dismally low levels, the Government found itself unable to meet its public sector salary commitments; arrears piled up and many employees, including much

¹⁴ France, Ministère de la Coopération, Devaluation briefing documents, 1994 (unpublished)

¹⁵ Banque de France, *La Zone Franc: rapports annuels*, Paris, 1994-1996

¹⁶ Agence France Presse, reports, 1993-1996

¹⁷ IMF, World Bank and French Government officials. Personal interviews, 1995-1997

of the regular army, went without pay for months on end. The Government's failure to make regular salary payments provoked army units into staging a series of mutinies, in April, May and November 1997; discontent was particularly intense among Yakoma troops, resentful of the way they had been treated since General Kolingba's departure from power. The mutinies deteriorated into clashes between the rebels and President Patassé's loyalist and intensely partisan presidential guard. There was widespread looting and attacks on foreigners' homes and businesses; even the resident representative of the World Bank was attacked. Most of the longstanding French community, and many other foreign residents, had to be evacuated by the French military – an experience that shattered expatriate business confidence in the CAR.

The French military also attempted to act as peace-keepers on the streets of Bangui; but, fairly or not, they came to be perceived as a pro-government force and increasingly risked being drawn into the conflict.¹⁸ Other African leaders were concerned that the crisis was spiralling out of control. Gabon's President Omar Bongo and the highly respected former Malian President, General Amadou Toumani Touré, supported by other leaders, eventually brokered a peace agreement – the 1997 Bangui accords – between the rebels and the Government; they persuaded both sides to accept its supervision by a multinational African peace-keeping force (MISAB – the Mission interafricaine de surveillance des accords de Bangui). This initiative was strongly supported by UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan, who persuaded the UN Security Council to upgrade the force, in April 1998, to full "Blue Helmets" status as MINURCA (the Mission des Nations Unies en Republique Centrafricaine). The force adopted fair but strong tactics – expelling the rebels from southern Bangui after they had murdered a peace-keeper, but retaining a measure of independence from the government. It successfully imposed peace on Bangui, creating a climate in which the country could attempt to lay the basis for a new future.

However the UN, notably in the person of Kofi Annan's special representative in CAR, Oluyemi Adeniji, made its presence conditional on the Patassé government's implementation both of IMF-supported economic reforms to revive growth and enhance transparency, and the reform of the military. A national "estates general" of the military agreed a reform plan designed to break down ethnic divisions in the armed forces, and to end the divide between a demoralized army and President Patassé's presidential guard.

MINURCA remained in place during the legislative elections of 1998 – when the MLPC and its allies only retained control of the national assembly thanks to the defection of an opposition deputy – and the presidential election of September 1999. The latter saw President Patassé's well-funded campaign secure an easy victory over a divided opposition: the president was elected for another five year term with 51.6% of the first round vote, while General Kolingba gained just 19.4% and other opposition candidates achieved minimal scores. Although President Patassé enjoyed a massive advantage in terms of resources, the vote itself seems to have been fair and, in contrast to the election results of the early 1990s, the result was accepted with pessimistic resignation by opposition leaders. However, it may have contributed to General Kolingba's sense of grievance (although his score did fairly represent the weight of his natural electoral constituency in the south). With the elections peacefully out of the way, the UN withdrew MINURCA in February 2000, although a small observer team (BONUCA – Bureau d'observation des Nations Unies en Centrafrique) was left in place.

¹⁸ French military sources, Bangui. Personal interviews, 1996-1997

The events of 1996-2000 have been outlined in some detail because they are fundamental to understanding the present situation. Developments over this period had profound consequences.

The violence of 1996-1997 marked a new threshold in the CAR's destabilization. Until this point, violence – other than persistent rural criminal banditry – was a rare phenomenon. The successive military coups d'état had used little direct force, while the democratization campaign of the early 1990s had been a peaceful civil protest, to which the authorities generally responded with moderation. There seemed to be no prospect of the CAR being engulfed in civil conflicts like those that had afflicted states such as Chad, Sudan, Angola or Rwanda. But the events of 1996-1997 transformed Bangui into a conflict and then “post-conflict” zone; they shattered the fundamental stability of the city, attracting arms and engendering a culture of conflict in which the routine use of military force was no longer surprising.

Moreover, looting during the mutiny crisis caused widespread damage to the formal economy in Bangui. Most of the CAR's already limited manufacturing capacity was wrecked and much has never been rebuilt, partly because many long-term expatriate business residents concluded that the CAR was too unsafe and opted to rebuild their businesses elsewhere. This has cost hundreds or possibly thousands of jobs, leaving the formal employment market even more dependent than before on a public sector with a disastrous record of failing to pay salaries on time or at all. The loss of jobs and spending power has been exacerbated by the absence of foreign troops for the first time in decades. France pulled out the last of its main permanent garrison in April 1998, with serious consequences for local business in the western garrison town of Bouar; in Bangui the impact was offset for some time by the presence of MISAB and MINURCA peace-keepers – but they too left in early 2000. All this has undermined employment and spending power.¹⁹

The shock of nearly losing power in the upheavals of 1996-1997 did cajole President Patassé into appointing a succession of reformist prime ministers – Jean-Paul Ngoupandé, Michel Gbezera-Bria, Anicet-Georges Dologuélé and now Martin Ziguélé (the latter two are related to him). They have attempted to establish an IMF-backed programme of financial rigour and economic liberalization, in the hope of securing foreign aid and debt relief, and stimulating investment. However, progress has been fitful, repeatedly derailed by political interference from the presidency, labour unrest among demoralized public sector workers and difficult international conditions (weak cotton and coffee prices and the disruption of the cheapest fuel import route, through the Democratic Republic of Congo). At present the Government is in the early stages of an IMF staff-monitored programme, designed to prepare the way for a restoration of a full status Fund programme and eventual debt relief. A letter of intent sets out its policy plans.²⁰

Under pressure from the UN and the IMF, and after procrastinating for three years, President Patassé did finally allow his defence minister Jean-Jacques Démafouth and the armed forces chief of staff, General Francois Bozizé, to press ahead with military reform in 2000. Supported by French aid for training and equipment, this made good progress in reducing the size of the presidential guard, breaking down ethnic divisions in the regular army and re-

¹⁹ IMF, World Bank and French Government officials. Personal interviews, 2001

²⁰ Central African Republic, *Letter of Intent and Technical Memorandum of Understanding*, Bangui, 19 November 2001, <http://www.imf.org/external/np/loi/2001/caf/01/index.htm> [accessed 20 March 2002]

deploying some army units to new rural bases where they could play a more useful role, combating banditry and poaching.²¹

However, the CAR's political elite missed the chance to exploit the post-crisis situation to build a new national consensus that could have consolidated stability. Neither President Patassé nor opposition leaders seemed able to reach out beyond their partisan differences to agree a common route forward. Opposition groups grudgingly backed the peace process, but seemed too mistrustful of President Patassé to accord him strong vocal support; he was similarly ungenerous. Since the presidential election, with the exception of two relatively small and new parties, the Parti de l'unité nationale (PUN) and Forum démocratique pour la modernité (FODEM), a demoralized and ineffective opposition has tended to keep away from the public stage.²²

4 The Crisis of 2001

4.1 Failed Coup of May and Aftermath

On the night of 28-29 May 2001 President Patassé's residence was attacked by up to 100 heavily armed rebels.²³ Only fierce resistance by the presidential guard saved the President and his family from probable death; even after the initial attack had been repulsed, the rebels retained control of much of southern Bangui, including the national radio. It took government forces about 10 days to re-establish control over the city as a whole, gradually advancing towards the south and west. At some stages the fighting was extremely fierce, with heavy bombardment of areas where rebels were thought to be hiding. At least some Yakoma appear to have been involved and former President Kolingba, interviewed by French radio, accepted some involvement.²⁴ Libya's Colonel Muammar Qadhafi – with whom President Patassé has always retained warm ties – sent about 100 troops to help ensure President Patassé's personal security; they also became involved in the fighting and suffered some casualties.

Jean-Pierre Bemba, of the Mouvement de libération du Congo (MLC), which controls neighbouring areas of northern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), also sent 150-200 troops to assist the Government.²⁵ To avoid confusion in the fighting, the MLC soldiers were given CAR army (FACA) uniforms; they were poorly disciplined and they became involved in widespread looting and abuses against the civilian population, provoking local resentment. The question of the MLC soldiers' arrival has subsequently become embroiled in the allegations over who plotted President Patassé; there have been claims that Jean-Jacques Démafouth, defence minister at the time, might have requested the presence of the troops; this would not be surprising – the Government, and President Patassé in particular – had been careful to cultivate good relations with Jean-Pierre Bemba, who controls all the DRC territory neighbouring the CAR. But some have claimed to detect a more sinister motive in Démafouth's alleged contacts; he has disputed this of course.

In the aftermath of the coup there were a substantial number of extra-judicial killings, mostly of Yakoma individuals or those thought to be Yakoma; many of these cases have been

²¹ Sources in the Ministère de la défense and État major (General Staff), Paris. Personal interviews, 2001

²² Economist Intelligence Unit, *Central African Republic: Quarterly Country Reports*, London, 1997-2001

²³ Agence France Presse [Bangui/Paris], May-June 2001

²⁴ *Idem*; Radio France International [Bangui/Paris], 2001

²⁵ Agence France Presse [Bangui/Paris], May-June 2001

individually identified by respected human rights researchers.²⁶ The total number of such political killings – as opposed to battle casualties in the fight to re-establish government authority over Bangui – is hard to verify, but experienced human rights activists put the numbers at between 60 and 120; most were the work of the Unité de Sécurité Présidentielle (USP) or MLC troops..

A complete picture of how the attack on the President was organized and financed – expensive relatively modern weaponry was used – has yet to emerge. Even months afterwards, the main western powers with an interest in Central African affairs, France and the US, remained unclear about what had happened,²⁷ nor had an official enquiry in the CAR itself shed much light on the matter. But some extra indications have emerged in recent months. There seems little doubt that Kolingba was connected to the coup, but probably only once it had started; according to exiled rebel sources the attack was planned and executed by young officers. They subsequently approached Kolingba, who agreed to accept a degree of titular involvement but also tried to persuade the rebels to lay down their arms and negotiate a settlement. At this stage the MLC troops arrived in Bangui and the rebels panicked and decided to maintain their resistance to government forces.²⁸ Until recently, western governments were uncertain whether Kolingba instigated the plot or was co-opted into leading something started by his sons or others disenchanted with the Patassé administration;²⁹ the latest indications support the latter thesis.

André Kolingba fled Bangui and his whereabouts are unknown. Once the Government had re-established control, President Patassé began to search out the alleged perpetrators of the coup, and those members of the security establishment whom he blamed for failing to prevent it. Responsibility for investigating the affair was entrusted to a joint judicial commission, headed by the chief appeal court prosecutor and government commissioner, Joseph Bindoumi. The commission consisted of three judges, six police officers and two army officers; but its activities have been dominated by Joseph Bindoumi, who has gained in prominence and is clearly President Patassé's key adviser on these issues; the President remains much of the time at his residence and relies heavily on the advice of a few key advisers, of whom Bindoumi and the Government's main public relations functionary, Prosper Ndouba, have become the most influential. The inquiry has deteriorated into a witch-hunt, with many individuals arrested on apparently fabricated or contrived evidence, rumour or merely on the grounds of their ethnicity.³⁰ In late August, the defence minister Jean-Jacques Démafouth was sacked and detained; the interior minister Theodore Bikoo was replaced (by Joseph Mozoule). By late September more than 100 officials had been arrested,³¹ and the enquiry into the coup attempt had spread a growing sense of fear in Bangui, especially among the Yakoma. In early October the armed forces chief of staff, General Francois Bozizé Yangouvonda, was also dismissed; the authorities attempted to

²⁶ Fédération Internationale des Ligues des Droits de l'Homme, *Droits de l'homme en République centrafricaine*

²⁷ US government and military sources, Washington. Personal interviews, September 2001; French government and military sources, Paris. Personal interviews, July 2001

²⁸ Expert researcher who had interviewed former rebels in exile. Personal interview, March 2002

²⁹ See footnote 27

³⁰ See footnote 28, and, Fédération Internationale des Ligues des Droits de l'Homme, *Droits de l'homme en République centrafricaine*

³¹ Agence France Presse [Bangui/Paris]

arrest him, but he was protected by some of his soldiers and succeeded in escaping to Chad in November.

In Chad, Francois Bozizé – now formally reduced to the ranks as André Kolingba has also been – was afforded the protection of the government of President Idriss Déby, who has made it clear that the general will not be sent home until his dispute with the CAR authorities is resolved.³² Bozizé supporters have engaged in some military activity in the northern CAR, attacking gendarmerie posts and other locations – notably staging an attack near Wandago, near Kobo, in November. This violence has led some government officials to flee to Bangui; the General nevertheless remains popular, especially among his own ethnic group, the Gbaya, and among troops of the regular army.

Large numbers of refugees remain present in the DRC. Former soldiers were disarmed and transported with the agreement of the UNHCR and the UN's MONUC peacekeeping force in the DRC to Bokilio, a remote mission station some six hours by road away from Zongo. The aim was to ensure that they would not become involved in new fighting. However, senior former officers thought to be close to André Kolingba are in Gbadolité. In December there was discussion about allowing the non-military refugees to return home; President Patassé was keen to see them come back because it would represent a step towards normalization. However, there were disagreements between the various international agency representatives on the spot over whether the conditions were yet right for their return – and in any case, most of the refugees felt that it was still too dangerous. Few came back. Some of those that did were immediately detained by the CAR security forces, and this undermined the confidence of the others. Conditions in the Bolikio refugee camp are poor; in January about 750 former soldiers were still based there, surviving on poor quality food, sharing a single well with the local villagers – provoking the risk of conflict between the two parties – and rarely getting the chance to see their families in Zongo.

Neighbouring countries have stepped up the diplomatic pressure for a peaceful settlement, holding regional crisis summits in Libreville, Khartoum and Brazzaville; they have succeeded in persuading President Patassé to abandon attempts to arrest and try François Bozizé for plotting and they have even discussed sending peace-keeping forces, but the situation remains uncertain. Meanwhile, Equatorial Guinea has announced a loan of several hundred million CFA francs (the equivalent of several million dollars) to help the CAR Government. These moves were followed by a meeting of foreign ministers in the African Union/Organization of African Unity conflict prevention organ on 26-27 January 2002, in Tripoli, Libya. This meeting further stepped up the calls for compromise, issuing a communiqué calling for the Government and its opponents to resolve their dispute through dialogue. The communiqué implicitly endorsed the legitimacy of Patassé's role as president, by condemning non-constitutional means of changing government; but it also effectively rebuked both sides in calling for the respect of human rights. The communiqué bluntly called on the Government to carry out the economic reforms demanded by the international financial institutions and issued a veiled warning against corruption with a call on the Government to improve the management of the country's resources.³³ The position on sending peace-keepers is not yet finally decided. In interviews with Central African national radio the CAR foreign minister, Agba Otikpo Mé Zo Dè, said the meeting had endorsed the principle of sending a force and

³² Agence France Presse, reporting statements by President Idriss Déby, November 2001-January 2002

³³ Organization of African Unity, Communiqué issued at close of conflict prevention organ meeting, Tripoli, 27 January 2002

Libya's minister for African unity said that Mali, Sudan and Burkina Faso had agreed to provide troops.³⁴ President Patassé told the OAU meeting that he wanted to see a force formally under the aegis of the Communauté des États Sahélo-Sahariens (COMESSA – an organization founded by Libyan leader Colonel Muammar Qadhafi in 1997 and to which most states bordering the Sahara and its southern fringes now belong). But the meeting noted that it this might pose logistic and financial problems and the position of the Central African franc zone, CEMAC (Communauté économique et monétaire de l'Afrique centrale), the other main regional organization to which CAR belongs, is unclear.³⁵

COMESSA member governments eventually agreed to send some peacekeeping troops to the CAR,³⁶ and a contingent of Sudanese soldiers have arrived; units from Mali and Burkina Faso are also expected. But this move is regarded with suspicion by some other leaders in the CEMAC, notably Gabon's President, Omar Bongo. An explanatory visit by Burkina Faso's President, Blaise Compaoré, failed to entirely reassure him. The Gabonese feel that the presence of troops from COMESSA member states, especially, serves only to strengthen Libyan influence and act as protection for President Patassé, while failing to address the underlying source of instability – which Gabon believes is Patassé's failure to come to an understanding with his opponents.³⁷ Patassé's personal security force has also been reinforced by Chadian mercenaries.

Meanwhile, the investigation into the coup had gathered further momentum. Although the official inquiry commission was wound down in December, preparations then began for the trial of those alleged to have been involved in the coup or other alleged plots. The trial got underway in February. About 30 individuals are appearing before the court; of these, Jean-Jacques Démafouth is the most prominent. But about 600 others are being tried *in absentia*, including André Kolingba. The trial has been characterized by numerous claims and counter-accusations, supposedly implicating an ever widening circle of opponents of the regime; Démafouth has himself accused André Kolingba, François Bozizé and the assassinated head of the gendarmerie, General François N'Djadder Bedaya, of organizing separate parallel plots. Other prominent individuals whose names have been linked to the plot allegations include: Charles Massi, formerly close to President Patassé but now leader of the Forum démocratique pour la modernité (FODEM); Sergem Kolingba, one of André Kolingba's sons; André Guédé, a member of the opposition FLAC (Flambeau centrafricain) party; Jean-Paul Ngoupandé, leader of the opposition Parti de l'unité nationale (PUN), Timothée Malendoma, leader of the Forum civique opposition party and two prominent trade union leaders – Théophile Sonny Colé, general secretary of l'Union syndicale des travailleurs de Centrafrique (USTC), and Richard Sandoz Oualanga, general secretary of the Confédération nationale des travailleurs de Centrafrique (CNTC).³⁸ It should be noted that Charles Massi, the leader of FODEM, has issued a formal statement categorically denying any allegations of his involvement in any plotting.³⁹

³⁴ Agence France Presse [Tripoli/Paris], 28 January 2002

³⁵ Agence France Presse [Tripoli/Paris], 27-28 January, 2002

³⁶ Agence France Presse [Paris, Tripoli, Bangui], January-March 2002

³⁷ Agence France Presse reports, Paris, Tripoli, Bangui, Libreville, January-March 2002

³⁸ Agence France Presse, February/March 2002

³⁹ Massi, C., Statement, issued via his representative in Paris, received in February/March 2002

The trial of alleged coup plotters was suspended on 12 March, because of the absence of defence barristers; they have boycotted the hearings in protest at a ban imposed on one of their number, the advocate Zarambaud Assingambi. The presiding judge said the hearings would not resume until the next legal session, which could be “two or three months away”. The suspension of the trial could represent a further tightening of the crackdown, because it means that defendants will have to wait longer for the chance to clear their names and it could be designed to give the prosecution time to assemble more evidence, however lacking in credibility. Alternatively, the trial suspension could be the prelude to a government retreat or winding down of the proceedings – in response to diplomatic pressure over the human rights and judicial flaws in the handling of the case.

This conflict was significantly different from the 1996-1997 violence in several respects.

The army (FACA) remained mainly loyal to the Government and played a major role in the re-capture of rebel-held areas. Some individual soldiers joined the rebels, but the vast majority did not.⁴⁰ Many of the Yakoma soldiers who fled to the Democratic Republic of Congo had nothing to do with the coup but feared ethnic reprisals.

The coup attempt was somewhat different from the mutinies of 1996. Those were quasi-spontaneous grassroots affairs instigated by junior officers and ordinary troops, motivated by poor pay and conditions and ethnic discrimination in the organization of the forces – and the political goals were limited to these issues and made no challenge to the legitimacy of President Patassé’s rule as president. The 2001 rebellion was more organized from the outset; it was well-equipped and clearly a politically-motivated attempt to kill the President or remove him from power. It came at a time when, in fact, reform of the military had been making good progress and the Government had also made modest headway in clearing pay arrears and advancing economic reform. (Indeed, an IMF team had just agreed provisional terms for the resumption of Fund support to the CAR, although the rebels were probably not aware of the significance of this.)⁴¹

There are rumours of various parallel plots, involving various members of the military establishment and opposition parties – these have been the subject of conspiracy theories and accusations at the ongoing trial in Bangui of those accused of involvement in the May 2001 putsch. But the truth of these is impossible to establish at this stage. Many of the accusations do not make sense, or appear to originate in attempts by those on trial to pass blame on to others. The investigation of the various plots and alleged plots has been characterized by questionable evidence, apparent fabrications by some witnesses, fear, politically motivated claims from different parties and a “witch-hunt” atmosphere.⁴² The names of a widening circle of political opponents of the Patassé regime – particularly those that pose the most potent electoral threat to the Government – have been dragged into the case.

The crackdown on the rebels took the form of a brutal and largely indiscriminate attack on Yakoma in general. During the government counter-attack, desperate civilians in mainly Yakoma districts of southern Bangui reported widespread bombardment and attacks on

⁴⁰ Agence France Presse [Bangui/Paris], May-June 2001

⁴¹ IMF, World Bank and French Government officials. Personal interviews, May-July 2001

⁴² Agence France Presse, February-March 2002

civilians;⁴³ loyalist Yakoma troops were murdered simply because of their ethnic origins. These extra-judicial killings and human rights abuses were almost exclusively the work of the presidential guard (now known as the Unité de Sécurité Présidentielle – USP). France and other governments exerted pressure on President Patassé to hold back from what appeared to be an incipient pogrom against the Yakoma as an ethnic group. Many Yakoma, and some other civilians, fled into the countryside or to Congo-Brazzaville or the DRC, to escape. One parliamentarian from General Kolingba’s RDC party was murdered.⁴⁴

The extent of direct ethnically-motivated violence and discrimination against Yakoma takes the CAR across a new threshold: for the first time, conflict is clearly driven by ethnic factors, with one particular group picked out for suspicion and mistreatment. The result has been that many Yakoma who had no connection with the rebel attack have nevertheless fled, particularly to Zongo, the DRC town across the river from Bangui; there appears to have been some resentment among Patassé loyalist northerners of the substantial role played by educated urban Yakoma in the Bangui urban economy.⁴⁵ Some appear to have been targeted simply because they were professionals or business people and they have now established themselves in Zongo, continuing with their business by mobile phone. The Government became sufficiently nervous to officially close the frontier with the DRC (not that it has any way of preventing people slipping across unofficially by boat under cover of darkness). Some Yakoma have also fled as far as Brazzaville, in the Republic of Congo, where they are now organized in refugee groups. But there have been some exceptions to the purge and some Yakoma still hold senior posts in the administration.⁴⁶

Also notable is the central role played by Libya, in protecting President Patassé and in promoting subsequent diplomatic efforts to resolve the conflict and consider peace-keeping options. Not only did Libya rush troops to Bangui to help Patassé hang on to power after the coup attempt of May 2001, it has maintained and expanded this garrison and taken a central role in diplomatic activity. Libyan leader Colonel Qadhafi is both acting as a support to President Patassé and attempting to play the role of power and peace-broker. In the run-up to the 26-27 January 2002 meeting of the OAU conflict resolution organ, in Tripoli, he held talks both with François Bozizé and with President Patassé. Libya is also the founder and prime mover in COMESSA, which may play a key role in diplomatic and peace-keeping activity, supplanting the traditionally central role of the Central African franc zone (CEMAC), with which France and the United Nations have more established links.

There has been a marked worsening of relations with Chad, which is mistrusted by the CAR Government for having given shelter to François Bozizé. Relations have further deteriorated following allegations that Central African forces had mistreated Chadian pastoralists in the border area.

⁴³ Professional independent observer sources, Bangui. Confidential personal reports; Agence France Presse [Bangui/Paris]; Residents of southern Bangui, confidential reports faxed to European media and seen by the author in person; investigations by researchers at Amnesty International, reported to the author

⁴⁴ Agence France Presse [Bangui/Paris]

⁴⁵ Interview reports by researchers at Amnesty International, reported to the author

⁴⁶ Officials of international organizations. Personal interviews

4.2 The Aftermath and Consequences

The events of May and June 2001 have had profound consequences. They have reduced the CAR to new depths of ethnically charged confrontation and, once again, set back the already fragile process of economic recovery; they have also deepened President Patassé's sense of isolation and the degree to which he has become alienated from all but a small circle of close associates. In early 2002 Bangui remained tense, awash with rumours about further possible rebellions⁴⁷ and with government opponents feeling intimidated and threatened to an extent not seen before since the restoration of democracy in 1992-1993.

President Patassé's personal paranoia and sense of isolation has deepened. The experience of narrowly cheating death has enhanced his already deeply ingrained mistrust of other parties. He has become heavily dependent on a small circle of advisers and this has allowed the chief prosecutor, Joseph Bindoumi, to assume a prominent role; his vigorous pursuit of the coup allegations has engendered a climate of fear in which an ever widening circle of prominent Central Africans appear to be targeted. He at one stage accused France of supporting the coup attempt, because French-supplied munitions were found in General Kolingba's house. (In fact, France has been the main official defence supplier to the CAR for decades and most of the arms that the rebels could have obtained locally would have been French in any case).⁴⁸ He clearly came to mistrust even some of those defence figures closest to him, blaming them for failing to prevent the coup attempt from taking place and even coming to perceive defence minister Jean-Jacques Démafouth and armed forces chief of staff François Bozizé as suspect plotters. It had been the success of their reform programme that kept most of the army loyal to the President during the coup, but President Patassé does not see it that way: his natural instinct has been to retreat to his traditional reliance on close ethnic and factional associates, rather than trying to strengthen the institutions of the Central African state and mobilize a broad cross-section of support behind efforts to avoid further violence. The involvement of ex-President Kolingba in the rebellion has exacerbated the regime's tendency to view politics as threats to its hold on power in ethnic terms. General Bedaya Djadder, commander of the gendarmerie and a key loyalist security figure, was killed when he was leaving his home to command troops guarding the presidency; it is unclear how he came to be killed, though it is now believed that he was killed by government forces, probably on orders from a senior figure.⁴⁹

The judicial enquiry into the origins of the coup - established in June - appears to have largely reflected the concerns of the presidential circle. By late August, President Patassé had come to the conclusion that he had been comprehensively let down by his senior defence and security personnel; there were rumours that some warnings of the impending coup had been ignored. The President's nervousness is reflected in the decision to dismiss and arrest Jean-Jacques Démafouth, hitherto one of his closest personal allies and formerly his personal legal counsellor, on suspicion of plotting; there were suggestions that, even if he had not been involved in the Kolingba putsch, the defence minister might have been preparing action of his own. A further sign of the fearful mood was the subsequent move against General Bozizé, another long time ally in whom the President now seemed to have lost faith, despite his success in ensuring the loyalty of the army during May and June. The move to arrest General

⁴⁷ Professional independent observer sources, Bangui. Confidential personal reports

⁴⁸ French government sources, Paris. Personal interviews, July 2001

⁴⁹ Personal assessment by opposition sources, Bangui, reporting to international human rights researchers; Independent researcher, Bangui. Personal interview, January 2002

Bozizé had the effect of turning this hitherto loyal supporter against the regime, as soldiers blocked presidential efforts to secure the General's arrest in northern Bangui. In the event, the General held out for some weeks and then escaped from the city and fled to Chad.

In cutting himself off from Jean-Jacques Démafouth and François Bozizé, President Patassé was narrowing his own potential base: both were political allies and General Bozizé, through his personal popularity with the troops, had helped to maintain the loyalty of the army in May and June.⁵⁰ Hitherto – with the modest exceptions of the minor opposition party leaders Jean-Paul Ngoupandé and Charles Massi, who have nibbled at the margins of his savannah support – President Patassé's opponents had been mainly from other regions and ethnic backgrounds. The President had been able to count on the predominant share of support in savannah regions, particularly the north-western cotton belt where a large proportion of the CAR's population lives. But François Bozizé is a Gbaya,⁵¹ from the north, and with strong popular appeal in the savannah political heartland; he also enjoys popular support in parts of Bangui, where he had founded a church that gave out free food to its congregation. He could certainly capture a significant portion of the President's political base and is therefore a serious threat. Local expert observers estimate that up to two-thirds of the army may sympathize with François Bozizé.⁵² He comes from Bossangoa, capital of Ouham, hitherto a region strongly supportive of Patassé. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the president's popularity has been badly damaged by his treatment of the former chief of staff.

The reasons for President Patassé's move against these men is still unclear: it is of course possible that the reports of their involvement in coup plotting might be true – but this has certainly not yet been clearly demonstrated. But it appears that political rivalries and motives of self-protection are fuelling the spiral of accusation and counter-accusation; the trial of those linked to the coup is increasingly similar to a show political trial in style. A number of the senior security or judicial personnel surrounding the regime are widely regarded as alcoholic, or ready to invent stories; extraordinarily implausible and contrived pieces of evidence have been cited in support of some accusations. In this sort of atmosphere almost anyone can be accused of almost anything; the list of opposition politicians whose names have been dragged into the allegations becomes less credible as it grows longer. Moreover, the President does have a track record of sacking government figures who begin to perform well in their jobs and gain respect and then come to be seen as a threat to his own dominance. This is true of both Jean-Jacques Démafouth and François Bozizé. Having once been viewed as no more than a presidential acolyte, the defence minister gradually came to gain the respect of foreign donors, notably France, for his successful management of the military reform programme.⁵³ Meanwhile, General Bozizé not only played a significant role in military reform, he also had a popular appeal that President Patassé may have come to regard as a political threat to his own position. After he fled to Chad his future became the subject of negotiations with President Déby after the latter agreed to allow him to take refuge; it is thought he could mount a guerrilla war against the Bangui government.

⁵⁰ Economist Intelligence Unit, *Central African Republic: Quarterly Country Report*, London: August 2001, November 2001

⁵¹ Professional independent observer sources, Bangui. Confidential personal reports, January 2001

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ French military sources, Paris. Personal interviews, July 2001

Many Yakoma still appear to be at some risk. The number who fled is estimated by humanitarian agency sources at 25,000, of whom only about 800 are thought to have been armed rebels⁵⁴ (and many fewer still involved in the direct coup assault of 28-29 May). The Government invited all those not involved in the coup attempt to return home, even setting up a commission to welcome them; but many remain unconvinced that it is yet safe to come back. Amnesty International, the Fédération Internationale des Ligues des Droits de l'Homme⁵⁵ and exile groups have received continued reports of discrimination and human rights abuses.⁵⁶ The events of mid-2001 have politicized the way the Yakoma are perceived to a new extent and this leaves them in a much more vulnerable position. As an ethnic group they now appear to be at risk of being viewed as a direct threat to the Government and potentially to other Central Africans in general. This is partly because, as southerners with a naturally substantial presence in the capital – which is in the south – and as the ethnic group of a man who held power for a decade, they had come to hold many important positions in public life and business; to some extent they have been perceived as an educated elite, and this causes resentment. Opposition politicians have been reluctant to speak out on their behalf and risk being viewed by the Patassé regime as potential enemies.

Moreover, the Yakoma are particularly vulnerable because of the crippling of the main political organization that represented them – the RDC – and the disappearance of the man hitherto seen as their leader, André Kolingba. The RDC, which was in fact the CAR's largest opposition party, was ordered to suspend activities after the coup – although there had been no proof of the involvement of the party as such (as opposed to its leader, André Kolingba). The rest of the opposition failed to speak out against this, a sign of the extent to which other political groups have proved ready to acquiesce in the crackdown on Yakoma interests. However, the main direct instrument of human rights abuses against the Yakoma is the USP (the presidential guard);⁵⁷ the regular army is much less partisan. There are still some Yakoma in senior government positions and the Yakoma have not been purged from the army; but this has not prevented the USP from engaging in abuses and discrimination against Yakoma in general.⁵⁸

Since the coup attempt, Bangui has remained tense. Initially, it was subject to a highly restrictive curfew and the city has still not returned to normality; a reduced curfew, from midnight to 5 a.m., is still in force. Armed attacks, looting and violence occur every night. Although citizens can move around fairly freely outside curfew hours, there is an underlying sense of tension and expectation of further conflicts. Bangui is controlled by the USP, which is perceived as deeply partisan, rather than the regular army or the normal police.⁵⁹ This adds to the nervousness of non-Patassé supporters; there are also reliable reports that the presidential camp has revived its private militia (see below), which would be even less accountable. There are reports of government military action against rebels linked to General

⁵⁴ Agence France Presse [Bangui/Paris], May-June 2001; Economist Intelligence Unit, *Central African Republic, Quarterly Country Reports*, London, August 2001, November 2001

⁵⁵ Fédération Internationale des Ligues des Droits de l'Homme, République centrafricaine: la chasse aux sorcières continue, Paris, 15 June 2001 (press release), and, Lettre à Monsieur Ange Félix Patassé, Président de la République centrafricaine, Paris, 11 October 2001 (press release)

⁵⁶ Human rights researchers, personal interviews, 2001-2002

⁵⁷ Professional independent observer sources, Bangui. Confidential personal reports, May 2001-January 2002

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

Bozizé and others supposedly connected to the rebellion of May-June 2001;⁶⁰ Libyan troops are reported by local sources to have been deployed in the north against Bozizé supporters.⁶¹ There are also reports or rumours of at least two other possible rebellions in the making. The culture of stability is evaporating; the CAR has become a country where violence is a routine aspect of politics and power, and trust in the institutions of the state has been severely eroded.

Increasingly, President Patassé's survival in power is becoming dependent on the support of an outside power – Libya – rather than that of his own political base and the institutions of the armed forces and the state. This could tip the balance between acceptance of his legitimacy as a democratically elected leader and mass popular resentment of the influence of foreign troops. However, such judgements must be tinged with caution: historically, CAR governments often depended on the support of the French, while General Kolingba's own presidential guard was trained by an Israeli; older Central Africans may be resigned to such foreign influence. During May and June, the president also depended on the support of troops from the Congolese MLC, who provoked widespread local anger when they engaged in looting; but they departed quickly. The presence of the Libyans has lasted much longer and is much more visible: they are Arabs, not sub-Saharan Africans, and they have modern equipment. Moreover, they are present in a country that – unlike Chad – does not have historical or ethnic ties to Libya. "Peacekeeping troops" from Sudan, an ally of Libya, risk being perceived in similar terms.

However, last December and January have brought a flurry of diplomatic activity as regional leaders seek to prevent the CAR's slide into civil war. The pressure that neighbour countries can bring to bear on all sides probably offers the best hope of averting a slide into renewed conflict. CEMAC (the Central African economic and monetary union, to which the CAR belongs) has held two summits, in Libreville before Christmas and, on 16 January, in Brazzaville. At the latter meeting President Patassé reiterated his commitment to abandon his attempt to prosecute François Bozizé for alleged plotting. Two days earlier, Lamine Cissé, the UN's representative in Bangui, and François Bozizé, had met together with Chad's President Idriss Déby, who confirmed that François Bozizé could continue to stay in Chad until his dispute with the government in Bangui had been resolved.⁶² In December a summit of the Libyan-dominated COMESSA discussed the sending of a peace-keeping force to the CAR. The peace-keeping issue was discussed again at the 26-27 January meeting of the African Union/OAU conflict prevention mechanism. President Patassé is strongly in favour of the idea.⁶³ In the eyes of opponents this risked being seen as provocative, given the strength of President Patassé's ties with Libya and his current reliance on its soldiers for his personal protection. But in the end, plans for a COMESSA force went ahead: Sudan, Mali and Burkina Faso promised troops and by early March Sudanese units were on the ground. The force claimed a measure of African Union endorsement, but its credibility as a genuinely neutral and independent operation – rather than merely a reinforcement of President Patassé's own defences – was questioned both by outside observers and by some of the CEMAC governments. A force in whose organization the African Union and the United Nations played a greater role would have been seen as more credible and neutral. But the growing

⁶⁰ Agence France Presse [Bangui/Paris], December 2001-January 2002

⁶¹ Professional independent observer sources, Bangui. Confidential personal reports, May 2001-January 2002

⁶² Agence France Presse [N'Djaména, Bangui, Brazzaville/Paris], 14-17 January 2002, reporting statements by President Idriss Déby

⁶³ Agence France Presse, 25-28 January 2002

pressure from other African governments for a peaceful resolution may gradually leave François Bozizé and other potential armed opponents with little choice but to accept whatever peace initiative these outside players impose. The Brazzaville summit decided to send an expert mission to the Chad-CAR border, to monitor the situation and try to prevent border flare-up such as the recent clash between herders and farmers.⁶⁴

5 Factors Shaping the Future

5.1 The Strengths and Weaknesses of the Patassé Government

As in many poor countries with small populations, the effectiveness of the government machine is heavily dependent on the leadership given by a few key individuals. Indeed, this is particularly true of the CAR because of President Patassé's highly personalized approach to national leadership. He is not a creature of the bureaucracy or the MLPC party machine; indeed, the MLPC is essentially a vehicle for his support and patronage. The President's power is rooted in traditional structures of patronage, and regional and ethnic support, and is also closely based on a small circle of close colleagues, the President's own security forces (the USP and the emerging private militia) and his business dealings.

In regional terms, the Patassé administration has up to now been able to rely on a strong electoral base in the north-western cotton belt, and in districts of the capital where northern migrants are concentrated. But President Patassé's standing is rooted in his strength as a personality; he is not simply a mouthpiece of northern regional interests or the product of a wider northern political movement. In style, he is much closer to the old style "big man" populist nationalists who played a prominent role on the African political scene in the early decades of independence after 1960.

This personalized approach means that the President's attitude is decisive in determining the policy adopted and whether it is effectively carried out. For example, the process of economic reform, so long delayed, finally got underway once the then finance minister (and future prime minister), Anicet-Georges Dologuélé, persuaded President Patassé in 1997-1998 that the Government must accept IMF demands for greater financial rigour and the privatization of the fuel sector, if it was to secure access to international aid and debt relief. But equally, the dominance of President Patassé as a personality means that, if he loses interest in a policy or comes to view it as a threat to vested interests, then it will often be neglected or even abandoned; this happened several times with the military reform programme. Moreover, he has had a tendency to see the success of other government figures as a potential threat to his own position: this may explain the dismissal of Prime Minister Dologuélé early in 2001,⁶⁵ just after he had successfully negotiated a temporary settlement of a long running strike and protest campaign by civil servants protesting over salary arrears. As a northerner – indeed, as the President's uncle – Dologuélé perhaps risked becoming a potential challenger for the votes of the northern electorate. He was therefore dismissed and subsequently nominated to head the regional development bank, conveniently located in Brazzaville, well away from the domestic political scene. President Patassé chose as the new prime minister Martin Ziguélé, a fellow native of Ouham Pendé, but one who had been working abroad as an insurance technocrat and had no government experience or political base of his own. The appointment of Ziguélé is clearly a victory for the caciques of the MLPC – the premier is a party member,

⁶⁴ Agence France Presse [Brazzaville/Bangui/Paris], 16-17 January 2002

⁶⁵ Economist Intelligence Unit, *Central African Republic: Quarterly Country Report*, London, May 2001

but he is also someone who owes his role entirely to the patronage of the president and the party; he has not built a power base of his own.

In a country where competent economic management and credibility with the donors translate into political clout for the prime minister - as has been the case in a number of West African states - Mr Ziguélé might be able gradually to enhance his political strength. But in the CAR this is a questionable prospect at best - economic reforming prime ministers such as Dologué and Ngoupandé have still found themselves ultimately at the whim of Mr Patassé and unable to make themselves unsackable, even when they have delivered success of some kind. Mr Ziguélé fits in with this pattern: he was not appointed because he had made himself a significant political player who had to be taken into account, but because Patassé and the MLPC party leaders needed a technically competent but politically controllable person to try and keep the economy on track and placate donors. The only ethnic group that seems to have been pleased by Ziguélé's appointment is the Thali; the speaker of the national assembly, Luc-Appolinaire Dondon Konamambaye, is a Thali and it is rumoured that he was one of those supported the choice of Ziguélé for the premiership. The Thali people are related to Patassé – his mother is a Thali.

On the other hand, the Kaba ethnic group were not pleased by Ziguélé's appointment; the premier is not a Kaba. The Kaba are of Chadian origin and now live scattered on both sides of the Chad-CAR border; they are thought to represent, at most, 1% of the CAR population. The Gbaya and Mandja, like various other ethnic groups, are both unhappy with Patassé. Both groups now have prominent opposition figures: former premier Jean-Paul Ngoupandé, member of parliament for Dékoa, who has spent much of his time in France recently, is a Mandja. He is reformist but also rather technocratic and his popular appeal may be limited. The Gbaya are the largest ethnic group, representing some 40% of the population, according to CAR independent sources. Hitherto, they have constituted the largest element of Patassé's electorate, but they are now discontented with the way he has run the country. General Bozizé is a Gbaya and he is popular with many fellow Gbaya – this gives the potential to mobilize a substantial volume of northern popular for any attempt to gain power.

The present government team has undergone some significant personnel changes over the past year. The net effect of these has been to make President Patassé even more closely reliant on a circle of close advisers. Finance minister Eric Sorongopé is a significant player in the MLPC, while communications minister Gabriel Koyambounou is a former customs official and technocrat who briefly served as prime minister in the mid-1990s; the respected former foreign and prime minister Michel Gbezera-Bria is minister of state (senior minister) at the presidency, although his name is often omitted from official government lists; he is one of the few men close to President Patassé with a non-partisan track record and a reputation for independent integrity. Another significant player is the foreign minister Agba Otikpo Mé Zodé. Prime minister Martin Ziguélé is a member of the MLPC, although he has also won the respect of donors for his technical understanding of key economic issues; but in the difficult present circumstances, when economic activity and revenue collection has been seriously disrupted by fighting and instability, it is hard to make a serious assessment of his performance. Key security posts have of course changed: a colonel close to President Patassé, Ernest Betibangui, is the new chief of staff, while the new interior minister is MLPC member Pierre Angoa; the new interior minister, Joseph Mozoulé is a member of the Parti libéral démocrate, which is allied to the MLPC.

Transparency and corruption issues have been a serious problem in the CAR. This has particularly been the case in the fuel sector – a major source of government revenue – and the regulation of the diamond trade: the stones are largely mined by artisanal diggers in remote rural areas and, as in some other African gem-producing countries, as much as half the national output may be smuggled abroad. There may also be some leakage of stones over the border from the Democratic Republic of Congo. For a short period a diamond exchange operated in Bangui, but regulation was lax and open to abuse by traders marketing conflict gems. Eventually it was shut down. Two mining ministers in succession were forced to resign over reports of possible abuses in the licensing system.

President Patassé has not been shy of referring to his own business connections, developed during his years of exile in Togo. Indeed, at one stage he even sent an envoy to Germany in the hope of reaching an agreement with the foreign private sector to raise money to clear some salary arrears.

The regime has a number of forces at its disposal – the police, the gendarmerie, the regular armed forces (FACA), the presidential guard (USP), President Patassé's own revived private militia and the Libyan detachment now based in Bangui. Identification of individual soldiers as members of the FACA, the USP or the militia is not always easy, as they often wear similar uniforms; however, it is persistently reported that USP members are responsible for the vast majority of human rights abuses and discriminatory action against potential government opponents. The police and gendarmerie have not generally been associated with political or repressive violence, although they have been accused of the routine extra-judicial killing of suspected violent criminals. Frequently, suspects are let off with a warning after a first offence but summarily executed if they are caught offending again; in a country where violent crime is a persistent problem this tough policy is popular. Bangui's main prison was destroyed in the 1996-1997 crisis and capacity to accommodate criminals is limited.

The regular army (Forces Armées Centrafricaines – FACA) is clearly in a demoralized and divided condition – a point highlighted by the defection of 300 soldiers to join the former armed forces chief of staff General François Bozizé. The events of the past four months have undone much of the progress made earlier in reforming the military and breaking down ethnic patterns of loyalty and recruitment. Assisted by France, defence minister Jean-Jacques Démafouth and General Bozizé had made progress in rebuilding morale and reducing excessive overall military manpower by demobilizing some soldiers into civilian life (with transition support and new job training). France had supplied equipment, technical support and training, to restore the army's normal role as the prime wing of the armed forces in the country – vis-à-vis a much reduced presidential guard. During the mid-2001 rebellion, the army – including many of its Yakoma troops and officers – remained loyal to the Government. But during the aftermath of the revolt, the attitude of hardline presidential loyalists was threatening this sense of unity: Yakoma army members were singled out for maltreatment and even, in at least one case, extra-judicial execution. The dismissal of Jean-Jacques Démafouth and General Bozizé further damaged morale and stirred antagonism towards the presidency, preparing the ground for soldiers' refusal to allow their newly dismissed chief of staff to be arrested.⁶⁶ The army was due to see its manpower reduced by 700-1,500 under a demobilization programme supported by the UN Development Programme, which included helping soldiers find a new civilian livelihood. The flight of 800

⁶⁶ Economist Intelligence Unit, *Central African Republic: Country Profile 2001*, London, 2001; and, *Central African Republic: Quarterly Country Report*, London, August & November 2001

mainly Yakoma soldiers to the Democratic Republic of Congo has changed the shape of the military. UNDP has decided to respond by concentrating on support for the reform of the army along lines that ensure a balance between different ethnic groups. UNDP will also support a newly launched disarmament programme that aims to reduce the large number of weapons in circulation among the civilian population. The CFA2.3 billion (out of CFA4 billion) in demobilization funding, that has not yet been spent, has now been reallocated to finance disarmament.⁶⁷

The presidential guard (Unité de Sécurité Présidentielle – USP) is the cornerstone of President Patassé’s security system. This is the one official security force that he fully trusts and it is composed largely of soldiers from his home region in the northwest. From the mid-1990s onwards, the presidential guard had grown rapidly in size, to the point where it threatened to overtake the army’s 2,500-3,000 manpower; at one stage, in 1997-1999, it may actually have been larger than the army. Moreover, it was paid more regularly, better equipped and accorded superior status. This provoked deep resentment among the regular soldiers. It also perpetuated ethnic divisions. Outside the presidency, across the spectrum of the CAR’s political and military leadership, there was broad agreement on the need to rebalance the forces, but it took strong United Nations pressure to induce President Patassé to implement reform. But this did finally make good progress during 2000 and the first half of 2001, with USP manpower being reduced from an officially admitted figure of 1,200 to just 800; a substantial number of troops from President Patassé’s Sara ethnic group were transferred to the regular army. The USP’s role was refocused on its narrow core role of protecting the President. However, since June 2001 this process has unravelled: feeling understandably under threat, President Patassé has reverted to heavy reliance on the institution he trusts, the USP. The manpower of the force has risen rapidly to an estimated 1,700 men since May 2001, according to sources within the ruling MLPC.⁶⁸ Numerous witness reports, news media reports and investigations by human rights groups have confirmed that it was the USP which took much the most prominent role in the politically motivated extra-judicial killings that followed the failure of the putsch attempt.⁶⁹

Militia groups are also springing up that are close to President Patassé and the MLPC. These are rather shadowy entities whose existence is often not recognized. (They do not, for example, have the sort of high public profile that characterized the Cobra, Cocoye, Zulu and Ninja political militias in Congo-Brazzaville.) Recruited mainly from areas sympathetic to the President, notably neighbouring southern Chad – they have at times reportedly included a significant number of former Chadian rebels – these militia forces first made an appearance as a result of the 1996-1997 crisis. Although it is notoriously difficult to verify or disprove rumours about Patassé informal military arrangements it does appear that no such militias existed before the 1996 crisis.⁷⁰ The “Karako” militia was created after the second army mutiny of 1996. Its members were then brought into the army at Patassé’s instigation, to

⁶⁷ Comments by UNDP resident representative Kingsley Amaning at the launch of the disarmament programme on 24 January 2002. See United Nations Integrated Regional Information Networks, *Central African Republic: National Disarmament Campaign Launched*, Nairobi, 14 February 2002

⁶⁸ Professional independent observer sources, Bangui. Confidential personal reports, January 2001

⁶⁹ *Ibid*, and, Fédération Internationale des Ligues des Droits de l’Homme, *Droits de l’homme en République centrafricaine*

⁷⁰ I have not heard any reports or seen any information to suggest these existed. My experienced independent Bangui source, who was present in the CAR through out this period, also says that no militias were set up before the 1996 mutinies.

balance the predominance of Yakoma in the armed forces inherited from the Kolingba era. The “Sarawi” and “Balawa” militias were created more recently, to oppose any attempt by the former military ruler, Kolingba, to recapture power by force. These groups were set up by leading members of Patassé’s MLPC party: Karako was formed by the now deceased former prime minister Jean-Luc Mandaba and by Jean Serge Ouafio; Sarawi was set up by the MLPC parliamentarian Théophile Ganro; Balawa was established by another MLPC member of parliament, Joseph Zouketia. There are a number of other weaker militia groups. Later, as military reform made headway, they appeared to have been wound down, with fighters encouraged to return home or at least retreat to the porous northern frontier area. But in the wake of the May-June 2001 crisis, they have reappeared, reflecting the intense nervousness of President Patassé over the possibility of further coup attempts and rebellions.⁷¹ Karako, Sarawi and Balawa have been sent to the northern border zone neighbouring Chad to fight Bozizé supporters.

The Libyan detachment is now estimated to be several hundred strong; some reports suggest there may be as many as 700-800 well-equipped troops. It was rushed to Bangui by Colonel Muammar Qadhafi, at President Patassé’s request, in the immediate wake of the May 2001 coup attempt. The Libyans have armoured vehicles and other modern equipment, but they are not thought to have aircraft or helicopters based in Bangui. However, Libyan planes are flying in and out of Bangui airport almost nightly. The force is now a significant military factor and it has reportedly been deployed in the north to counter activity by armed supporters of General Bozizé.⁷² It sustained casualties during the mid-2001 crisis, but this did not deter Colonel Qadhafi from keeping it place and it now appears to be staying for the medium term; the Libyan troops concentrate essentially on the protection of President Patassé and his regime and their presence has been crucial to its survival in power over recent months. However, the presence of these foreign forces is increasingly resented by opposition parties and some ordinary people. Central African defence sources claim privately that during the events of May-June last year, the Libyans suggested direct bombardment of the civilian areas of Bangui where rebels were thought to be hiding; but senior CAR personnel persuaded President Patassé that this was not a wise idea and would cause needless suffering.⁷³

The extent to which the new COMESSA force, comprising troops from Sudan, Mali and Burkina Faso, will develop as a genuinely independent and neutral peacekeeping operation, distinct from the Libyans, is far from clear. The full extent of African Union endorsement and supervision of the force is also yet to be tested. Contributing countries have friendly ties to Libya, which is a sponsor of the peace initiative but is also a close ally of President Patassé. By early March, some Sudanese troops had already arrived.

5.2 The Opposition Parties

Other than the MLPC, Central African parties can be loosely categorized – in terms not of any ideological left-right spectrum but in terms of their attitude to the Government and the dominant MLPC. The opposition parties have been less vocal in criticizing government over recent months, partly because they are clearly intimidated by the regime’s security apparatus; some politicians are too scared to say what they really think. The RDC in particular had already been intimidated by the still unexplained murder in 1996 of Christophe Grelombe, a

⁷¹ See note 68

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ Independent researcher, Bangui. Personal interview, March 2002

former Kolingba regime interior minister, and his son Martin. There was a brutal reminder of this in 2001, with the killing of an RDC parliamentarian. In any case, in the wake of the May 2001 coup attempt, opposition parties clearly had no choice but to condemn the violent attack and implicitly endorse President Patassé's legitimacy. Subsequently, as outlined above, a growing number of opposition leaders – including Jean-Paul Ngoupandé (PUN), Charles Massi (FODEM) and Timothée Malendoma (Forum Civique) – have found themselves the target of accusations of involvement in coup plotting.

A number of small centrist parties – the Parti libéral démocrate, the Convention nationale (CN) and some members of the Parti social démocrate (PSD) – are allied with the Government and hold a few ministries. They have only limited influence, but they are vital to sustaining the Government's majority position in the national assembly.

Two relatively new opposition parties were set up in the mid-1990s: the Parti de l'unité nationale (PUN), led by former reformist prime minister Jean-Paul Ngoupandé, has three deputies and relies heavily on support in the heartland of his Mandja people around Dékoa in centre south, while the Forum démocratique pour la modernité (FODEM), set up by the former mines minister Charles Massi, is similarly rooted in its leader's regional base, in the west, around Baboua. These two parties pose a limited threat to the MLPC: they have nibbled at the fringes of the President's savannah electoral base, but they have so far failed to achieve a major breakthrough in terms of national profile. However, they have proved to be among the most tenacious critics of the Government and Jean-Paul Ngoupandé has been unusual in making serious policy criticisms: their leader's relative youth and this pragmatic opposition style might eventually win these parties more support among young Bangui students and professionals.

The traditional opposition, whose roots lie in the democracy campaign of 1991-1993 includes the Front patriotique pour le progrès (FPP), led by the veteran Abel Goumba, which has origins in the immediate post-independence era, and other groups founded by political veterans such as the Alliance pour la démocratie et le progrès (ADP) and the Mouvement pour la démocratie et le développement (ex-president David Dacko). These parties have been grouped in the UFAP alliance, but their effectiveness has been hampered by the age or poor health of some of their leaders, such as Professor Goumba and David Dacko; François Pehoua, leader of the ADP, has died. Since the May 2001 attempted coup d'état, UFAP, as an alliance, has faded away and the member parties have kept a low profile.

The RDC, founded by then President Kolingba in the mid-1980s has been the largest single opposition party, partly because it has had a coherent block of support among one group, the Yakoma. It does not seem to have suffered from its association with the authoritarian one-party rule of the 1980s, perhaps because the Kolingba regime was relatively relaxed and certainly a lot less oppressive than the Bokassa regime. However, the May 2001 rebellion and its aftermath dealt a devastating blow to the RDC: its leader disappeared and is widely regarded as the prime figure responsible for the foolhardy attempt to change the government by force; a large proportion of its potential supporters are in exile. Party activists and members have been understandably intimidated by the abuses against Yakoma and, for a period, the authorities suspended the party's activities, though recently (May 2002) the speaker of parliament, Luc-Appolinaire Dondon-Konanambaye, made it clear that the continued suspension and banning of the RDC is out of the question and he appealed to the party to resume its political activities in the CAR. "The suspension of this party was confirmed for a three month period, after which the government was due to say whether it

would be dissolved. If the government failed to take an appropriate decision at the right time there is no reason to treat the RDC as blameworthy”, he said. In other words, he was saying that the party could not be punished as the government had failed to advance a case for shutting it down by the official deadline (and indeed, long afterwards - the three months elapsed many months ago).

However, it is still uncertain whether the RDC is able to reassert itself. Many of the key RDC players around Kolingba fled from the CAR after the failed coup a year ago. Some have trickled back, but others remain in exile. The party did suffer one major shock in the immediate aftermath of last year’s coup attempt - one of its parliamentarians, Theophile Touba, was killed. Laurent Gomina-Pampali, who was appointed acting party chairman, was later dismissed from this post and left the RDC altogether. All the senior officers who fled the country after the failed coup are still abroad. They fear for their lives and have no plans to return while Patassé is still in power. Some, such as General Djengbot, are in Gbadolite and others are believed to be in Congo-Brazzaville (where there are substantial numbers of Yakoma refugees). Some Yakoma are believed to have slipped back into south-western CAR; independent sources in Bangui believe they are hiding out because they feel unsure of their safety. The number estimated to have fled to Congo-Brazzaville was initially estimated by some Bangui sources at 800.

There are reports circulating in Bangui suggesting there were underground links between the RDC party and the Mobutuistes of the Ngbandi tribe; there are also reports of Mobutuistes being seen during the failed rebellion in May 2001. But these reports have not been independently verified. More recently, there have been persistent rumours circulating in Bangui that Kolingba is hiring Rwandan Hutu militia to mount a new attack. But the main source for these claims appears to be President Patassé’s MLPC party - so they could just be a propaganda attempt to discredit Kolingba’s reputation. No evidence has yet been produced to support these allegations.

5.3 Civil Society, the Churches, Trade Unions and Human Rights Groups

During the democratization campaign of a decade ago, civil society organizations emerged as a major factor on the Central African scene. They have become less of a factor in recent times, although they still play a significant role; this is partly because they feel intimidated, in the current tense security situation, and also because of the changed nature of CAR politics. In the early 1990s, a broad range of groups, from political parties to church leaders, trade unionists, students and human rights activists, could agree on a common agenda for basic democratic reform. In recent years the trade unions and students have been more focussed on mainstream issues directly concerning the treatment of the public sector, such as salary arrears and the payment of student grants; the UFAP opposition parties have been sympathetic to their demands but there has not been the same level of campaigning coordination as seen a decade earlier. Furthermore, the launch of a violent military assault against the elected civilian president – however unpopular he may be in some quarters – was something that civil society organizations could not support. It is of course possible that in the current situation, with civil liberties clearly at some risk, civil society will eventually gain in significance as a focus of contestation and defence of human rights; but this is far from certain in the present tense and intimidatory atmosphere.

Trade unions remain a significant factor, although the movement has been weakened by factional splits. The main union blocs are the Confédération syndicale des travailleurs centrafricains and the pro-government Organisation des syndicats libres du secteur publique.

Student unions are also a significant force. Despite their divisions, the unions have retained the capacity to mount significant protest and strike campaigns. In March 2001 the Government agreed a temporary truce over the pay arrears issue, but this broke down in May when it failed to make all the promised interim payments. In the latest stages of the coup plot trial in Bangui, two prominent trade union leaders have been named in accusations; this suggests that the regime is coming to regard the union movement as a threat.

A diverse print media has flourished during the past 10 years and the CAR now has about 42 registered newspapers, although only about 10 of these appear regularly. Furthermore, their reach is limited mainly to Bangui, with few copies circulating to provincial towns. Among the most important publications are *Le Novateur* (genuinely independent) and the pro-opposition *Le Citoyen*, but there have been cases of harassment of independent or pro-opposition journalists. National television and radio are dominated by the Government and the MLPC party (which also has a private station, *Radio Victoire*). But *Radio N'Déké Luka*, which was established to succeed *Radio Minurca* – which had been sponsored by the UN peacekeepers – and the Catholic *Radio Notre Dame* do provide an independent source of broadcast information.⁷⁴

The churches are also an important influence in the CAR. They played a central role in the democratization process and have subsequently spoken out in favour of compromise and human rights at other times of difficulty. Most Central Africans are Christian or follow traditional beliefs. There is a significant Muslim minority but religious divides as such have not been a significant factor up to now. On 12 January 2002 the Catholic episcopate published an open letter warning about the current levels of tension; the Catholic Church and leaders of other religious groups have spoken out on a number of occasions calling for peace, reconciliation, national unity, renewed confidence and respect for democratic principles.

Human rights are clearly an issue of growing concern. The human rights league (Ligue centrafricaine des droits de l'homme – LCDH), with which the respected lawyer Nicolas Tiangaye has been associated, has played an important role at times. The main international organizations to have taken an interest in recent human rights conditions in the CAR are the Fédération Internationale des Ligues des Droits de l'Homme (FIDH)⁷⁵ and Amnesty International. FIDH carried out a mission to the CAR on 6-18 July 2001; it reported widespread human rights abuses, including some carried out by the judicial mixed commission enquiring into the origins of the May 2001 coup attempt. Amnesty International carried out a research mission to the CAR in early 2002.

Central African lawyers have continued to fight to defend their professional independence and freedom of action. In early October 2001 they staged a one week strike in protest at the detention of the lawyer Zarambaud Assingambi, over allegedly “seditious” newspaper articles he was said to have written. But the authorities banned the lawyers from holding a press conference.⁷⁶

⁷⁴ Economist Intelligence Unit, *Central African Republic: Country Profile 2001*

⁷⁵ Fédération Internationale des Ligues des Droits de l'Homme, *Droits de l'homme en République centrafricaine*; and, Lettre à Monsieur Ange Félix Patassé

⁷⁶ Fédération Internationale des Ligues des Droits de l'Homme, Lettre à Monsieur Ange Félix Patassé

5.4 Security Issues and Potential Armed Opponents – the Risk of a Rural Bush War

Until recently, the CAR has not witnessed conventional guerrilla bush war of the kind seen in, for example, Chad, Congo-Brazzaville or the DRC. If rebel groups do mount a guerrilla campaign in the countryside this will mark a major escalation of the situation; hitherto, rural areas have been largely unaffected, in military terms, by the upheavals in Bangui. The mutinies of 1996 were an urban affair, staged by discontented troops in Bangui (joined by some who had travelled from outlying provincial garrisons to take part); outside the capital, the country remained calm and continued to function relatively normally. The coup attempt of 2001 and the subsequent government counter-attack also remained an urban affair, although in pursuing rebels the FACA did press out to the further southern fringes of Bangui. There have been some incidents of violence that are treated as criminal but which may also have political dimensions, notably the killing of the Libyan ambassador in Bangui in August 2000 and the murder, just weeks after the failed 2001 coup, of Jean-Pierre Lhommée, a retired French military officer who was head of UN security in the CAR.⁷⁷

5.5 Rural Security and Potential Rural Guerrilla War

There have been serious security problems in rural areas, but these have not been related to political or ethnic factors. Extremely violent rural banditry – by the “zarguinias” or “coupeurs de route” – has been a major problem, disrupting road traffic and trade in many rural areas; poaching in the neglected game parks has also been recurrent. In both cases, many of the culprits seem to have come from across the borders of Chad and Sudan – both countries that have seen long periods of civil conflict, where arms are widely available; but there has been no evidence of significant Chadian or Sudanese rebel or military activity in the CAR (although it would be unsurprising if fighters had slipped back and forth across the long and remote CAR-Sudan border). Certainly, Sudanese refugees have taken shelter in the eastern CAR at times. Another security concern has been the possibility of fighters from the Great Lakes conflicts – notably Rwandans or Mobutuistes – slipping over the border, using the southern CAR as a refuge: on a number of occasions the Government has expressed concern about this, although its ability to prevent or contain such movements along the long riverine border with the DRC is limited. Of course, more or less the whole of the northern DRC is now under the control of the MLC, led by Jean-Pierre Bemba. The MLC is, in the formal sense of the word, an armed rebel movement; but in terms of the CAR’s security it has in fact posed much less of a problem up to now, because “Bemba-land” is run as a quasi-state with a degree of military organization – and President Patassé has been careful to maintain good relations with Jean-Pierre Bemba. That could change; the MLC has tolerated the presence of former Central African rebels for some months.⁷⁸

The CAR’s rural security situation seems to have got significantly worse during the late 1990s, because the Central African government has been preoccupied with the situation in Bangui and because of the problems within the army. As part of the army reform programme of 2000-2001, there was a conscious effort – supported by French aid – to refocus army operations on combating banditry and poaching, with the establishment of at least two bases outside the capital and the use of an aircraft provided by France to hunt down poachers. Since the crisis of May-June 2001, the impetus behind this process may have been lost and certainly the aircraft has been used instead to pursue anti-government rebels.

⁷⁷ Diplomatic sources, Paris, July 2001; Washington, September 2001. Personal interviews

⁷⁸ Agence France Presse, May 2001-January 2002; Independent observers, CAR and northern DRC. Reports sent to or read by the author, 2001-2002

The current situation could open the way to a drastic new step-change in the spreading of conflict. There is a clear risk that political violence could spread from the capital to some provincial areas. The rebels associated with the May 2001 coup attempt – who mostly fled to the Democratic Republic of Congo – are southerners, who might hope to find sympathy in Bangui and other areas along the Oubangui river valley border with the DRC. Although they have been moved away from the immediate proximity of the border, it would be hard to stop them slipping back into the CAR in remote rural areas. Equally significant is the potential for a bush war by supporters of General Bozizé: while he has some support in northern Bangui, he could also tap into a degree of sympathy in Ouham and the northern cotton belt. There are also reports of a possible rebellion in the west. There is therefore the potential for the CAR to experience, simultaneously, rural warfare in the west, along the southern border and in the most populated rural areas of the north – with dramatic humanitarian results, marking a clear escalation from the essentially urban crises of 1996-1997 and 2001. At the very least, a rural war could lead to significant displacement of civilian populations, with movements across the border into Chad, or into main towns such as Bossangoa and Bangui. It could also disrupt rural production and the trading of diamonds; moreover, the stones are already widely smuggled and a rural guerrilla force might gain access to some of these deposits, risking a slide into the sort of diamond-funded military activity seen in Angola, DRC and Sierra Leone.

Below is a summary of the main potential armed opponents of the current government:

The rebels associated with the coup attempt of May-June 2001 seem to have been mainly Yakoma, although it is not impossible that they included some elements of other origin, or even mercenaries. The apparent leader of the coup attempt, former President André Kolingba, was the leading Yakoma figure on the CAR political scene until he fled the country after the failure of the rebellion. The current state of play is uncertain. Bangui humanitarian agency sources estimate that some 25,000 Central African refugees fled the country in June, of whom some 15,000-20,000 went to the DRC. The vast majority are civilians, but an estimated 800 are fighters. In October, the UN's MONUC force in the DRC agreed to work with UNHCR to move the fighters away from the border town of Zongo, to locations where they would pose less of a military threat to the Central African Government. But the position is hard to control. Central African military sources believe that General Ndjengbo, who is close to André Kolingba, is at Gbadolite, in the DRC, with a number of armed men.⁷⁹ The whereabouts of André Kolingba himself since mid-2001 are unclear, although intelligence and diplomatic sources believe that he is still alive (if perhaps seriously ill). It is thought most likely that he is in the MLC-controlled area of the DRC, perhaps in Gbadolite; but it is also possible that he might have slipped back over the border to a remote corner of the southern CAR. The Kolingba family has a local estate in the CAR near the border.

Supporters of François Bozizé could instigate a significant rebellion in northern rural areas, notably the general's home region of Ouham, in the cotton belt. François Bozizé is well-respected by many regular army troops: soldiers personally loyal to him blocked the path for other government forces attempting to arrest the general in northern Bangui in October-November 2001. When he escaped from the capital Bozizé was joined by about 300 troops. Moreover, there is widespread sympathy for him among those soldiers still in the government army, and among many ordinary Central Africans, particularly in Ouham and northern

⁷⁹ Professional independent observer sources, Bangui. Confidential personal reports, January 2002

Bangui. Using southern Chad informally as a rear base, Bozizé supporters could mount an effective guerrilla war that could disrupt everyday life in one of the CAR's most densely populated rural areas, a major centre for cotton production and livestock trading – or even deprive an over-stretched government of effective control of the region. Already Bozizé supporters have staged attacks on gendarmerie posts and other locations in northern CAR; government officials are reported to have fled the Batangafo and Kabo areas.⁸⁰ With tension rising, there have also been two deaths in clashes between Central African farmers and Chadian livestock herders near the border. The fact that many Bozizé supporters are drawn from the regular army could reopen the old fault line between Patassé loyalists in the USP and the President's private militia and the soldiers of FACA. Chad's President, Idriss Déby, has accorded Francois Bozizé refuge, and he seems prepared to resist Central African pressure to send the general home; it is less clear whether Déby would tolerate Francois Bozizé using southern Chad as a base for operations, although in remote areas he might not be able to prevent it anyway.

A rumoured possible rebellion in the west. At this stage this is essentially a matter of speculation and it may be merely the result of accusations emerging from the politically fuelled hunt for those alleged to have plotted against the Government. There is no clear factual evidence and there are no clear indications of how many fighters might be involved, where they might be recruited or how well armed and trained they would be. In Bangui rumours that such a revolt is in preparation have been circulating recently, although no firm evidence is yet available.⁸¹ Such a rebellion would presumably affect the Baboua area where political support for FODEM, the party led by Charles Massi, is strongest; but these reports may be no more than propaganda, linked to the recent surfacing of allegations against Massi during the coup plot trial. If there was a rebellion in the west, it would have serious social and economic consequences, potentially disrupting not just rural populations and farm production, but also threatening the security of the road link between Bangui and Cameroon – the CAR's main import-export artery.

5.6 African Diplomatic Pressure

The pace of diplomatic activity by governments of surrounding countries has stepped up rapidly over recent weeks and it is becoming harder for either the CAR Government or potential rebels to stand aloof from any imposed process of negotiation. The poverty and landlocked location of the CAR means that both government and opposition groups are heavily reliant on the goodwill or at least tolerance of the neighbouring states and this gives the emergent peace initiative better prospects than it might otherwise have. While President Patassé has begun to come under pressure from fellow African heads of state to compromise in his treatment of General Bozizé and to raise governance standards, the former chief of staff is also being pressed hard to accept a negotiated resolution. The presence of African peace-keeping troops would reinforce those pressures. However, outside countries can only nudge the process forward in the relatively short term; they have little power to force a resolution of the underlying governance and political failures, or personal rivalries, which are major contributors to the crisis.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, and, Agence France Presse, January 2002

⁸¹ See footnote 78

5.7 Social and Economic Pressures

The population of the CAR was estimated at 3.8 million in mid-2001 by the UN Population Fund; it rose by an average 1.9% a year over 1995-2000.⁸² Average per capita gross national income was US\$290 per annum in 1999, according to World Bank estimates;⁸³ this ranks the country among the least developed economies. UNDP's Human Development Index places the country amongst the 10 least developed in the world, just ahead of Chad but well behind both Cameroon and Sudan. Life expectancy is a mere 44 years, compared with an average of 49 for sub-Saharan Africa.⁸⁴

But despite these weak development indicators, the CAR is in a stronger economic position than statistics suggest. With ample reserves of fertile well watered land it is fundamentally viable in economic terms, at a basic subsistence level. Broadly, the country can feed itself and should be able to generate sufficient domestic tax revenue to meet the current running costs of the public administration, armed forces and so on. This is a rural economy in which the vast majority of the population get their living from small-scale agriculture and livestock herding; the cultivation of cotton in more arid areas and coffee in wetter regions allows many families to earn a modest cash income to supplement their subsistence farming output. In some regions, the artisanal digging of high quality gem diamonds also injects substantial cash flow into the rural economy.⁸⁵

Formal sector activity is limited: Bangui has a new tobacco processing factory, but otherwise subsists mainly on commerce and services, and the incomes of public sector employees – when they are paid; arrears in public sector pay have clearly helped to depress the urban economy. In rural areas the main formal sector activities are cotton ginning and commercial logging. The timber sector is one of the few to have seen significant growth in recent years. Cotton and coffee output has been badly set back by the weakness of world cash crop prices; when account is taken of the high transport costs attached to export from the landlocked CAR, export prices are so low that many farmers have switched their main effort to the production of local food crops for the home market. In terms of the national trade balance, timber's growth has helped to offset the depression in cotton and coffee; but in social and employment terms it is not much compensation: timber is produced in rainforest areas far from the main farming populations in the northwest. As a member of the African franc zone, with its currency pegged to the Euro (at CFA656 = Euro1), the CAR does enjoy monetary stability and low inflation.⁸⁶ But political instability and the absence of consistent political leadership on economic issues, together with the small size of the local market, have hampered the CAR's ability to benefit from the inflows of foreign investment seen by some other franc zone markets over the past few years.

Until 1996, under President Patassé the CAR made little attempt to develop a serious long term economic policy that could command donor support. Vested interests and a suspicion of the rigour sought by the IMF and World Bank prevailed. Since 1996 a succession of reform-

⁸² United Nations Population Fund, *The State of World Population 2001*, New York, 2001

⁸³ World Bank, *World Development Indicators*, Washington, 2001

⁸⁴ United Nations Development Program, *Human Development Report 2001*, New York 2001

⁸⁵ World Bank, *African Development Indicators*, Washington, 2001; Banque de France, *Rapport Zone Franc*, Paris, 2001

⁸⁶ Banque de France

minded prime ministers has tried to pursue a policy of careful financial management and economic liberalization that could command the support of the donor community; but progress has been hampered by the failure of the presidency to give consistent and committed leadership. In 1997-1998 Anicet-Georges Dologuélé as finance and then prime minister did eventually persuade President Patassé that the Government had to press on with reforms demanded by the IMF. The country was eventually accorded a three-year Enhanced Structural Adjustment Facility (ESAF) from the IMF in July 1998. (Like other ESAFs, this was subsequently converted into a new-style Poverty Reduction and Growth Facility (PRGF), with a stronger focus on poverty reduction and social measures). The programme has focussed on tightening up revenue collection, to ensure there was enough state income to meet basic salary payments – and thus assist political stability – and on the installation of greater transparency.⁸⁷ A key IMF/World Bank demand was the privatization of fuel distribution, a sector where the monopoly state company Petroca had become a tool of political patronage and revenue diversion. Success in meeting PRGF targets was supposed to lead the CAR towards qualification for debt relief under the HIPC (Heavily Indebted Poor Countries) initiative. However, the programme has repeatedly lapsed. This is partly due to weak political leadership, but also to circumstances beyond the Government's control – notably the mid-2001 coup attempt and the earlier civil war in the two Congos, which closed the cheap river-based fuel import route and forced the country to bring in fuel by the much more expensive road tanker route through Cameroon.

The surprise dismissal of Anicet-Georges Dologuélé in early 2001 dismayed donors, who had come to see him as the main architect of progress.⁸⁸ However, they have found themselves impressed by the performance of his replacement, Martin Ziguélé, who has stayed out of political infighting and concentrated on the unglamorous task of getting economic reform back on track. By late May 2001 the IMF had agreed with the prime minister on a route towards restoration of the PRGF programme – only to see the plan thrown off track by the violent coup attempt. By late 2001 it was clear that revenue for the year would be substantially down on earlier projections. However, Martin Ziguélé succeeded in negotiating a Staff Monitored Programme (SMP) with the Fund, that set basic targets for steering the country back to a full PRGF. He also made a presentation to donors at a meeting in Paris in December 2001; this secured no new aid pledges but did make a favourable impression and may have laid the ground for future concrete aid commitments.⁸⁹ Initial performance against IMF revenue targets over the past two months has been encouraging and if this continues the Fund expects to begin work on drafting a new PRGF deal in March. If this is approved by the IMF executive board and the Government continues to make good progress in satisfying Fund criteria, the CAR could reach the “decision point” to qualify for debt relief before the end of 2002. Government and IMF estimates put real GDP growth at 1.5% in 2001 and the government, counting on a marked recovery after the conflict disruption of last year, is projecting 4.5% growth for 2002.

However, as always, economic progress will depend on the political situation. A loss of political will to persist with this programme could derail the process. Equally, a resurgence of violence could divert attention from economic issues, damage economic output and revenue

⁸⁷ See IMF's extensive documentation of its relations with the Central African Republic, available at <http://www.imf.org/external/country/caf/index.htm> [accessed 20 March 2002]

⁸⁸ Sources at IMF and World Bank. Personal interviews, 2001

⁸⁹ Sources at IMF and World Bank. Personal interviews, January 2002

collection and throw the programme off-track. Furthermore, a further lapse towards more repressive policies and human rights abuse might lead bilateral donors to refuse new support. In the most serious scenario, some of the abuses seen in the past few months could put the CAR at risk of facing a European Union aid ban. In the case of Côte d'Ivoire, the EU has shown itself willing to impose tough governance and human rights conditions on aid. Under the European Common position policy towards Africa,⁹⁰ enshrined in the Cotonou accord with African, Caribbean and Pacific states,⁹¹ such a ban is usually binding on member governments. Without the injection of new aid from key donors such as France and the EU, a full-scale IMF programme might not be sustainable for lack of funding.

Core social services have been seriously neglected over the past five years. Political instability and pay disputes with the public service employees have disrupted the provision of health and education services; children and students have effectively missed whole years of normal schooling. The disruption of health care in Bangui, and rural insecurity, undermining the provision of services outside towns, are both a contributor to the unusually low life expectancy. Moreover, the CAR has developed one of the highest incidences of HIV infection in the region: UNAIDS figures estimate the rate of HIV infection at 13.8% of the susceptible population at the end of 2000 – compared with 7.7% in Cameroon and just 2.7% in Chad.⁹² Infection rates seem to be just as high in rural areas surveyed as in Bangui city and there is no sign of a slowdown in the growth of the pandemic. An estimated 240,000 Central Africans are living with HIV/AIDS and 23,000 have already died from AIDS, leaving 99,000 children orphaned. Besides its impact in human suffering, this is a major contributor to social breakdown and the unstable climate that fosters political violence. The HIV/AIDS crisis is worsened by the CAR's political and military crisis – with health services disrupted, promiscuous sexual practice by soldiers and fighters, and the collapse of formal sector activity, driving women into prostitution. At a time when many other African governments have been stepping up efforts to combat the pandemic, the Central African authorities have been preoccupied with basic security issues; furthermore, as evidence in other conflict zones has shown, violence and social breakdown themselves contribute to the spread of HIV. The World Bank has helped the Government prepare a new action programme to support a renewed effort to combat HIV/AIDS; it is providing US\$17m in support of the programme.⁹³

6 External Players

Because of its landlocked location and its poverty, the CAR is particularly dependent on its relationships with other countries and the international community. Imports, notably fuel,

⁹⁰ European Union, Common Position ... Concerning Human Rights, Democratic Principles, the Rule of Law and Good Governance in Africa, 98/350/CFSP, Brussels, 1998

⁹¹ European Union, Partnership Agreement between the Members of the African, Caribbean and Pacific Group of States (ACP) of the One Part, and the European Community and its Member States, of the Other Part, Signed in Cotonou on 23 June 2000, *Official Journal*, L 317, Brussels 15 December 2000, Articles 9 and 96

⁹² UNAIDS and World Health Organization, *Central African Republic: Epidemiological Fact Sheets pm HIV/AIDS and Sexually Transmitted Infections: 2000 Update (Revised)*, Geneva, 2000

⁹³ World Bank, *Multisectoral HIV/AIDS Project, Central African Republic [: Project Summary]*, Washington, 25 March 2002, <http://www.worldbank.org> [accessed 30 March 2002]

World Bank, *Multisectoral HIV/AIDS Project, Central African Republic: Project Information Document*, Washington, 28 September 2001, <http://www.worldbank.org> [accessed 30 March 2002]

World Bank, *Multisectoral HIV/AIDS Project, Central African Republic: Project Appraisal Document*, Washington, 12 November 2001, <http://www.worldbank.org> [accessed 30 March 2002]

must be brought in through neighbouring countries, while diamonds are the only significant export commodity that can be flown out viably as air-freight, direct from Bangui.

6.1 CEMAC

As a member of the Central African franc zone (CEMAC – Communauté économique et monétaire de l'Afrique centrale) the CAR is one of 14 countries sharing the CFA franc common currency and one of six creating a regional single market with common trade rules and a joint central bank in Yaounde, Cameroon.⁹⁴ The franc zone structure helps to provide a framework of stability for relationships with Cameroon, Chad, Gabon and Congo-Brazzaville, even at times of tension. This could prove particularly useful in preventing the wrangle with Chad over the activities of General François Bozizé from boiling over into overt confrontation. The recent upsurge in diplomatic activity by the CAR's neighbours, concerned that a descent into civil war could further destabilize their own countries and the region generally, is probably the most hopeful prospect of averting conflict in the CAR. However the involvement of "peacekeepers" from Sudan, Mali and Burkina Faso, without the endorsement of the CEMAC states, and particularly Gabon's President Omar Bongo, threatens to inject a note of wariness into relations between the Patassé government and fellow members of CEMAC.

6.2 Democratic Republic of Congo

Relations between the CAR and the Democratic Republic of Congo are peculiarly complex, because of the economic and ethnic ties that link the two countries and the current political and military situation in the DRC. There are close ethnic ties between the people of southern CAR, such as the Yakoma, and those on the southern bank of the Oubangui river in DRC; former president André Kolingba was related to President Mobutu Sese Seko. There is a constant flow of informal trade back and forth across the long river frontier; a significant amount of Congolese coffee is smuggled into the CAR, where it can be sold to traders for CFA francs, which is a quasi hard currency much preferable to the Congolese franc. Meanwhile, the CAR has traditionally imported its fuel via Kinshasa, from where it is transported to Bangui by river barge; this is much cheaper than the alternative route – import by road through Cameroon.

However, since the collapse of the Mobutu regime relations have been uncertain: President Patassé signed a security pact with the previous DRC president Laurent Kabila. But when the MLC rebel movement led by Jean-Pierre Bemba took control of the entire northern Equateur region of DRC, and thus the full length of the frontier with the CAR, President Patassé was in a difficult position. In contrast to other regional neighbours of the DRC which had become involved in its internal war, President Patassé was anxious to keep his country out of the dispute. He was well aware that the conflict could easily spread across his southern border and that the MLC, because of the local ethnic ties, might be sympathetic to opposition interests within the CAR, particularly General Kolingba. The Central African President therefore engaged in a diplomatic balancing act, attempting both to keep Kinshasa sweet and to develop friendly relations with the MLC leader Jean-Pierre Bemba; the latter was allowed to import certain essential supplies via Bangui.⁹⁵ At the same time, the CAR allowed Kabila's

⁹⁴ See institutional and country specific information at www.izf.net, the CFA website established by the Commission de l'Union Économique et Monétaire Ouest Africaine (UEMOA) and the Secrétariat Exécutif de la Communauté Économique et Monétaire de l'Afrique Centrale (CEMAC)

⁹⁵ Economist Intelligence Unit, *Central African Republic: Quarterly Country Reports*, London, 2000-2001

defeated troops, fleeing the advancing MLC forces, to take refuge on its territory; President Patassé then arranged for Libyan government aircraft to fly the men home to Kinshasa. Even so, the Kinshasa government remained resentful of President Patassé's stance; this was clearly a key factor in its decision to take control of Central African fuel stocks held in Kinshasa awaiting shipment north. Combined with the periodic closure of the river because of fighting, this completely blocked Bangui's import of fuel via the DRC, forcing it to bring shipments in at exorbitant cost by road through Cameroon; the dispute was only resolved in 2001.⁹⁶

President Patassé's cultivation of good relations with Jean-Pierre Bemba was vindicated by the events of mid-2001; the MLC leader sent troops to assist the Central African government in putting down the rebellion. This was crucial. MLC support for the rebels could perhaps have turned the tables against President Patassé. Instead, Jean-Pierre Bemba chose to support the government in Bangui – which had shown a helpful tolerance of his own cross river trading. He may also have judged that connivance in toppling a democratically elected government might damage his own standing in the eyes of the United Nations and in terms of the Congolese domestic peace negotiations. The CAR government has played a helpful role in supporting the United Nations and the peace process: its military bases have been used for logistic back-up of the MONUC force in Congo. (This arrangement has usefully generated an estimated CFA700m⁹⁷ a month in rent for Bangui; this is enough to meet a third of the state wage bill – but, unfortunately for the CAR, the UN has decided it no longer needs the use of these facilities during 2002.)

After the failed coup attempt of May-June 2001 many defeated rebels fled across the river Oubangui to Zongo in DRC. But large numbers of mainly Yakoma civilians also fled, fearing ethnic reprisals as the Government cracked down in Bangui. President Patassé's government, fearing that rebels might try to slip back into Bangui, ordered the official closure of the border, although in practice it had no means of enforcing a total frontier closure. It was later reported that UNHCR and the UN's MONUC force had agreed to move fugitive former fighters away from the immediate vicinity of the border (see above). Some 1,000 were moved six hours drive away, to Bokilio; about 700 remain there. It remains unclear exactly what the MLC's attitude to the Central African situation is;⁹⁸ the movement appears both to be maintaining relations with the Government in Bangui and affording a degree of shelter to figures thought to be linked to the May-June 2001 revolt.

6.3 Cameroon

The CAR cannot afford a breach of good relations with the country through which its main external trade route runs; but ties are workmanlike rather than close and there is surprisingly little political contact between President Patassé and Cameroon's president Paul Biya. In early 2001 there was a minor border dispute between the CAR and Cameroon, but a settlement was rapidly negotiated;⁹⁹ the CAR is not in a position to pick arguments with Cameroon.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

⁹⁷ Economist at donor organization. Personal interview, January 2002

⁹⁸ Mouvement de libération du Congo, Confidential Report (unpublished document), seen by present author, June 2001

⁹⁹ Economist Intelligence Unit, *Central African Republic: Quarterly Country Report*, London, May 2001

6.4 Chad

Chad is a fellow member of the Central African franc zone and relations have historically been uneventful; the rumoured recruitment of former south Chadian rebels to fight in President Patassé's forces has probably suited the government in N'Djamena because it has kept potential trouble-makers occupied elsewhere. However, the decision of Chad's President Idriss Déby to accord sanctuary to the dissident CAR former chief of staff François Bozizé has certainly injected a note of tension into the relationship with Bangui. President Déby has felt obligated to be seen affording General Bozizé sanctuary, but this situation was complicating his relations with Bangui and by January 2002 he was anxious to see a settlement that would allow the former chief of staff to return home.¹⁰⁰ There have been violent incidents around the border, across which there have long been movements of southern Chadian rebels and where the traditional conflict of interests between farmers and pastoralists often makes for difficulties.

Chadians living in the CAR are thought to number a total of over 100,000, scattered all over the country, according to independent local observers in Bangui. Of these about 40,000 are refugees. The longstanding position of Chadians as traders (and as Muslims in a largely Christian and animist country) has not caused particular resentment. But relations between locals and the Chadians have been deteriorating recently, because of President Patassé's use of Chadian fighters to prop up his regime. Chadians had in fact been close to Patassé at earlier stages as well, but the decision of Chad president Idriss Deby to grant sanctuary to General Bozizé has soured relations between the Bangui and N'Djaména governments. As a result, the 600 Chadian fighters hired by Patassé are mainly former southern Chadian rebels from the group formerly headed by the late Moïse Kette. Among them is Abdoulay Miskine, who is conducting military operations in the border area.

6.5 Sudan

Relations with Sudan have been friendly but uneventful. There have been some concrete efforts to develop closer ties – notably with the establishment of a direct air link; for the CAR, the main priority is to ensure there is no overspill from the Sudanese civil war into its own remote eastern regions. The presence of Sudanese “peacekeeper” troops marks a distinct closing of the relationship between President Patassé's government and Khartoum; their presence could stir resentment among ordinary people in Bangui.

6.6 Libya

President Patassé's connections with the Libyan leader Colonel Muammar Qadhafi extend back to his years in exile from the CAR and, since coming to power, he has always been careful to nurture this relationship. For the Central African leader, Libya is a rare outside friend, willing to pitch in with emergency assistance at times of crisis; during the fuel shortages of 1999-2000 Libya offered to supply emergency oil consignments. But it was during 2001 that Tripoli's role most dramatically came to the fore, with the sending of troops to help in resisting the rebellion of May-June and ensure President Patassé's continuing hold on power since then. There may now be as many as 700-800 Libyan troops in Bangui.¹⁰¹ The Libyan presence is resented by many Central Africans and President Patassé is running a

¹⁰⁰ Western diplomatic sources. Personal interviews, January 2002

¹⁰¹ Independent local observer, Bangui. Personal interviews, January – February 2002

clear political risk in relying on the Libyan troops to some extent for his personal security. Libya's interest in the Central African Republic appears to be both ideological and practical: for the Tripoli regime, the relationship with President Patassé is a public expression of its philosophy of African and Third World solidarity, but it also represents a concrete step in the Libyan Government's efforts to extend its influence in sub-Saharan regions (seen also in the ties, for example, with Burkina Faso and Gambia). In strategic terms, the CAR presence is a useful way of underpinning Libya's efforts to maintain influence over Chad. Central African diamonds are a potentially useful trading and diplomatic tool for the Libyan Government. However, Libya also seems aware of the dangers of being perceived simply as a protector of the Patassé regime; its role in promoting the new peace initiatives may help to reposition it as a less partisan player.

6.7 France

France is the CAR's most important non-African external partner and for many years the relationship epitomized the old colonial power's reluctance to let go of its influence over its former African possessions. However, France's decision, at the end of the 1990s, to close its military bases in the CAR was meant partly as a symbolic demonstration that these neo-colonialist days were over. Moreover, relations with the administration of President Patassé have been bedevilled by suspicion and mistrust on both sides: the Central African President has frequently criticized Paris, for example, demanding the departure of French troops, only to worry for his security when they did pull out. France meanwhile, regards President Patassé as an unreliable populist. However, Paris is still concerned to try and sustain constitutional democratic government in the CAR and underpin its fragile stability; it therefore is likely to provide new economic aid in support of any new IMF programme, provided that the country satisfies basic governance criteria. Indeed, in mid-2001 the French decided to accord President Patassé a much sought for invitation for an official visit to France.¹⁰²

6.8 Bretton Woods Institutions and the United Nations

The CAR's links with the IMF and World Bank, and the UN, have often been difficult, troubled by mistrust and concern, on the part of international officials, about the apparent reluctance of some key figures in the CAR to vigorously pursue the application of policy agreements, whether on economic or military reform. International officials have frequently expressed concern that reform efforts by the Government and military high command risk being undermined by a lack of presidential support.¹⁰³

7 Scenarios

At this stage the future course of events in the CAR appears uncertain and it is possible to identify a number of ways in which the situation could evolve. The section below outlines three broad brush possibilities – steady improvement, continuing fragile calm or an outright plunge into deeper conflict and crisis. However, it should be stressed that these are not absolutes; the situation is fluid and highly unstable; moderate improvements on the economic front, for example, could run in parallel with a political deterioration, while a return to calm and political negotiation is no assurance of economic recovery or long term peace. The uncertainty of the present position is well illustrated by the fact that the self-evident success

¹⁰² French Government sources, Paris. Personal interviews, July 2001

¹⁰³ Senior IMF and World Bank officials. Personal interviews, 1993-2002

of the MINURCA UN peace-keeping operation – widely posited as a model for similar interventions elsewhere in Africa – nevertheless proved unable to ensure continued peace or greater political consensus after the peace-keeping troops had gone home.

7.1 Political Reconciliation and Gradual Economic Recovery

This optimistic course of development is by no means impossible. Shaken by the potential security threats to his regime, President Patassé has in recent weeks attempted to make peace with his opponents, agreeing to abandon the effort to bring François Bozizé to justice. Despite their military resources, potential rebel leaders such as General Ndjengbo and General Bozizé must realize that mounting a full-scale war to overturn the Government could be a risky and difficult enterprise, with a high risk of failure and inter-ethnic conflict. Moreover, they may also realize – although this is far from certain – that the international community would be unsympathetic to leaders of a fresh military putsch or civil war. This message may well have been drummed home to François Bozizé in his discussions with Lamine Cissé, the UN's representative in the CAR. The flurry of diplomatic activity by the CAR's neighbours certainly offers some hope of averting a worsening of the situation.

To establish a credible peace process, President Patassé would have to adopt a freshly inclusive approach to politics and governance; this seems unlikely, but it could work. Gradually, and perhaps with the supervision of international or African monitors, the mainly Yakoma refugees currently in the DRC would return home.

An optimistic reading would see this political reconciliation paralleled by progress on the economic front, with prime minister Martin Ziguélé pursuing the IMF staff monitored programme and eventually moving on to qualify for a full-scale PRGF package and HIPC debt relief. In technical economic terms, this is certainly feasible: the Government does have the skilled officials needed to manage such a process and the economy does have the potential revenue base required to satisfy IMF requirements. Preparation of an interim poverty reduction strategy, with international assistance, would open the path to revival of a long term development strategy, with new aid. The savings achieved through debt relief could be channelled into grassroots development, including job creation measures for young men who might otherwise be tempted into military activity.

Achievement of this optimistic scenario would require an unprecedented show of leadership and self-restraint on the part of both opposition and government figures, notably President Patassé. But having seen the country almost topple into ethnic civil war during 2001 it is just possible that they might be prepared to cooperate in the national interest, to avoid the CAR suffering the fate of Congo-Brazzaville or the DRC. Moreover, the strong African diplomatic drive, and the possibility of a new peace-keeping force, would help to sustain the chances of this scenario being fulfilled.

7.2 A Slide into Deepening Conflict and Economic Collapse

On the other hand there is a serious risk that the CAR will topple into outright rural civil war, with new rebellions launched in the north by supporters of General Bozizé, in the south by supporters of former President Kolingba and perhaps even in the west, by supporters of Charles Massi. The most likely trigger for such widespread resistance to the Government would be the continuation of highly partisan repressive measures on the part of the USP (presidential guard) and the President's militia, directed at individuals and ethnic groups thought to be sympathetic to the opposition.

A new round of USP repression, perhaps in response to provocative pinprick attacks by opposition militants, would serve only to stir increased support for opposition armed groups. In contrast to the largely Yakoma supporters of ex-President Kolingba, the Bozizé camp can draw on strong grassroots support both in the northern savannah – notably among the general’s own important Gbaya ethnic group – and in the army. The security forces could fragment, notably between the regular army (FACA) and the USP.

There is also a risk of renewed labour unrest, as public sector salary arrears persist; against mass strike campaigns, even the tough USP would be little use; new strikes and urban violence would disrupt the collection of revenue, derailing efforts to get the IMF programme back on track. Prime minister Martin Ziguélé’s successes in technocratic financial management could be completely nullified by a collapse into new violent crisis; in such a situation, President Patassé would revert to his past intensely partisan reliance on close patronage connections – and that would undermine IMF confidence. In a worst case outlook, parts of Bangui – notably the southern districts where Yakoma have lived – and areas of the north, west and south-eastern countryside potentially sympathetic to opposition rebels would either slip out of government control or become the targets for repressive and sometimes random action by loyalist security forces.

This would provoke further substantial refugee movements. Gbaya viewed as sympathetic to General Bozizé, notably in the Ouham region, might seek refuge in southern Chad, while some of the remaining Yakoma in the south would seek sanctuary in the northern DRC and northern Congo-Brazzaville. Some westerners might cross into Cameroon. The international community would be faced with a major humanitarian crisis, and the risk of widespread ethnically-fuelled conflict and repression. Government is already reported to be using an anti-poaching aircraft for action against suspected rebel positions. Clearly, this could deteriorate into action against civilians, perhaps with the use of mercenaries or even foreign militia (just as Sudanese Zaghawa fighters have been recruited to the service of the government in Chad at certain times). Indeed, precisely because the various armed forces, of government and opposition, lack equipment and are under-trained, there would be a risk that they could lapse into using terror tactics – a danger already demonstrated in the way the USP handled its pursuit of alleged rebels in Bangui in June 2001. This situation could see the CAR sliding into a Burundi-style military stalemate, with the Government relying on tough military action to retain control of the capital – but large areas of the countryside slipping into de facto rebel control, while disputed areas are the target of repression or terror tactics by all sides.

7.3 Continued Instability, Undermining Sporadic Reconciliation Moves and Economic Recovery Efforts

The hope of peaceful recovery or the horror-prospect of a slide into civil war are clearly both present. Equally it is possible that over the coming months neither will come to pass and the CAR will simply be caught in continuing instability. This scenario envisages that regional diplomatic efforts, and possibly a peace-keeping presence, will help prevent a descent into civil war, but will not be enough to ensure genuine and lasting reconciliation within the CAR. The government of Martin Ziguélé will persist with its attempts to pursue the IMF programme, although it will struggle to satisfy IMF criteria for full Fund support and debt relief. It also assumes that potential armed rebel groups hold back from mounting new military campaigns and that the Government refrains from a descent into outright ethnic repression.

But this remains an imperfect situation. An absence of real political dialogue and the unwillingness of a still mistrustful President Patassé to make genuine concessions to the opposition continue to block the path to the re-establishment of genuine stability. Yakoma and other groups suspected of opposition sympathies are still the target of sporadic discrimination and human rights abuses by the USP; many Yakoma remain in exile. The widening net of accusations against alleged coup plotters, and the growing personal isolation of President Patassé, make for a dangerous situation; the President remains increasingly reliant on a few key advisers, such as chief prosecutor Joseph Bindoumi. The climate of fear remains intense, inhibiting normal political life as a wide circle of prominent public figures feel targeted by accusations. This suspicious political climate blocks the path to a new understanding with the trade unions over the pay arrears issue, provoking periodic new strikes and the consequent disruption of public services in general and revenue collection in particular.

Investor confidence is still absent and the economy is stuck in a relatively low level of activity, while it proves impossible to launch a concerted effort to tackle development problems, the spread of HIV/AIDS and economic diversification. Large numbers of refugees opt to remain in the DRC and Brazzaville. Although there are no large new refugee movements, the danger of renewed conflict and the displacement of more people remains present.

8 Conclusion

Of the three scenarios outlined above, it is the third that seems most likely. On balance, it seems just about probable that the CAR will avoid a slide into wholesale civil war – partly thanks to international donor pressure, and especially given the regional diplomatic pressures now being exerted by neighbouring governments. Moreover, Central African society as a whole is not scarred by the sort of ethnic hatreds and mistrust that have characterized countries such as Rwanda and Burundi. Like the two Congos, the CAR is a country where the crisis is primarily driven by the rivalries and power politics of different leaders and political interests rather than grassroots mass sentiment. However, the prospects for genuine reconciliation among this political leadership seem poor and it is likely that the CAR will remain trapped in uncertainty. There is little sign that its leaders are willing to make the compromises and sacrifices of vested interests required to re-establish a clear national consensus on the use of power, to bring an end to security force abuse or potential rebellions, and to provide the calm conditions needed for economic recovery. Already weakened political and judicial institutions are being eroded by a vindictive and politically motivated web of accusations against those who might pose even a purely electoral threat to the regime.

9 Bibliography

Agence France Presse, May 2001 – March 2002; 1993 - 1996

Banque de France, *Rapport Zone Franc*, Paris, 2001

_____, *La Zone Franc: rapports annuels*, Paris, 1994-1996

Central African Republic, *Letter of Intent and Technical Memorandum of Understanding*, Bangui, 19 November 2001, <http://www.imf.org/external/np/loi/2001/caf/01/index.htm> [accessed 20 March 2002]

Commission de l'Union Économique et Monétaire Ouest Africaine (UEMOA) and Secrétariat Exécutif de la Communauté Économique et Monétaire de l'Afrique Centrale (CEMAC) , [institutional and country specific information], <http://www.izf.net> [accessed 20 March 2002]

Economist Intelligence Unit, *Central African Republic: Country Profile 2001*, London 2001

Economist Intelligence Unit, *Central African Republic: Quarterly Country Reports*, London, 1997-2001, 1993-1994, 1986-1990

European Union, Partnership Agreement between the Members of the African, Caribbean and Pacific Group of States (ACP) of the One Part, and the European Community and its Member States, of the Other Part, Signed in Cotonou on 23 June 2000, *Official Journal*, L 317, Brussels 15 December 2000

_____, Common Position ... Concerning Human Rights, Democratic Principles, the Rule of Law and Good Governance in Africa, 98/350/CFSP, Brussels, 1998

Fédération Internationale des Ligues des Droits de l'Homme, *Droits de l'homme en République centrafricaine: discours et réalité: un fossé béant*, Paris, 13 February 2002

_____, République centrafricaine: une parodie de justice, Paris, 13 February 2002 (press release)

_____, Lettre à Monsieur Ange Félix Patassé, Président de la République centrafricaine, Paris, 11 October 2001 (press release)

_____, République centrafricaine: la chasse aux sorcières continue, Paris, 15 June 2001 (press release)

France, Ministère de la Coopération, [devaluation briefing documents], 1994 (unpublished)

International Monetary Fund, [documentation of its relations with the Central African Republic], <http://www.imf.org/external/country/caf/index.htm> [accessed 20 March 2002]

O'Toole, T., *The Central African Republic: the Continent's Hidden Heart*, Boulder CO: Westview Press, 1986

Organization of African Unity, Communiqué [issued at close of conflict prevention organ meeting], Tripoli, 27 January 2002

Radio France International [Bangui/Paris], 2001

UNAIDS and World Health Organization, *Central African Republic: Epidemiological Fact Sheets pm HIV/AIDS and Sexually Transmitted Infections: 2000 Update (Revised)*, Geneva, 2000

United Nations Development Program, *Human Development Report 2001*, New York 2001

United Nations Integrated Regional Information Networks, *Central African Republic: National Disarmament Campaign Launched*, Nairobi, 14 February 2002

United Nations Population Fund, *The State of World Population 2001*, New York, 2001

World Bank, *Multisectoral HIV/AIDS Project, Central African Republic [: Project Summary]*, Washington, 25 March 2002, <http://www.worldbank.org> [accessed 30 March 2002]

_____, *Multisectoral HIV/AIDS Project, Central African Republic: Project Appraisal Document*, Washington, 12 November 2001, <http://www.worldbank.org> [accessed 30 March 2002]

_____, *Multisectoral HIV/AIDS Project, Central African Republic: Project Information Document*, Washington, 28 September 2001, <http://www.worldbank.org> [accessed 30 March 2002]

_____, *World Development Indicators*, Washington, 2001

_____, *African Development Indicators*, Washington, 2001