

CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC

TIER 1 | USCIRF-RECOMMENDED COUNTRIES OF PARTICULAR CONCERN (CPC)

KEY FINDINGS

The Central African Republic (CAR) remains violent, fragile, and fractured along religious lines. In 2017, targeted killings based on religious identity escalated in the center and east of the country. Violence was reminiscent of the extensive killing and displacement of Muslims that took place in 2014; armed groups especially targeted the ethnoreligious minority Peuhl population. In early August, then United Nations (UN) Emergency Relief Coordinator Stephen O'Brien warned that the early signs of genocide are present in CAR. Militias that formed along opposing Muslim and Christian lines killed individuals based on their religious identity and displaced tens of thousands. More than one million Central Africans were displaced as of late 2017, the highest number since 2014. CAR's Muslim population remains disproportionately displaced, with 80 percent of that community having been driven from the country. In the western part of the country,

some Muslims cannot practice their faith, move freely, or equally access services. A USCIRF delegation that traveled to CAR in May was disappointed by senior government officials' dismissive response to concerns about conditions for Muslims. Government officials failed to acknowledge that the conflict has resulted in gross violations of religious freedom, including widespread killing based on religious identity, the ethnic cleansing of Muslims, separation of communities based on religion, and the destruction of houses of worship. The CAR government has taken some steps to address interfaith tensions but needs to increase its reconciliation efforts to prevent the ethnic cleansing of Muslims and improve interfaith relations. USCIRF again finds in 2018 that CAR merits designation as a "country of particular concern," or CPC, under the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA), as it has since 2015.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Designate CAR as a CPC under IRFA;
- Increase engagement with CAR authorities, the UN, and international donors to ensure that issues related to ending sectarian violence and impunity, increasing interfaith reconciliation, and affirming the rights of religious freedom and religious minorities are supported and raised in all engagements with relevant parties;
- Press CAR authorities to undertake initiatives to ensure that Muslims have a future in the country by:
 - Issuing statements that Muslims are full and equal citizens;
 - Undertaking development missions in the northeast;
 - Ensuring Muslim participation in government administration;
 - Safeguarding sustainable returns of Muslim refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) to their homes;
 - Recognizing Muslim holidays as national holiday; and
 - Rebuilding destroyed mosques and Muslim properties;
- Work with the UN Security Council to continue to sanction ex-Séléka and anti-balaka members responsible for organizing and/or engaging in sectarian violence, ethnic cleansing, and crimes against humanity, and continue to speak out regularly against sectarian violence and gross human rights abuses;
- Condition ongoing support for security sector reform on the establishment of security forces and police units that reflect the country's diversity;
- Continue to support programs to re-establish and professionalize CAR's judiciary, and fully fund the Special Criminal Court;
- Expand support for reconciliation programs and interfaith dialogue to rural areas; and
- Continue to support humanitarian assistance for refugees and displaced persons, as well as rebuilding projects.

COUNTRY FACTS

FULL NAME

Central African Republic

GOVERNMENT

Presidential Republic

POPULATION

5,625,118

GOVERNMENT-RECOGNIZED RELIGIONS/FAITHS

N/A

RELIGIOUS DEMOGRAPHY*

51% Protestant
29% Roman Catholic
10% Muslim
5% Unaffiliated
5% Other

*U.S. Department of State

BACKGROUND

In CAR, sectarian violence and targeted killing based on religious identity started after the 2013 coup. The coup resulted in rampant lawlessness and the complete collapse of government control. Despite efforts of the internationally supported transitional government from 2014 to 2016 and the election of President Faustin-Archange Touadéra in 2016, the current government and scant security forces have almost no presence outside of the capital. Ongoing violence between Muslim-majority ex-Séléka militias and Christian-majority anti-balaka militias has resulted in thousands of people dead, 2.4 million in need of humanitarian assistance, and more than 542,000 refugees and 688,000 IDPs as of the end of 2017—the highest number of displaced Central Africans since 2014. In December 2014, the UN Commission of Inquiry on the Central African Republic (COI) issued a report finding a “pattern of ethnic cleansing committed by the anti-balaka in the areas in which Muslims had been living.” By the end of the height of CAR’s sectarian conflict in mid-2014, 417 of 435 mosques in the country were destroyed, 80 percent of CAR’s Muslims had fled the country, and those who remained

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sought safety in UN peacekeeper-protected enclaves. In Bangui, 99 percent of the capital’s Muslim population fled.

Fourteen armed groups control an estimated 60 percent of the country, and government officials, the police, and the judiciary have neither the infrastructure nor the resources to stop ongoing fighting or to bring perpetrators of violence to justice. Nevertheless, the CAR government, armed groups, and diplomats continue to engage in political negotiations for a peace

agreement. On June 19, government officials and representatives of 13 armed groups signed a peace agreement negotiated by the Community of Sant’Egidio and established a ceasefire. However, violence between accord signatories resumed within days.

In an effort to stabilize the country, the UN maintains a peacekeeping force of 13,751 personnel called the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA). Deployed in 2014, MINUSCA faces serious challenges in fulfilling its mandate, including being targeted by armed groups. Christian militias have portrayed UN peacekeepers

from Muslim-majority countries as part of a broader campaign of foreigners to infiltrate the country, increasing local suspicions of Muslims and MINUSCA.

On February 15, 2017, the CAR government appointed Toussaint Muntazini Mukimapa from the Democratic Republic of Congo as prosecutor of the Special Criminal Court, a hybrid court composed of CAR and international judges to prosecute those accused of committing gross war crimes since 2003. While some judges have been appointed, the court faces significant challenges in becoming operational. In addition, accountability for violence against civilians, in particular sexual and gender-based violence, remains absent.

In May 2017, USCIRF Commissioners traveled to Bangui and Boda and assessed religious freedom conditions for CAR's minority-Muslim population, government reconciliation efforts, the status of the conflict, and the country's rule of law challenges. The delegation met with senior CAR officials, religious leaders, UN representatives, and civil society actors.

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM CONDITIONS 2017

Sectarian Violence and Ethnic Cleansing

Since May, targeted killings based on religious identity increased dramatically and clashes between armed groups continued across the country. Violence was reminiscent of the extensive killing and displacement of Muslims that occurred in 2014; armed groups are especially targeting the ethnoreligious minority Peuhl population. In early August, then UN Emergency Relief Coordinator Stephen O'Brien warned again that the early signs of genocide are present in CAR. As in previous reporting periods, CAR authorities lacked the capacity to investigate the killings or hold the perpetrators accountable.

On May 13–14, in Bangassou, anti-balaka militias attacked and killed Muslims, including the town's imam, Mahamat Saleh. The fighters sought to eliminate Muslims from the town, even trapping Muslims who sought refuge in a mosque and hospital. Cardinal Dieudonne Nzapalainga, Archbishop of Bangui and a founder of the national interfaith Religious Leaders Platform, had to negotiate their release and

escort them to the town's Catholic cathedral, where an estimated 2,000 still reside as IDPs. Days later, in Bria, ex-Séléka militias attacked and killed Christians. Other small towns, such as Alindo and Mombaye, also experienced sectarian violence in May. The UN reports that overall, the violence resulted in more than 100 dead and 40,000 displaced.

On October 13, anti-balaka fighters attacked the Djimbi mosque in Kembe, killing 26, including the imam and deputy imam. Survivors reported that the militants surrounded the mosque before attacking it, with dozens inside.

Since June, in Batangafo, Zemio, Bria, and Pombolo, ex-Séléka and anti-balaka fighters engaged in repeated religious-based violence, killing hundreds and displacing tens of thousands. Human rights groups reported that between August and October alone, approximately 250 civilians were killed in this violence.

Marginalization of Muslims

During USCIRF's May 2017 visit to CAR, the delegation concluded that despite some positive efforts to reverse the displacement of Muslims from the capital and west, notable concerns remained and CAR's Muslim population remains highly marginalized.

Muslims continue to face severe limitations on their ability to move freely within and outside of their communities. Imams in Bangui and Boda stated that some Muslims in their cities could move outside of

their enclaves; however, it remained unsafe for Muslims to travel to other areas, especially in Islamic garb. Representatives of the Office of the UN High Commissioner

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for Refugees (UNHCR) and civil society told USCIRF that throughout western CAR, especially in rural areas, predominantly Christian communities limit the movement of Muslims and prohibit them from returning to their homes or their previous jobs in the mining sector. UNHCR and human rights groups also reported that in some western villages, Muslim returnees are prohibited from practicing their faith.

Muslims in CAR were already marginalized prior to the current conflict, which has further hardened views

on Muslim Central African identity and citizenship. Muslims endure social and structural discrimination related to access to education, healthcare, and identity documents. They suffer hate speech and harassment frequently, including by security officers who treat them as foreigners, asking for multiple forms of identification.

On a positive note, in Bangui and Boda, imams and Muslim leaders reported to USCIRF that physical barriers and peacekeepers stationed to protect Muslim residents had been removed and that some Muslim IDPs had returned to their home villages.

Abusive Witchcraft Accusations

Witchcraft is a part of many Central Africans' lives, and accusations of witchcraft can lead to human rights violations. Women, the elderly, children, and people with disabilities are common targets of witchcraft accusations, which have resulted in detention, torture, or death. Such abuses continued in 2017 and were carried out by the anti-balaka.

Prospects for Reconciliation

Despite further peace initiatives and ceasefire negotiations in 2017, the government of CAR still faces major obstacles to executing any reconciliation strategy or dealing with core issues of the conflict. During USCIRF's 2017 visit to CAR, senior government officials were dismissive about concerns over Muslims' inability to move freely as well as their general safety concerns. CAR government officials also did not acknowledge that the conflict has resulted

in gross violations of religious freedom—including killings based on religious identity, the ethnic cleansing of Muslims, separation of communities based on religion, and the destruction of houses of worship—but instead stated that the conflict is not religious in nature.

CAR authorities signed onto the Sant'Egidio-facilitated political agreement and ceasefire of June 2017, but heavy clashes continued that same week. With international support, Muslim and Christian religious leaders signed an action plan toward reconciliation in

December. In another internationally-supported initiative, anti-balaka and 3R armed groups signed a local ceasefire agreement in Nana-Mambéré Province.

In 2017 the government of CAR launched a pilot disarmament, demobilization, reintegration, and repatriation (DDRR) program, launched a new Roadmap for Peace and Reconciliation with the African Union, and created a committee to establish a truth, justice, reparations, and reconciliation commission. President Touadéra reshuffled and expanded his government, increasing the Cabinet size from 23 to 34 and Muslim ministers from three to eight. CAR has two ministers for national reconciliation and adopted a National Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms Commission, yet officials were unable to provide USCIRF clear information on the government programs. In 2016, President Touadéra launched a plan for local peace and reconciliation committees nationwide. At the end of the reporting period, 10 peace and reconciliation committees were established, the majority in Bangui.

Given the failure of past peace accords and ceasefires, Central Africans remain skeptical of new initiatives. Greater international coordination on peace efforts is also needed. Many interlocutors

informed USCIRF that while social cohesion programs concentrated in targeted cities such as Bangui and Boda have allowed for increased contact and decreased mistrust between Muslims and Christians, they called for continued and increased U.S. government support for

reconciliation programs, especially in rural areas.

U.S. POLICY

The U.S. government reduced its engagement in CAR in 2017, although it continued financial support for humanitarian assistance, conflict mitigation, peacebuilding, and rule of law programs. U.S. forces, alongside Ugandan and other African troops, previously supported peacekeeping efforts in the east of CAR but drew down in fall 2017 after progress was made in the operation against

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the Lord's Resistance Army and its commander Joseph Kony. In Fiscal Year 2017, the U.S. government was the largest contributor of humanitarian assistance, providing \$124,990,467. In November 2017 the US also supported the extension of MINUSCA's mandate for an additional year, including an increase in troops and other measures to improve the capabilities of the force. On May 9, 2017, President Donald Trump announced he would continue to implement Executive Order 13667, which declared a national emergency in CAR and sanctioned the following persons identified by the UN Security Council for threatening CAR's stability: former president Bozizé, former transitional president Michel Djotodia, ex-Séléka leaders Nourredine Adam and Abdoulaye Miskine, and anti-bal-aka "political coordinator" Levy Yakite.

U.S. Embassy Bangui strongly advocated for religious freedom, interfaith dialogue, national reconciliation, and justice. Then U.S. Ambassador to CAR Jeffrey Hawkins regularly met with President Touadéra, senior government officials, and religious leaders to promote reconciliation and security nationwide.