



Avoiding the Worst in Central African Republic

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Preventing War. Shaping Peace.

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Executive Summary

As the Central African Republic (CAR) experiences a strong upsurge in violence and armed groups take root in the provinces, the national authorities and their international partners have been unable to halt the escalation and find durable solutions to the crisis. So far, the government and the UN have focused their efforts on the process of disarmament, demobilisation, reinsertion and repatriation (DDRR) of the rebels, but little progress actually has been made. The incapacity of the peacekeepers to change the balance of power on the ground, the failure of the government to respond to the strong community tensions dividing the country and the competition between international mediation initiatives have further contributed to the current stalemate. In order to reverse this trend, the government and its partners must put pressure on the rebels – particularly by tackling their sources of income and exercising stronger military deterrence – but also rebuild trust among the populations of peripheral regions.

The presidential and legislative elections held at the end of 2015 and the beginning of 2016 were welcomed by Central Africans and generated high expectations. These political developments were followed by a few months of improved security, as armed groups adopted a wait-and-see attitude, gauging the intentions of the new authorities in Bangui. Unfortunately, President Touadéra's electoral legitimacy did not translate into an effective leverage over the rebels. The relative respite was thus only short-lived. The UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA), comprising over 12,000 peacekeepers, has failed to compensate for the departure of the French Sangaris force in October 2016 and to exercise a real military deterrence on the armed groups.

Since the end of 2016, violence has flared almost everywhere in the provinces. The resurgence of armed groups has led to the death of a large number of civilians and to massive displacement. While in the north west the crisis revolves around armed groups, as well as perennial conflicts around movements of cattle, in the centre and the east rebels are waging a guerrilla warfare to control zones of influence and resources. This provincial violence has numerous damaging consequences: the links between rebel groups and local communities is reinforced; the number of local militias is rising; and, above all, a resurgence of targeted attacks against Muslim minorities is driving ethnic and religious exclusion, reminiscent of the most tragic events of the country's recent crisis.

Several international and regional actors, as well as international organisations, have launched a series of parallel mediation efforts since the end of 2016. The African Union (AU) and CAR's neighbours, including Angola and Chad, merged several individual initiatives, launched a joint mediation in early 2017. The catholic community Sant'Egidio also joined the ranks of mediators. They organised meetings with armed groups in Rome which resulted in a "political peace agreement" for CAR, signed in June 2017. However, the agreement was soon taken over by renewed violence on the ground.

Divergent agendas, institutional rivalries and differing approaches have led these various actors to propose remedies that are at times contradictory, especially

concerning amnesty of rebel leaders, the integration of combatants into the army or the return of former presidents. But the strong upsurge in fighting since April seems to have provoked a new level of awareness and a change of position. Thus, President Touadéra and the Secretary-General of the UN, António Guterres – so far hesitant – have expressed their openness to a major role for the sub-region in the resolution of the crisis. Similarly, aware that the dispersion and the competition between different diplomatic interventions is problematic, the European Union (EU) organised on 21 June 2017 a round table in Brussels, aiming to relaunch a coherent and credible international mediation.

Since then, the AU has again taken control of this delicate international mediation by producing, in Libreville in July 2017, a new Roadmap for Peace and Reconciliation in CAR. Although this initiative has been welcomed by CAR's international partners, including at meetings in the margins of the UN General Assembly in New York in September, some core disagreements remain. The coming months will show whether the much needed improvement in international coordination is forthcoming.

As CAR is again engulfed in the crisis, the worst may be yet to come. A repetition of the events of 2013 and a return to civil war cannot be excluded. A normalisation of the security situation in CAR is highly unlikely in the near future, and a military defeat of the armed groups even less feasible. However, there are a certain number of measures that could be adopted to contain the violence and to achieve small progresses toward a resolution of the crisis. Supporting a negotiated solution with the armed groups involves combining strong coercive measures and positive incentives, which include:

- ❑ **Reducing the attractiveness of the war economy for youth and undermining the finances of the armed groups by acting decisively against the illegal war economy.** Precise instructions should be given to MINUSCA contingents in the course of the renewal of its mandate in November 2017, in order to fight illegal trade networks.
- ❑ **Establishing a stronger power balance vis-à-vis armed groups by combining diplomatic efforts with strong pressure.** This will not only require an increase in peacekeepers, but also the deployment of contingents that are capable of seriously deterring the rebels. In parallel – as the Special Criminal Court is expected to be operational soon – the arrest and trial of rebel leaders organising major attacks against civilians should be a primary objective.
- ❑ **Encourage pragmatic leading elements of armed groups to play a more positive role.** Beyond the integration of a limited number of combatants into the army, the possibility for certain leading figures to assume a more political role on the local level, could figure in the agenda for discussions.

At the same time, ongoing mediations need to be boosted, with the aim of reaching a credible and enforceable peace agreement and cooperation between Bangui and its neighbours needs improving. In this sense:

- ❑ **In the spirit of the reunion in Brussels, all international mediators should agree on a coherent roadmap to resolve the crisis.** Above all, they need to determine who will be the guarantor of these future agreements,

what international framework must be established to ensure its enforcement and financing and how to promote its ownership by the Central Africans.

- ❑ **In order to obtain long-term support from regional countries, Bangui and neighbouring capitals should cooperate on a common ground of shared interests.** In particular, they could cooperate to better organise transnational livestock migrations in CAR. It is, for example, essential to revitalise the bilateral measures on nomadic pastoralism, initiated in 2012 under the Chadian-Central African Joint Commission, but which were forgotten in the later crisis, and to more broadly integrate other neighbours of CAR.

Finally, in order to reduce community tensions and to improve relations between the state and the populations in the eastern part of the country, the Central African government should break with policies of previous regimes, and speak courageously about past events, even if it means antagonising a part of its electoral base:

- ❑ **The president could acknowledge crimes committed by his predecessors in remote areas of the country in order to draw a line under the past and open a new page.** A training program for new administrative elite should also be envisaged, including inhabitants of peripheral regions of all religious backgrounds. The message of the authorities must be clear: Muslims are Central Africans and have their rightful place in the nation. In this sense, it is important for the government to take concrete actions to avoid discrimination in the reconstitution of national identity files and to facilitate the restitution of property abandoned during the crisis.
- ❑ **The government could also take symbolic reconciliation measures,** such as organising the national day on 1 December in the north east in order to send positive signals to a region which has long mistrusted Bangui, and affirm its place in the national space.

Bangui/Nairobi/Brussels, 28 September 2017

Avoiding the Worst in Central African Republic

I. Introduction

In May 2016, Crisis Group warned against over-optimism after regular elections were held in the Central African Republic (CAR). For indeed many felt that the clear victory of Faustin-Archange Touadéra in the second round of the presidential election, in February 2016, marked a decisive step out of crisis. However, the crisis in CAR has already lasted for a number of years and more than 18 months after the elections, fundamental problems persist. The current government, having inherited many challenges that the transition largely failed to resolve, is powerless in the face of a rapidly worsening security and humanitarian situation.

Since late 2016 the enthusiasm engendered by the elections has faded as the country drifts towards civil war. The anti-balaka self-defence militias formed to resist the Seleka coalition, that seized power through a coup in 2013, have stepped up their criminal activities and adopted an unambiguously anti-Muslim stance. Western CAR remains the scene of outright persecution of the Muslim population – which explains why the vast majority of the Muslim refugees who have fled CAR to eastern Cameroon and southern Chad since 2013 do not dare to return home. In the north, centre and east of the country, violent conflicts continue to break out and armed groups are reinforcing their hold over the territory they control.¹ In the areas where there is open conflict there has been an accelerating trend of local militia creation, while rebel groups exploit prevailing insecurity to operate protection rackets. An even greater worry is the increasingly intercommunal nature of the conflict, which has once again stirred up the issue of indigenous identity. Muslims, and Fulani in particular, are viewed as foreigners – as happened at the height of the crisis in 2014.

This report is the result of research carried out in Bangui and in numerous provincial towns such as Bambari and Bria in 2016 and 2017. It looks at how the Central African crisis has evolved since late 2016, describes the mediation efforts underway and seeks to alert international opinion to a possible return to open conflict. The final chapter of the report outlines a fresh approach that might tackle the duplicitous and manipulative behaviour of armed groups and makes recommendations about how to counter the risk of a further deepening of the rifts within Central African society.

¹ For more information on the armed groups in the Central African Republic, read the Midterm report of the Panel of Experts in accordance with paragraph 28 (c) of resolution 2339 (2017), 26 July 2017 and for an analysis of the history, motivations and strategies of these groups, read Crisis Group Africa Report N°230, *Central African Republic: the Roots of Violence*, 21 September 2015.

II. The Elections Did Not Resolve the Problems

Ever since he took office, President Touadéra has sought to persuade his international partners to remain engaged in the CAR and regularly travelled abroad in search of new sources of support.² In the aftermath of the elections, the government turned to international aid donors to provide funds: at the donor conference held in Brussels on 17 November 2016, the CAR's partners pledged to provide \$2.27 billion in support over the next three years.³ But much of the recovery and consolidation plan approved at the meeting consists of existing projects and budget support that was already scheduled, while there is little sign of the additional aid commitments being disbursed; many donors are worried that the government lacks the reformist will-power to improve governance.⁴

Although the country has benefited from financial assistance, its economic performance remains sluggish. Projects to relaunch the cotton and timber sectors are being developed, but the business community remains generally pessimistic. Compared to 2016, the economic growth is weak and there has been no increase in fiscal and customs revenues. It is a reflection both of the fragility of the economy and the growth of customs and tax evasion and illustrates the difficulties that President Touadéra and his government face in trying to mount an effective campaign against corruption. For many observers, the country appears to be sliding back into the bad practices of the past.

But it is, above all, on the security front that the deterioration is most marked (see section III). In late 2016, the fundamentals of the situation were redrawn. President Touadéra expressed deep regret at France's decision to pull out the soldiers from its military operation Sangaris on 31 October 2016 and the relative disengagement of Paris after the elections.⁵ For, in reality, the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilisation Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA) has not been able to make up for the departure of the French troops and put pressure on the rebels. Against that background, the armed groups play a double game: they take part in meetings in Bangui and abroad, yet this produces no change in the scale of insecurity afflicting provincial areas.

Moreover, the security situation is stagnating in a political and strategic context that is already fragile. President Touadéra does not enjoy the support of a broad political base or organised political movements to shield him in periods of crisis. The creation of a political party – as had been planned in 2016 – would have enabled him to relaunch meaningful political debate, test his own political weight and distance himself from memories of the bad governance that characterised the rule of François

² Looking for international support, President Touadéra visited Israel in May, Chad in June and Rwanda in August.

³ "Conférence des bailleurs de la Centrafrique: les promesses de dons dépassent les 2 milliards de dollars", *Jeune Afrique*, 17 November 2016.

⁴ Crisis Group interview, donor, Bangui, June 2017.

⁵ "Centrafrique: Touadéra à Paris, Hollande l'assure du soutien de Sangaris", *Jeune Afrique*, 20 April 2016. Operation Sangaris was deployed in December 2013, to support the African-led International Support Mission to the Central African Republic (MISCA), following the adoption of Resolution 2127 by the UN Security Council.

Bozizé, president from 2003-2013, under whom he served as prime minister. In 2016, there was talk of Touadéra creating a party, but the idea came to nothing. He does have some supporters from Bozizé's party, the Convergence nationale – or Kwa Na Kwa (KNK) – but they are far from reliable, while his own inner circle is clearly split between those who favour Bozizé's return and those who oppose the idea.⁶ Thus Bertin Béa, the general secretary of Kwa Na Kwa, continues to call for the return of the former head of state and the organisation of an inclusive political dialogue.⁷

Furthermore, the putative “sacred union” with the parties that supported Touadéra in the second round of the presidential election has never been properly established. Since he came to office, the members of the presidential majority have never once met together; the major parties are under-represented in the government and have long waited – so far in vain – for more ministerial portfolios. On the contrary, the last ministerial reshuffle, on 12 September 2017, saw the return to government of several former rebels from the ex-Seleka and the anti-balaka – as had already happened during the transition.⁸ But unfortunately this overture by President Touadéra toward the armed groups is not likely to have much impact on local security dynamics (see chapter IV.D). Some of the political parties that called on voters to support Touadéra in the second round of the election feel aggrieved and have now adopted what they describe as a “constructive opposition” stance.⁹

In the National Assembly, President Touadéra depends on a very fragile majority, including a number of independent members, while relations between the executive and the parliament have deteriorated over the past year. This sort of situation has arisen previously. During the political transition that ended in 2016, transitional President Catherine Samba Panza was on bad terms with the Assembly speaker, Alexandre Nguendet. And today relations between Touadéra and the National Assembly speaker, Karim Mekassoua, are also difficult – which became clear when the membership of the assembly's executive was renewed in March 2017. Among the points of contention is Mekassoua's call for parliament to be routinely consulted over the award of mining and logging contracts. Rumours frequently suggest that the speaker is trying to destabilise the government, while the government's tardiness in responding to summons that require appearance before the deputies has come close to provoking an institutional crisis. The prime minister, Simplicie Sarandji, only appeared before the assembly after the government had been threatened with a censure motion.¹⁰ Institutional deadlock is never far away and President Touadéra

⁶ Moreover, it should be noted that despite being subject to UN sanctions, former President Bozizé continued to travel, particularly to Kenya and Uganda. See Midterm report of the Panel of Experts in accordance with paragraph 28 (c) of resolution 2339 (2017), *op. cit.*

⁷ “Le Kwa Na Kwa réclame le retour de Bozizé et un dialogue politique”, *Jeune Afrique*, 18 September 2017.

⁸ “En Centrafrique, des proches des milices font leur entrée au gouvernement”, *Le Monde* (online), 15 September 2017.

⁹ Crisis Group interviews, Central African political actors, Bangui, June 2017.

¹⁰ Faced with discontent among deputies, he went to answer their questions about insecurity without taking his defence minister along. “Le torchon brûle entre l'Assemblée nationale et le gouvernement”, *Apa News*, 19 May 2017.

risks becoming isolated, which could add a political crisis to what is already a crisis in the security and humanitarian situation.

Finally, and probably the most important factor, President Touadéra no longer enjoys the level of popularity that he had in 2016. Many Central Africans express disappointment and the lack of progress on the security front erodes his political capital and undermines his credibility. These days, President Touadéra's main source of support is MINUSCA. Yet we are starting to see the emergence of fundamental disagreements between him and the UN, which is asking the authorities to take serious steps to get a real process of reconciliation underway. Unfortunately, much of the government machine, and Touadéra's electoral base more generally, is reluctant to involve Central African Muslims more deeply in the process of resolving the crisis. However, Touadéra needs to show political courage and an ability to make the case, even if this risks upsetting some of his voter base.

III. The Security Crisis Worsens

Since late 2016, we have seen a major resurgence in fighting across large areas of the CAR, a spiral of violence on a scale not seen since the peak of the crisis in 2014. This has created dramatic humanitarian pressures and a desperate need for protection. For the first time in two years the number of internally displaced people has come close to 600,000, and a further 481,000 are refugees in neighbouring countries.¹¹ Altogether, almost a quarter of the population is displaced and Najat Rochdi, the UN humanitarian coordinator for the CAR, says that the proportion of the population who need humanitarian aid “is one of the highest in the world” – one in two Central Africans depends on it for survival.¹²

Furthermore, the conditions in which the NGOs have to operate are becoming increasingly difficult. The CAR is now regarded as one of the most dangerous countries in the world for humanitarian actors. They are often the target of extortion threats and since January 2017 there have been more than 200 attacks on NGOs.¹³ Recently, several leading international NGOs decided to suspend their activities in certain risky areas after attacks by armed groups, such as at Batangafo in the north in September.¹⁴ Despite hugely increased urgent humanitarian needs linked to the upsurge in fighting, humanitarian agencies are short of resources. The 2017 humanitarian response plan – whose budget was recently revised upwards, to \$497 million – remains far short of what is needed; and by the end of June only 24 per cent had been disbursed.¹⁵ In this context, any prospect of the situation normalising is still remote.

A. A Capital That Is Secure – But Not Really at Peace

In the CAR, the local security dynamics vary enormously from one region to another. For example, Mambéré-Kadéï prefecture, in the south west, is affected by everyday criminality and fairly strong anti-Muslim feelings are still evident; yet it seems to be less touched by the crisis than the other regions of the country. Meanwhile, over the past two years significant progress has been made in Bangui in terms of security. Shops in the PK5 district – hitherto severely scarred by intercommunal violence – have reopened, while the main supply route to the capital has been made secure and the camp for urban displaced populations at Mpoko, next to the airport, was closed at the start of 2017. These have been encouraging signs.

However, the capital is far from being an oasis of peace. Many of the Muslim inhabitants of the 3rd and 5th districts say that they have no local problems but do not feel safe venturing outside their neighbourhoods and thus feel almost under

¹¹ See the website of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), <http://data.unhcr.org/car/regional.php>.

¹² “Act now to avoid the worse”, press release from the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), Najat Rochdi, Bangui, June 2017.

¹³ Crisis Group telephone interview, NGO staffer, July 2017.

¹⁴ “28 000 personnes privées d’aide humanitaire à cause d’un niveau de violence jamais atteint contre les travailleurs humanitaires à Batangafo (RCA)”, press release by the coordinating committee of international NGOs in the CAR, Bangui, 11 September 2017.

¹⁵ “Act now to avoid the worse”, op. cit. and “En Centrafrique, l’explosion des besoins impose la révision du Plan de réponse humanitaire”, UN News Centre, 17 August 2017.

house arrest. Moreover, everyone in Bangui has relatives in provincial areas and when terrible events affect a town or a village, communal tensions are renewed in the capital. After the clashes of May 2017 at Bangassou, in the south, self-defence groups once again appeared openly on the streets of the PK5 district. All the shops in the neighbourhood stayed shut on 19 May 2017, a day of prayers in memory of those who had died in Bangassou.

Thus, even in Bangui, a section of the population says that it is not seeing any benefit from the presence of international forces and there are growing popular demands for the rearmament and renewed deployment of the Central African armed forces (FACA). The leading religious figures formerly very supportive of MINUSCA no longer refrain from criticising the UN both in public and in private: “During war-time, the peacekeeping mission becomes an observer of chaos”.¹⁶ Behind the scenes senior politicians and civil society figures manoeuvre to take political advantage of these discontents, and particularly by stirring up young people in the city. As early as October 2016, Gervais Lakosso, coordinator of the civil society working group at the time, had launched a petition after the murder of a FACA officer in PK5. A demonstration organised in Bangui in parallel with this, to call for the departure of MINUSCA, got out of hand, leaving several people dead.¹⁷ Ever since, the city has been abuzz with rumours about future demonstrations.

B. *Flare-ups in the Provinces: Numerous “Hot Spots” Develop*

The situation in the capital is certainly not a meaningful barometer of security conditions in the rest of the country. Since late 2016, violence has flared up in a host of communities scattered all over a vast area encompassing the north west, the north, the centre, the east and, now, part of the south east.¹⁸ The north west is seeing armed group activity overlap with already common disputes about nomadic pastoralism and cattle rustling, whereas the centre and the East are fractured by strong intercommunal tensions and territorial guerrilla fighting between armed factions. At the same time, the April-May 2017 withdrawal of American special forces and Ugandan contingents deployed as part of the regional force assigned to tackle the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) has left a security void now being filled by major armed groups, sparking an explosion of violence in the south east.¹⁹ Although this expansion of the crisis into Mbomou and even Haut-Mbomou prefectures – two areas relatively spared hitherto – had been expected, an overburdened MINUSCA could not prevent it.

The geology of the Central African crisis is composed of several strata. Besides describing the incessant struggles between armed groups and the way they have intensified since late 2016, any understanding of the current events also requires an appreciation of the political and identity dimension of the conflict. This is most

¹⁶ Crisis Group interview, religious leader, Bangui, June 2017.

¹⁷ “The United Nations should leave; they are there to earn their per diems and they are allowing the armed groups to get stronger”, argues an influential civil society actor. Crisis Group interview, Bangui, December 2016.

¹⁸ See the map in the appendix A.

¹⁹ “RCA: à Obo, le départ des soldats ougandais inquiète la population”, Radio France Internationale (RFI), 22 May 2017.

strikingly reflected in the re-emergence of the demands related to indigenous identity that first appeared so dramatically in 2013.

1. A battle for the control of territory and the impossibility of reunifying the ex-Seleka

Over the past fifteen years, the centre and east of the country have become a “grey zone” beyond the reach of effective state control. The regions are the subject of fierce tussles between armed groups vying for control of its resources and rivalries that are compounded by ethnic tensions. In 2012, most of these groups came together to form a coalition of convenience, “Seleka”; they seized national power, only to break apart once more, amid violent rivalries and highly unstable alliance deals.

Since late 2016, this fighting has reached new levels of intensity. Two ex-Seleka factions, the Union for Peace in the Central African Republic (UPC) – composed mainly of Fulani – and the coalition led by the Popular Front for the Rebirth of Central African Republic (FPRC)²⁰ squabbled over territory in parts of Haute-Kotto, Ouaka and Mbomou. Their expansionist ambitions, and other obstacles to any reunification of the old Seleka, fuelled repeated clashes between the two groups and culminated in the propagation of hate speech against the Fulani.

Dangerous rhetoric about *centrafricanité* (“Central African-ness”) had already been aired in the late 2000s by north-eastern armed groups, to stigmatise their rivals,²¹ and then in 2012 by Bozizé’s coterie, seeking to paint Muslims as foreigners. Now it has been appropriated by both the FPRC and the anti-balaka groups, as a tool to stigmatise Fulani populations and suggest they are from Chad or Niger. In this time of crisis, such language and the propaganda disseminated by the armed groups finds a ready public, who may then become radicalised themselves.²²

Agreements to delineate and share out territory such as the Mbrès accord – signed by the UPC and the FPRC in mid-2016 – or the November 2016 deal to end the crisis in Haute-Kotto, have never been respected.²³ Each group has a long track

²⁰ “Organized around a High Supreme Council, headed by Nourredine Adam, and a National Council on Defence and Security, headed by Abdoulaye Hissène (S/2016/1032, para. 162), the coalition includes leaders from several ex-Séléka groups, including Mahamat Al-Khatim from MPC (annex 5.2), Azor Alite and Zakaria Damane from the Rassemblement patriotique pour le renouveau de Centrafrique (RPRC), as well as Ahmat Issa from the former Arab faction of UPC. Though Abdoulaye Hissène is in practice the military leader, the command structure remains relatively unclear, with several leaders having introduced themselves as the coalition’s chief of staff, including General Azor Alite, Mahamat Saleh and Mahamat Al-Khatim”. Extract from the Midterm report of the Panel of Experts in accordance with paragraph 28 (c) of resolution 2339 (2017), 26 July 2017.

²¹ In the late 2000s, Djotodia’s Union of Democratic Forces for Unity (UFDR), predominantly Gula, was hostile in its attitude toward the Rungas involved with the Convention of Patriots for Justice and Peace (CPJP), a rival rebel group that had been set up in the north east of the country in 2008. Even back then, the Rungas were accused of being foreigners. Today the leaders of these groups play a central role in the FPRC, but tensions between Gula and Runga persist. For more information about these groups, read Crisis Group Africa Report N°203, *Central African Republic: Priorities of the Transition*, 11 June 2013.

²² Crisis Group interviews, civil society actors, religious leaders, Fulani, Gula, Runga, Banda traditional chiefs, representatives of armed groups, Bria and Bambari, December 2016.

²³ “Accord de fin de crise en Haute-Kotto entre l’UPC et le FPRC”, Bria, November 2016.

record of issuing press statements accusing the other of seeking to occupy its zones of influence. The mediation efforts organised by the local Islamic community in 2016 failed to rein in this trend.

Indeed, these groups have continued to seek new recruits, including some from outside the country, and to bring in arms supplies, in the case of the FPRC, from Chad (Tissi and Ngarba), Sudan (Um Dukhun and Am Dafok) and South Sudan, and from the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and South Sudan for the UPC.²⁴ This struggle for the control of territory, mineral resources and coffee production led to heavy fighting around the Ndassima gold mines and then again at Bria in November 2016.²⁵ This has redrawn traditional patterns of difference and allegiance, with the formation of temporary alliances between former enemies. The FPRC briefly allied itself with a series of local self-defence groups against the UPC and Fulani populations more generally, but these alliances have subsequently broken apart.

This upsurge in fighting follows the collapse of an attempt to reunite the ex-Seleka elements in late 2016. Once the political transition was underway, and lacking reliable interlocutors, the Central African government and the international community asked the various ex-Seleka factions to form an organised group for the July 2014 Brazzaville summit. They provided help for Seleka to hold a congress at Ndélé in May 2014, but these efforts proved fruitless. In 2016, the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) also tried to bring the various elements of the ex-Seleka together, with no more success. In reality, Seleka had only ever been united for a mere three months, the time it took to capture power. As soon as its coup d'état had succeeded, this very heterogeneous coalition that had brought former enemies together fractured and many of its senior figures made death threats against the putschist head of state Michel Djotodia.²⁶ In 2014, Ali Darassa, one of the ex-Seleka's military commanders, left Bangui for Bambari, where he then set up the UPC at the request of local Fulani in Bambari who were complaining that already they had become the target of attacks by both the other Seleka factions and the anti-balaka militia groups.

Since then, rivalries between commanders, fierce competition for control of local chieftancies and disagreements over the strategy for dealing with central government have prevented these factions from coming back together around a common cause.²⁷ The failure of both the gathering proposed by Nouredine Adam²⁸ at the October 2016 general assembly in Bria, and the subsequent meetings held in Ndélé and Sido, effectively signed the death warrant of the Seleka coalition – which had never really existed in any case.²⁹

²⁴ Midterm report of the Panel of Experts in accordance with paragraph 28 (c) of resolution 2339 (2017), *op. cit.*

²⁵ "RCA: nouvelles violences à Bria entre deux factions de l'ex-Seleka", RFI, 23 November 2016.

²⁶ Crisis Group interviews, leaders of armed groups, Bangui, April 2013.

²⁷ See Crisis Group Report, *Central African Republic: The Roots of Violence*, *op. cit.*

²⁸ Nouredine Adam is one of Seleka's most experienced military commanders. See the account of his career in Crisis Group Report, *Central African Republic: Priorities of the Transition*, *op. cit.*

²⁹ At the general assembly in Bria, only the Patriotic Rally for the Renewal of the Central African Republic (RPRC) supported the FPRC proposals. Later, at Sido, the Patriotic Movement for the Central African Republic (MPC) joined this coalition, but the UPC maintained its total rejection of the proposals.

In 2017, the situation deteriorated rapidly: in February and March Bambari became the focal point of tensions between competing armed groups – and a major security and political challenge for the government and its partners. Occupying a strategic position as a crossroads between Bangui, to the west, and the roads heading toward the north of the country and, eastwards, to Sudan, the town is a “gateway” between the capital and the rebellions in the east. Moreover, facing the threat of a new military expedition to Bambari by the FPRC, MINUSCA focused a lot of resources to the town and the UN Blue Helmets adopted a more offensive posture.³⁰ Since March, the town has been visited a number of times by President Touadéra and members of the government, accompanied by donors, to signal the return of the state to the east of the country.³¹ A mayor, a prosecutor, 60 gendarmes and 30 police have been posted to Bambari.

However, the initial optimism felt by the authorities and their partners about this attempt to create a “town without armies” soon subsided. The redeployment of a small team of civil servants does not really amount to the same thing as the proper restoration of state authority and the gendarmes are protected by UN peacekeepers. Above all, the February 2017 departure from Bambari of Ali Darassa, leader of the UPC, under pressure from MINUSCA, displaced the conflict further south – where his group embarked on a wave of looting. This provoked the creation of a myriad of local self-defence groups, some of which allied themselves with the FPRC, receiving money and weapons and launching punitive expeditions against the Fulani.³²

A 13 May 2017 attack on Bangassou by groups of local “self-defence” militia fighters, supported by former Central African armed forces personnel who had come from the west, left more than 100 dead, causing widespread shock.³³ Indeed, the local self-defence groups attacked not only the Fulani but also the rest of the Muslim population. The town has since been attacked numerous times and at the beginning of September 2000 Muslims were still sheltering in the grounds of the bishopric, under the protection of UN peacekeepers. The mosque and their homes having been destroyed, the Muslims know that they will be in danger if they leave the church compound. In this situation, Stephen O’Brien, the UN Under-Secretary General for Humanitarian Affairs, has said there are signs of a risk of genocide.³⁴

³⁰ “The Bambari war won’t happen”, was the message from General Keïta, MINUSCA’s military commander. In February, MINUSCA helicopters opened fire on an FPRC column which was heading for Ippy, apparently without hitting their target. Zoundeko, one of the alliance commanders found dead at the same time, is thought to have been killed by other rebels. Faced with a MINUSCA ultimatum, Darassa and the anti-balaka commanders “Gaëtan” and “Tarzan” left Bambari. Crisis Group interviews, security experts, Bangui, June 2017.

³¹ On his March 2017 visit Touadéra was accompanied by Makhtar Diop, vice president for Africa at the World Bank, one of the main donors to the CAR, who had come to announce plans to provide CFA6 billion (about \$10.7 million) in funding for the region. However, security conditions will prevent the disbursement of most of this money in the short term.

³² A number of known anti-balaka commanders, such as Marcelin and Gaëtan went to Bria to finalise an alliance with the FPRC chiefs in the Borno neighbourhood.

³³ “A Bangassou, une attaque meurtrière très préparée”, *La Croix*, 18 May 2017.

³⁴ “UN sees early warning signs of genocide in CAR”, *Al Jazeera*, 8 August 2017.

After the attack on Bangassou in May, there were very violent clashes between a wing of the FPRC and anti-balaka fighters in Bria in June and August 2017 and then more widely in Haute-Kotto.³⁵ In September 2017, fighting even broke out between the mainly Arab and Runga faction of the FPRC and another strand of the movement who are mainly Gula, provoked by the closeness of their links with leaders of the anti-balaka. So in Bangassou we are witnessing the revival of old rivalries between the Gula and the Runga, which had already left large numbers of dead in this mining town in 2011.³⁶ The conflict has also spread eastwards as far as Haut-Mbomou, where there has recently been an upsurge in tension between local militias and UPC fighters on the Rafaï-Mboki road. In some towns such as Zémio the fighting has provoked a rise in intercommunal tensions between Fulani livestock herders – present locally in large numbers since the 1980s – and the rest of the population.³⁷

2. The old demons return: a conflict in which ethnic and commercial interests and questions of indigenous identity all overlap

Beyond the alliances and rivalries between armed groups, questions of politics and identity are fundamental dimensions of the crisis – fuelled by intercommunal hatreds that expose the rifts within the CAR population. This is exemplified by the violence that has hit Bangassou since May 2017 against a background of rhetoric about indigenous identity, highlighting deep-rooted social resentment, particularly related to business. As happened in Bangui in 2014, the houses of Muslims have been looted and set on fire and mosques attacked. The Tokoyo district, home to many of the traders, was the first area to be targeted.³⁸

While the initial spark for this violence was the expansion of the UPC into southern areas, its roots lie in a powerful and longstanding intercommunal hostility. According to Bangassou residents, the mainly Christian Nzakara, Mbogou and Kara traders were complaining that Muslim businesspeople – Arab and Fulani – were competing against them by selling their goods at prices that were too low. In Bangassou, as across much of the CAR, Muslim minorities, accounting for about 20 per cent of the country's population, are more affluent and have more extensive networks. They organise much of the local trading, and in some respects this leaves them in a dominant position, creating a social hierarchy that is sometimes resented by the Christian and animist sections of the population. This resentment toward Muslim business people finds expression in the pejorative names by which they are described –

³⁵ Crisis Group interview, soldier, Bangui, June 2017.

³⁶ The UFDR and CPJP factions have fought a lengthy tussle for the control of Bria's resources. This rivalry sparked violent firefights between the two armed groups, particularly in 2011. Read Crisis Group Report, *Central African Republic: Priorities of the Transition*, op. cit.

³⁷ Fulani are present in significant numbers in Zémio and in Mboki, the most important market in south-eastern CAR – and that helps to reassure the many herders who find they have become targets and it attracts members of the UPC who find themselves on the defensive. Unfortunately, this UPC presence in the south east leads to false assumptions, with the other local communities regarding all of the local Fulani as complicit in the activities of the armed group.

³⁸ "Centrafrique: à Bangassou, le pire côtoie le meilleur de l'humanité", *La Croix*, 26 June 2017.

“Bengue”, “Toubé” or the “big boubous” (“big robes”) and they are sometimes the target of violent score settling assaults.³⁹

In an ambiance of increased violence, sectional attitudes flourish as concepts of indigenous identity are increasingly accepted. Thus, playing out a scenario sadly familiar in the CAR, sometimes erroneous historical references are cited as evidence that the town’s Muslims come from elsewhere and are foreigners. The folk history of tenacious Bangassou warrior confronting mounted Arabs – an incomplete summary of a complex past – is a powerful driver in mobilising locals to “resist”. The May 2017 attack on Bangassou was planned and had the backing of some politicians and was probably blessed by a pastor.⁴⁰ Witness reports suggest the attackers enjoyed some other forms of support from members of the entourage of the Sultan of Bangassou and among members of parliament and their stand-in running mates.⁴¹

Even beyond Bangassou, the idea that Muslims are foreigners has become widespread among a section of the population and the Central African administration. This is reflected, notably, in the discrimination evident in the issuing of identity documents and birth certificates, many of which have been destroyed in the violence of recent years. So neither Bangui nor Bouar have seen mobile court hearings in the neighbourhoods with Muslim majorities – respectively the third district, and Bouar’s Haoussa neighbourhood – because judges are reluctant to issue supplementary judgements of citizenship to Muslims whose right to nationality they regard as “questionable”.⁴²

The local public consultations organised in the run up to the Bangui Forum of 2015 had already shown that this was a crucial issue.⁴³ In several municipalities in Ouham and Ouham-Pendé, community representatives had called for foreigners to be deprived of identity documents and demanded that nationality requirements should be revised. Later, at the forum itself, anti-balaka representatives demanded “the cancellation of all passports, residence permits and national identity cards issued in recent years”.⁴⁴

In the east, the leaders of armed groups and their political allies also draw on history and feelings of identity as tools for mobilising youth. In the eyes of some

³⁹ Crisis Group Report, *Central African Republic: The Roots of Violence*, op. cit.

⁴⁰ While a majority of religious leaders tried to calm the situation, one pastor did allow hate speech toward Muslims and incitements to violence to be propagated in his church. Crisis Group interviews, Bangassou authorities, researchers, Bangui, June 2017.

⁴¹ Crisis Group interviews, Bangassou authorities, researchers, Bangui, June 2017.

⁴² Public hearings to make supplementary judgements on the issuance of birth certificates were organised by NGOs to enable families who did not have birth certificates to obtain them. Crisis Group interview, consultant/researcher, Bangui, June 2017.

⁴³ The Bangui Forum, organised in May 2015, was supposed to be the first stage of a genuine process of reconciliation. It brought together more than 600 participants drawn from every prefecture (country) in the country and from different religious faiths, to discuss and reach agreement on recommendations concerning a range of subjects such as governance, the economy or, indeed, reconciliation. See the conclusions of the Rapport Général du Forum national de Bangui, Central African Republic, Bangui, May 2015.

⁴⁴ See the Rapport consolidé des missions des consultations populaires à la base en République centrafricaine, Bangui, March 2015 and the Recommandations de l’ex-mouvement des patriotes anti-balaka, Coordination nationale des anti-balaka, Bangui, May 2015.

Muslim notables, Seleka is viewed as a metaphor for revenge by the Arab-Sudanese empires that were defeated during the nineteenth century, during the process of colonisation.⁴⁵ Thus, in total contrast to groups such as the UPC – whose development was essentially fuelled by the economics of predation and a need to protect pastoralists – other factions such as the FPRC were motivated by more political aims. In its statements as well as in interviews with us, the FPRC talks of the history of the Senoussi sultanate⁴⁶ and calls either for the partition of the country, or a federal structure or autonomy – depending on the circumstances at any one time – in order to make its weight felt in negotiations.⁴⁷

The idea of a partition of the CAR, encouraged by some members of the then administration, has been on the agenda since the Brazzaville summit of July 2014.⁴⁸ In December 2015, the FPRC raised a flag at Ndélé to proclaim the independence of Dar el-Kouti and then of the Republic of Logone. Of course, these moves had more than a touch of opportunism, but it would be complacent to see them as no more than a power play by the rebels. Privately, a number of intellectuals, traditional rulers such as the “sultan”⁴⁹ – as he is known in Bria’s Borno neighbourhood – and indeed the former member of parliament for the area all remind young people of the era when CAR really was under the sway of sultanates.⁵⁰ It is hardly surprising therefore that the FPRC demands the signature of an overall political agreement before any disarmament takes place and often expresses hope of achieving some kind of autonomy for their region.⁵¹

3. The UN lacks the ability to respond to security challenges

MINUSCA’s strategic objective is “to support the creation of conditions conducive to the sustainable reduction of the presence of, and threat posed by, armed groups”.⁵² Yet today we are seeing attacks gain in intensity, while armed groups grow in number and consolidate their areas of territorial control. This is a reflection of the Blue Helmets’ inability to fulfil their mandate – with devastating consequences for communities. This weakness sows opposition to MINUSCA among the population and political actors and it also undermines the UN’s capacity to play a political role in mediation, at the very moment when the Security Council is calling for a negotiated solution.⁵³

Like many UN missions, MINUSCA is flawed in several key respects. Most fundamentally, it is too small and under-equipped. Faced with a growing number of

⁴⁵ Crisis Group interviews, member of a Muslim association, Bambari, March 2015; local authorities figure, Bria, March 2014.

⁴⁶ To learn more about Senoussi, read Pierre Kalck, *Histoire de la République centrafricaine* (Paris, 1977) and Bernard Simiti, *Le Dar-El-Kouti empire oubanguien de Senoussi (1890-1911)*.

⁴⁷ Crisis Group interviews, FPRC officials, Bria, December 2016.

⁴⁸ See Crisis Group Commentary, “Central African Republic: Four Priorities for the New President”, 10 May 2016.

⁴⁹ In reality, a member of the family of the Sultan of Birao.

⁵⁰ Crisis Group interview, local authority figure, Bria, March 2014.

⁵¹ Crisis Group interviews, FPRC officials, Bria, December 2016.

⁵² Resolution 2301, UN Security Council, S/RES/2301, 26 July 2016.

⁵³ “Pourquoi la crise centrafricaine dure et va durer...”, *The Conversation*, 23 May 2017.

“hotspot” crises, the mission has been completely overwhelmed. It has little more than 12,000 soldiers deployed and much of its strength is concentrated in Bangui. Moreover, it has only a slim room for manoeuvre in operational terms. For example, in many regions anti-balaka groups are destroying wooden bridges yet, with only two helicopters, the force is desperately short of the air power to tackle those responsible.⁵⁴ To extend MINUSCA’s reach, some new units are now being deployed, perhaps soon to be supplemented by a Brazilian contingent as well, possibly in the shape of a rapid reaction force. The UN Department for Peacekeeping Operations is preparing to ask the Security Council for substantial troop reinforcements. The French are already firm supporters of this proposal and the Americans could also give it their backing – but they are pressing for tough action to be taken against contingents implicated in sexual violence.⁵⁵

However, it is not just a matter of insufficient personnel and capacity. The weakness of the force’s commitment and reactivity is a real problem. This is well illustrated by the fact that MINUSCA was caught off guard by the May 2017 attack on Bangassou. UN staff, NGOs and the local authorities in Bangassou reported the warning signs: self-defence groups that had come from outside the area took up positions at the entrance to the town and warnings of the impending attack were circulated widely.⁵⁶ On this occasion, the Blue Helmets posted in the town had even asked for reinforcements. Yet the build-up of warning signs, as in Bria in November 2016, was not enough to save Bangassou from disaster. Once again, this cruelly exposed both the UN troops’ lack of speed and flexibility and the reluctance of some contingents to leave the areas where they were based.

Furthermore, in areas with high levels of intercommunal tension, local people – unfairly – question the neutrality of the Blue Helmets. Thus, ever since 2013, good relations between local traders and those contingents that are predominantly Muslim have often been misinterpreted, with damaging consequences for the country. Dangerous assumptions are made by a section of the population, who sometimes accuse the Blue Helmets of siding with an ex-Seleka armed group, because of their Muslim faith. Even though these perceptions are ill-founded, they continue to be widely believed and, implicitly, pose the question of whether MINUSCA’s deployment strategy should be redefined. Over the near future, there could be a sharp rise in the number of attacks and provocations against MINUSCA – which has already lost a dozen troops in 2017.

⁵⁴ Crisis Group interview, military expert, Bangui, June 2017.

⁵⁵ Crisis Group interviews, diplomats, New York, September 2017.

⁵⁶ Crisis Group interviews, Bangassou authorities, NGO members, military expert, UN staff, Bangui, June 2017.

IV. Dialogue and Mediation Attempts

The end of the political transition that came with the elections and the subsequent appointment of a new government in April 2016 brought an end to the international mediation process that had been led by the president of the Republic of Congo, Denis Sassou-Nguesso, and the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS). The international contact group was dissolved and, from late 2016 onwards, there has been developing rivalry between competing would-be actors in crisis mediation. Besides the official framework for mediation between the government and the armed groups – which is essentially limited to discussions about the demobilisation, disarmament, reinsertion and repatriation (DDRR) process – the CAR has seen a planned parliamentary initiative and a memorandum signed by parties and political associations in May and June 2017. This aims to get the National Assembly and the political groups more involved in the process of resolving the crisis.⁵⁷

International efforts involve governments, regional organisations and actors specialised in mediation. The African Union and the regional powers – Chad, Angola, Republic of Congo, ECCAS, the International Conference of the Great Lakes Region (ICGLR) – all became involved again in 2016, bringing a range of parallel initiatives together to launch an African Union (AU) mediation effort, which was presented to the UN Security Council in March 2017.⁵⁸ Various non-state actors joined the mediation party. The Sant'Egidio Community in Rome, a Catholic organisation that had become involved in 2015 during the political transition – particularly in relation to the Republican Pact – organised a new round of meetings in the Italian capital in 2017. Initially held in private with the representatives of armed groups, these discussions were widened out, culminating in the signature of a political peace agreement in June.⁵⁹

But until now, these international mediation initiatives have had no impact on the local security dynamics. Indeed, they have revealed the existence of differences in agenda, institutional rivalries and variations in mediation cultures. This dispersion and competition between the various diplomatic interventions do not engender progress on the core issues at stake and there have been no concrete results. Confronted with this reality, the European Union (EU) organised a round table of mediators in Brussels on 21 June 2017, in an attempt to relaunch a coherent and credible international mediation initiative. Since then, and on a number of occasions, including in New York in September 2017, these various actors have reaffirmed their support for the roadmap adopted by the AU in July 2017 in Libreville. Yet

⁵⁷ These documents contain several important suggestions: the recommendations of the Bangui Forum held in May 2015 should be the framework of reference for the peace process; a peace agreement should take the form of a law and be submitted to a vote in parliament; the negotiations should take place in the CAR and could be facilitated by the National Mediation Council with the support of international experts.

⁵⁸ To ensure that the AU retained a role after the elections, its then special representative for the CAR, Hacem Lebatt, pressed for the creation of an international support group. His initial proposal envisaged that this would be chaired by the AU, but the UN and other partners of the CAR were strongly opposed to this idea and the presidency was enlarged to encompass many other international actors. See the interview with Hacem Lebatt, RFI, 23 March 2017.

⁵⁹ Accord politique pour la paix en République centrafricaine, Rome, 19 June 2017.

disagreements persist. The next few months should show whether reinforced coordination between international actors is in fact feasible and whether this could open the door to a resolution of the crisis.

A. Impasse in the Dialogue between the Government and the Armed Groups

Up to now, the forum for discussions between the government and the armed groups has been limited almost exclusively to the DDRR committee but this is deadlocked. The rebel groups have been received by President Touadéra in Bangui and he has gone to meet them in provincial centres, notably Bouar, Kaga Bandoro and Bria. At the meetings of the consultative and monitoring committee for DDRR that have taken place since October 2016, a national DDRR strategy has been adopted. The fifth and sixth meetings of the committee did take place in Bangui in June 2017, bringing together for the first time the representatives of all the armed groups, including the Democratic Front for the Central African Republic People (FDPC) led Abdulaye Miskine,⁶⁰ yet provincial areas saw a resumption of violence. At the very moment that their men were committing abuses, the representatives of the armed groups disclaimed any responsibility and cast the blame on foreign groups.⁶¹ Moreover, Nouredine Adam has recently made statements that make the participation of FPRC combatants in DDRR conditional on the release of group members held at “Le Roux” military base – which vividly illustrates the impasse that the process has reached. Faced with these obstacles, even the government and the UN have expressed serious doubts about the prospects for the success of DDRR.⁶²

Since the start of the political transition in 2013 – as in the majority of African countries that have suffered civil war – the agenda for resolving the conflict has been constructed around a programme of demobilisation, disarmament, reinsertion and repatriation (DDRR) for the armed groups and the reestablishment of a professional and multi-ethnic army. These two objectives have been on the negotiating menu for many years. Back in 2008, during the inclusive political dialogue, sessions were organised to look at why the previous demobilisation, disarmament, and reinsertion (DDR) programs had not been implemented. The Central African authorities and international partners identified a number of priority issues. Today, almost five years after the start of the current crisis, progress in tackling these challenges remains very slow.

The basis of the current DDRR process was formally established through an agreement reached at the Bangui Forum on 8 May 2015, during the political transition.⁶³ At the same time, a program aimed at reducing community violence (RCV)

⁶⁰ In Brazzaville on 1 June 2017 Abdulaye Miskine and Jean Wilybiro Sako, the minister in charge of DDR, signed the addendum to the Bangui Accord dealing with DDR.

⁶¹ Crisis Group interviews, diplomats, Bangui, June 2017.

⁶² Crisis Group interviews, diplomats, Bangui, June 2017.

⁶³ Signed at the time by ten armed groups and the transitional government, the agreement established a core principle: only fighters belonging to signatory armed groups and in possession of military weapons would be eligible for DDRR. These criteria have subsequently been relaxed, so that combatants from non-signatory groups can be eligible. As in the standard model for such schemes, the DDRR program envisages that fighters will be regrouped at a number of sites where the authorities will be responsible for their accommodation and subsistence. The plan is that the fighters will

was set up to complement DDRR; this is targeted at combatants who do not qualify for the latter, but still wish to benefit from the options available for reinsertion into civilian life. While the program for reducing community violence has been set up in several towns, particularly in the west, the DDRR process itself is drifting. Several towns have seen the launch of pre-DDRR activities – public works schemes, particularly those of a highly labour intensive nature (THIMO) in return for the “provisional” deposit of weapons. But with each new security flare-up, the combatants take back their weapons and return to the fighting, as has happened over recent months in Bambari.⁶⁴ A DDR pilot project for 560 combatants, with 40 drawn from each group, has just begun and several dozen rebels have disarmed, but this amounts to no more than a token remedy, given the number of armed militia fighters in the country.

While the international donors have promised to provide \$45 million for DDRR, the political and security conditions required for its implementation do not yet prevail.⁶⁵ There are still numerous obstacles to the disarmament of the armed groups – which, fundamentally, reflect the nature of these factions. Their fragmentation, and the disintegration of their structures, place a question mark over whom their leaders really represent as they negotiate and render the agreements that they sign often inoperative. The context also poses problems as the escalation of conflict and the absence of even minimal security guarantees for minority populations accentuates the degree to which populations depend for their security on the armed groups, who consequently gain in strength.

The integration of rebels into the army is also a serious stumbling block. Militia fighters see DDRR as a promise of automatic integration into the security forces. “For me, DDR amounts to a medical test – and if you are shown to meet the standards, then you join the security forces; otherwise you return to civilian life”, says one influential leader of an armed group.⁶⁶ Yet the Bangui authorities remain highly reluctant to integrate yesterday’s enemies into what everyone in the CAR today sees as the foundation of government authority.⁶⁷ Last but certainly not least, the failure to implement DDR is also linked to the international forces’ inability to establish a real balance of strength vis-à-vis the rebels – a prerequisite for getting the rebels to negotiate. Today, MINUSCA is only trying to contain rebel activity.

With DDRR at a standstill, the Central African authorities have failed to inject fresh momentum into the mediation process, to calm the situation and reduce the level of violence.

subsequently be enrolled into community recovery programs or integrated, on an individual case-by-case basis, into the security forces – subject both to vetting (of their personal history) and to the security force units’ capacity to accept them. See “Accord sur les principes de désarmement, démobilisation, réintégration et rapatriement (DDRR) et d’intégration dans les corps en uniforme de l’Etat centrafricain entre le gouvernement de transition et les groupes armés”, Bangui, 10 May 2015.

⁶⁴ Crisis Group interview, member of UN staff, Bambari, December 2016.

⁶⁵ “Pourquoi la crise centrafricaine dure et va durer...”, op. cit.

⁶⁶ Crisis Group interview, rebel leader, Bangui, April 2016.

⁶⁷ Thierry Vircoulon, *La reconstitution de l’armée centrafricaine: un enjeu à hauts risques*, research note n°36, Institut de recherche stratégique de l’école militaire (IRSEM), 28 April 2017.

B. *The African Initiative*

Against this background the AU launched its first mediation initiative in early 2017, with the support of Chad, Angola, the ICGLR, the Republic of Congo and ECCAS. This “African Initiative for Peace and Reconciliation”⁶⁸ had the declared goal of encouraging a resumption of dialogue between the armed groups and the government, to achieve the effective disarmament of the former in return for – mainly political – commitments.⁶⁹ However, fundamental disagreements soon appeared.

1. The origins of the initiative

The AU initiative followed other attempts at mediation, particularly led by Cheick Tidiane Gadio, the representative of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC). Since 2014, he had been in contact with the protagonists in the conflict, including former President Bozizé – who has been in exile since the March 2013 coup d’état.⁷⁰ In 2015, the OIC organised a meeting with the FPRC in Chad and managed to secure a cessation of hostilities during the election period.⁷¹ Gadio quickly realised that the rebels in the ex-Seleka did not have a political agenda or structure and he tried to coax the most inflexible elements into talks and encourage them to make realistic demands. However, the Central African and the Chadian authorities feared that the mediation process might take on a religious dimension so, with the region now willing to get involved in mediation once more, the OIC handed over the task. The eighth extraordinary session of the ECCAS heads of state and government, on 30 November 2016 in Libreville, confirmed the re-engagement of the sub-region, which said that it wanted to support an AU initiative. A subject of particular concern to N’Djamena was raised – the large-scale integration of the rebels into the army.⁷²

At the same period, in December 2016, several representatives of the FPRC, of the Patriotic Movement for the Central African Republic (MPC)⁷³ and the anti-balaka travelled to Luanda for a parallel mediation exercise. They were received by the Angolan authorities, including André de Oliveira João Sango, director general of the secret services. Angola’s interest in the CAR was not new as the country had provided financial aid to the transitional administration and offered to send troops

⁶⁸ “Nous sommes en train de développer un accord de paix et de réconciliation en RCA”, RFI, 14 February 2017.

⁶⁹ Idriss Déby thus spoke of the need to organise “a national forum national including all of those who today are excluded by the international community, that is to say, the former presidents Bozizé and Djotodia, the leaders of the ex-Seleka and the anti-balaka”. “Idriss Déby Itno: au lieu de nous donner des leçons, l’Occident devrait écouter notre avis”, *Jeune Afrique*, 6 February 2017.

⁷⁰ Crisis Group interviews, researcher, diplomat, Bangui, December 2016.

⁷¹ After the Central African elections the OIC also organised local mediation both between factions of the ex-Seleka both in the CAR and at Sido, on the country’s frontier with Chad. Ibid.

⁷² Final Communiqué of the 8th Extraordinary Session of the Conference of Heads of State and Government of ECCAS, Libreville 1 December 2016.

⁷³ The Mouvement patriotique pour la Centrafrique (MPC) emerged in late July 2015 and is mainly drawn from members of the ex-Seleka from the Kaga-Bandoro and Kabo area in the north of the country. It is led by Alkatim Mahamat, one of the leading figures in the former Seleka coalition.

to the CAR in 2015.⁷⁴ Moreover, Luanda had long been arguing the case for bringing the former Presidents Bozizé and Djotodia back into the negotiations.

Still, the result of the Angolan mediation, like the Nairobi agreement signed by the most hard-line anti-balaka and ex-Seleka factions in 2015, was more like a catalogue of rebel demands than a compromise.⁷⁵ It was rejected by President Touadéra, as he made clear during a visit to Angola in early 2017.⁷⁶

Finally, at the AU summit in Addis Ababa in January 2017, Angola, the ECCAS countries and the AU agreed to coordinate their efforts in a joint initiative. This took concrete form in March 2017 with the drafting of a roadmap and a concept note. But these were still rather vague; when Hacén Lebatt, the AU's special representative for the CAR, presented them in New York in March, they failed to reassure the members of the Security Council.

2. The African initiative at the heart of discussions

The involvement of the AU, Chad, Angola and ECCAS presents several advantages. Firstly, the neighbouring countries' ability to apply even relative pressure on the leaders of some armed groups is seen by many as a guarantee that the most implacable ex-Seleka elements will join the crisis resolution process.⁷⁷

In the past, Chad in particular, has demonstrated its influence: Idriss Déby, in concert with France, forced the resignation of Djotodia in January 2014;⁷⁸ the relative calm that prevailed in the CAR during the electoral process was the consequence of instructions sent from N'Djamena to the ex-Seleka leaders; finally, individual players such as Noureddine Adam and Al Khatim have close relationships with Chad's National Security Agency and officers in the Chadian army (ANT). Indeed, it was probably a request from the Chadian president to Noureddine Adam that facilitated the talks between the Central African authorities and the FPRC leader in August and September 2017. There has already been one helpful development on 24 June 2017, with the Chad justice minister's announcement that an asset freeze and a ban on entry to the country were being imposed on Abdoulaye Hissène, the military commander of the FPRC-led coalition, who has business activities in N'Djamena. Today, although it has officially withdrawn from the diplomatic front line, in reality Chad is very involved, through ECCAS and the AU, both now headed by former Chadian foreign ministers. "N'Djamena is playing both the bilateral and multilateral cards", says a diplomat.⁷⁹

⁷⁴ In June 2016, the Central African problem is discussed at an ICGLR summit chaired by Angola, which recommends the lifting of UN sanctions and the embargo. Press Release...6th Ordinary Summit of ICGLR Heads of State and Government of the International Conference on the Great Lakes Region (ICGLR) Luanda, Angola 14 June 2016.

⁷⁵ Thus the agreements signed by the Angolan mediator and the FPRC and the MPC, and then by the anti-balaka and the Angolan mediation both envisage a recognised status for former heads of state, an amnesty, numerous ministries, 40 per cent of recruitment into the armed forces and also positions in public enterprises.

⁷⁶ "Angola: Touadéra à Luanda pour un court séjour de travail", *La Nouvelle Centrafrique*, 12 January 2017.

⁷⁷ See the interview with Hacén Lebatt, *op. cit.*

⁷⁸ "RCA: la démission de Djotodia officialisée à Ndjamena", RFI, 11 January 2014.

⁷⁹ Crisis Group interview, Bangui, June 2017.

The second advantage lies in the necessity of involving the countries of the region in any durable plan to resolve the Central African crisis. Thus the lesson of the eras of Patassé – president of the CAR from 1993 to 2003 – and Bozizé have shown that the regional isolation of Central African heads of state usually marks a first step toward their removal by force of arms. Patassé had lost the support of his neighbours and, in particular, Chad, which helped Bozizé depose him in 2003. Ten years later, it was Bozizé's turn to lose his regional supporters and be overthrown by a rebellion that maintained close links with his northern neighbour.⁸⁰

At the present time, Touadéra lacks real backers in the region. Even though Chad was the destination of his first foreign trip, his relations with Déby are not good. This is mainly because of the links that certain ex-Seleka figures maintain with elements of the Chadian leadership and because of Touadéra's initial reticence about the AU initiatives. President Touadéra's last visit to Chad in July 2017, when he met Déby, Moussa Faki and the Guinean President Alpha Condé, reportedly took place in a tense atmosphere.⁸¹ And the links between Luanda and Bangui have cooled in the wake of the Angolan mediation, which was criticised by Touadéra. Congo's President Sassou-Nguesso is reported to have once again criticised the choice of prime minister, as he did during the political transition, as Sassou-Nguesso would have preferred to see the post given to Karim Mekassoua or to Dologuélé, the defeated second round presidential election candidate.⁸² Cameroon is very preoccupied with the threat posed by Boko Haram and continues to take a back seat on CAR matters. So the only source of clear support for President Touadéra appears to be the president of Equatorial Guinea, Teodoro Obiang. This has led to the training of Central African soldiers and members of the presidential guard in Equatorial Guinea, by Israeli trainers.⁸³

Yet it is useful to involve the neighbouring countries, because they too have an interest in the stabilisation of the situation in the CAR, even if some of them have played an unhelpful role in the past. For example, Chad is worried about the position of Muslims, including traders of Chadian origin and nomadic Chadian livestock herders who go to the CAR. In 2003, Déby spoke of a supposed plan to wipe out the Chadians in the Central African Republic and in 2013, N'Djamena sent a plane to Bangui to evacuate its citizens.⁸⁴ There are also fears that the close links between northern Central Africans and southern Chadians could one day destabilise the south of Chad, the location of the oil fields that are the state's main source of revenue.

⁸⁰ For more information on the regional isolation of Bozizé, read Crisis Group Report, *Central African Republic: Priorities of the Transition*, op. cit.

⁸¹ Crisis Group telephone interview, diplomat, September 2017.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Crisis Group interview, military expert, Bangui, June 2017. Furthermore, in late June, 200 FACA soldiers left for Rwanda to undergo training there as special forces. Midterm report of the Panel of Experts on the Central African Republic extended pursuant to Security Council resolution 2339 (2017), 26 July 2017.

⁸⁴ "Le Tchad rapatrie ses ressortissants et ouvre une information judiciaire sur les exactions", RFI, 29 December 2013.

3. Disagreements on the content and methods of mediation

The content of this mediation initiative and the way it has functioned were criticised at the end of 2016 by Central African parliamentarians, members of civil society, the UN, Western governments, and the Central African president himself, including in his speech to the Security Council in March 2017. While the AU and the CAR's neighbours argue that it is necessary to first reach a political agreement and to postpone questions of justice until later, the Central African government and the UN stressed that it was essential to fight impunity.⁸⁵ In this end, the Special Criminal Court should become operational at the start of 2018, and a long UN report on the serious violations of international humanitarian law committed in the CAR between January 2003 and December 2015 – in which Chadian soldiers in particular were allegedly implicated – will provide a base of documentation.⁸⁶

Arguments quickly focused around the question of amnesty for armed groups. While the recapture of Bambari by international forces in February 2017 had given Touadéra and the UN some reason for hope and for sending a firm message toward the armed groups, the plethora of clashes in April, May and June changed the picture; the government realised that it was necessary to include CAR's neighbours in the mediation process. Touadéra said he was open to the AU's offer of mediation and the UN Secretary-General, António Guterres, confirmed that he supported the AU initiative and was waiting to see a roadmap.⁸⁷

C. *Back to the AU – After a Detour through Rome and Brussels*

After, the UN and the Central African government had thus signalled their readiness to see the subregion get clearly involved, a new phase opened in June 2017 with the signature in Rome – under the auspices of Sant'Egidio – of a “political accord for peace in the CAR” and, a few days later in Brussels, a meeting of the key mediation players in the Central African crisis.

The peace agreement was signed in Rome on 19 June 2017 by thirteen of the fourteen so-called political-military groups, the Central African foreign minister, Charles-Armel Doubane, and a presidential adviser, in the presence of representatives of the National Assembly, the political parties and religious leaders.⁸⁸ The organisers made plain their hope that this would inject fresh momentum into the mediation process. But the agreement has serious limitations of both form and

⁸⁵ “If among them there are people who have blood on their hands, let us leave time to do its work. There is no point in creating a special jurisdiction for that: the victims can always bring an action and win their case, as has happened in Chad with the agents of the old DDS from the Hissène Habré era”, quoted in “Idriss Déby Itno: au lieu de nous donner des leçons, l'Occident devrait écouter notre avis”, *op. cit.*

⁸⁶ Report of the Mapping Project documenting serious violations of international human rights law and international humanitarian law committed within the territory of the Central African Republic between January 2003 and December 2015, Office of the High Commissioner, UN Human Rights, May 2017.

⁸⁷ Report of the Secretary-General on the Central African Republic, UN, 2 June 2017. It should also be noted that since March 2017 a UN mediation team, working jointly with the AU, has been deployed in Bangui.

⁸⁸ Accord politique pour la paix en République centrafricaine, Rome, 19 June 2017.

content and in Bangui it is widely viewed as a non-event. There had been little preparatory work and it came as a surprise to many observers – and the participants; the political opposition was unaware of the purpose of the meeting even a few hours before it began.⁸⁹ Even as this agreement, envisaging an immediate ceasefire, was being signed, the fighting had actually become more intense in Bria, rendering it immediately out of date.

The agreement, like the one reached at the Brazzaville Forum in 2014, can be added to a very long list of ceasefires broken in the very hours after they had been signed. It raises questions about the utility of deals of this type, finalised in a rush. Moreover, its content also has drawbacks: in particular, it calls for consultations on the lifting of UN sanctions, a readjustment of the allowances for the representatives of the groups which come to negotiate at DDRR meetings – reminiscent of a procedure tried in the past, which proved to be problematic⁹⁰ – and also the drafting of recommendations for the reinsertion of commanders of armed groups by the “Truth, Justice and Reconciliation Commission”, which would amount to a *de facto* amnesty and also a diversion from its original purpose.

The subsequent mediators meeting, which took place in Brussels on 21 June 2017, was probably more useful. It was attended by delegations from the CAR, Angola, the Republic of Congo, France, Italy, the U.S., the AU, ECCAS, the ICGLR, the UN, the EU and Sant’Egidio. Although Chad’s absence was noticed, the various actors who were present agreed to adopt a common approach, under the leadership of the Central African government, “co-led by the African initiative” and with the support of the CAR’s international partners.⁹¹ The idea was to close the various divergences that had appeared in recent months, particularly between the Central African government and neighbouring countries over the mediation process.

So on 17 July in Libreville, the AU presented a new roadmap for peace and reconciliation in the CAR whose key principles included respect for the territorial unity of the country and the implementation of the DDRR agreement, and which recognised that impunity is not a sustainable solution. Beyond the themes specifically addressed in the document, through this initiative the AU showed that it expected to lead the mediation. The document is presented as the “sole” roadmap for peace and the international support group for the CAR – composed of the AU, ECCAS, the ICGLR, Angola, the Republic of Congo, Gabon and Chad – was designated as the facilitation panel. This met for the first time on 11 and 12 September in Bangui. While this process is to be co-led by the government and the AU, other international actors such as the UN, OIC and the EU will participate in the meetings as observers.

The success of a hypothetical future peace accord will depend less on its content – which will surely resemble previous agreements – than on the ability of its guarantors to ensure that the commitments that are made are in fact honoured and equally on whether Central Africans take ownership of the deal. Thus the shape of

⁸⁹ Crisis Group interview, Central African political actor, Bangui, June 2017.

⁹⁰ The DDR process provided an occasion for the representatives of armed groups to obtain money and establish an income stream for themselves. Unfortunately, this has never produced the desired results. Today, leaders of the armed groups treat the money that they are paid under the aegis of DDR as an income, but their men do not disarm.

⁹¹ “Les partenaires de la République centrafricaine se sont réunis au siège de l’Union européenne à Bruxelles”, press release, European Union, 21 June 2017.

the international guarantee arrangements to monitor the financing and the implementation of the agreement merits careful attention. Moreover, if an agreement starts to emerge, it would be strengthened if it were subjected both to a popular referendum before being finalised and to a vote in the Central African parliament. This would also help to foster a sense of national ownership of the deal.

D. *Lessons Learned from Previous Agreements and Mediation Efforts*

The history of the CAR is littered with political mediation efforts – in 1997, 2003, 2007, 2008, 2013 and 2015, but the agreements that have emerged from these have rarely been implemented in concrete terms. Some warlords have even received suitcases of money from mediators, in return for promises to demobilise their fighters that have produced no results.⁹² It was not even possible to implement the recommendations of the 2008 inclusive political dialogue – which had enjoyed a degree of consensus support – because of obstruction by President Bozizé and the armed groups. Years later, history falters once more as the leaders of the armed groups have not changed and former Bozizé associates still occupy key roles in government.

But some lessons can be drawn from the previous agreements. For example, the CAR has already seen deals that make amnesty conditional on participation in DDR, supposedly to open the path to reconciliation, and these have proved unsuccessful. Altogether, three amnesty laws have been passed, in 1996, 2003 and 2008. The Sirte agreement signed under the auspices of Muammar Qadhafi, and the Birao agreement had already envisaged this tool, taken up once more in the overall Libreville peace accord of 2008. Thus on 13 October 2008, President Bozizé promulgated an amnesty law approved by parliament a few days earlier.⁹³ At the time, this amnesty was a tool to exonerate the incumbent regime for the numerous crimes committed by the presidential guard and to confirm the impunity of the former “liberators” who had carried Bozizé to power in 2003.⁹⁴

But in a country that has been experiencing active rebellions continuously for the past twenty years, and where the armed groups are generally stronger than the very weak state, the granting of amnesty to rebel leaders can sometimes have the drawback of encouraging them to resort to armed struggle without fear of being punished. Moreover, there is no demand for such amnesties from the base of the rebel movements because lower-ranking combatants do not risk being put on trial anyway, the Central African justice system lacks the capacity to do so and because

⁹² In particular, this is the case for the leaders of the Convention des patriotes pour la justice et la paix (CPJP). Crisis Group interview, UN official who served on the DDR monitoring committee, Bangui, 15 December 2012.

⁹³ At the time, the opposition condemned an “unacceptable” law. “Polémique sur la loi d’amnistie générale”, RFI, 1 October 2008.

⁹⁴ To qualify for this, rebels were required, under Article 6 of the law, to end violence within 60 days and submit “to the mechanisms for regrouping, disarmament and reconversion”. But they did not disarm. They complained that the timetable was too short and they criticised Article 8, which provided that “beneficiaries of the amnesty who continue to share information with a rebel movement will be banned from engaging in any political activity for ten years”. The amnesty did not apply to “the crime of genocide or crimes against humanity or war crimes” falling within the potential jurisdiction of the International Criminal Court. See Crisis Group Africa Report N°55, *Central African Republic: Untangling the Political Dialogue*, 9 December 2008.

they will join the DDRR process. The issue really concerns only a few group leaders who could be tried either by the International Criminal Court, which is looking into the case of the CAR, or by the Special Criminal Court, which will soon be operational. Today the various mediators are taking care to avoid the word amnesty, even though the leaders of armed groups repeatedly call for an amnesty.

Another key question is the political inclusion of the rebels at national level, particularly through ministerial appointments. During the last ministerial reshuffle, announced on 12 September 2017, ministerial posts were granted to several leaders from ex-Seleka factions and from the anti-balaka. Although the ex-Seleka failed to secure the position of prime minister, as Noureddine Adam had wanted, Gontran Djono Ahaba, mining minister during the transition and a nephew of Djotodia, Ahamed Senoussi and Lambert Mokove Lissane, a senior FPRC figure close to Adam, were brought into the new government team, securing some strategic portfolios such as water and forestry. The anti-balaka leaders Jean-Alexandre Dedet and Jacob Mokpem Bionli have also joined Touadéra's second administration. The political peace accord signed in Rome goes yet further and encourages the rebel groups to turn themselves into formal political parties. Yet so far, attempts to move in this direction have failed, while other efforts to politicise these groups have proved to be a total fiasco – as was to be expected, given the experience of the ex-Seleka's brief spell in power, which was characterised by generalised looting and a spate of factional squabbles.

So while this strategy of political inclusion at the national level has been tried numerous times in the past, with some short-term security benefits, the longer-term effects have been damaging. Thus, in a country used to coups d'état, securing the leadership of an armed group has become one of the main routes into politics.⁹⁵ The political agreement deal that followed the 1996 mutinies gave places in government to the representatives of the mutineers. The Sirte accord and the first and second Libreville agreements envisaged the appointment of rebels to posts in the administration and in the government itself. In the aftermath of the 2008 Libreville comprehensive peace accord, the Union of Democratic Forces for Unity (UFDR) secured positions in the government and the administration, but no development program was designed for the north east and combatants were not disarmed. It will be necessary to innovate and the local level of politics may be more pertinent here (see Section V).

Finally, the crisis resolution measures included in the previous agreements and under discussion again today tend to focus on political concessions and financial rewards that the central state and the CAR's neighbours can offer to the armed groups, but this neglects the key issue of stability at the local level. The sometimes conflictual relationships between communities evident in the north and east have received no attention. So the confrontations between Gula and Runga or, more recently, between the UPC Fulanis and the other ex-Seleka factions are neglected. If the negotiations that lie ahead are to tackle the sources of instability, they need to take account of such "north-north" or "east-east" relations.⁹⁶

⁹⁵ Andreas Mehler, "Rebels and Parties: The Impact of Armed Insurgency on Representation in the CAR", *Journal of Modern African Studies*, vol. 49, no. 1 (2011), pp. 115-139.

⁹⁶ Numerous efforts have been undertaken by local actors, international NGOs and the UN to support local dialogue and mediation structures such as the "peace committees", "mediation

V. What Kind of Negotiations to Resolve the Crisis?

For several months, violence has been growing, reaching levels comparable to 2014. There seems no prospect stabilising the security situation in the CAR in the near future and a solid peace agreement could take time to emerge. In such a context, there is a great temptation to adopt easy solutions that could prove problematic in the long term.

Even so, it is possible to make some progress, however limited, by pursuing a twin-track approach that would tackle both the disarmament of the armed groups and those more structural causes of the conflict that are amenable to concrete action. For example, this is the case with livestock migration and conflicts between farmers and herders, an issue of interest to government in Chad, Cameroon, Sudan, Democratic Republic of Congo and the CAR. These are subjects where it would be possible to get the Central African authorities involved and to secure neighbouring countries' agreement to a strategy that could benefit all parties. Moreover, in tackling armed groups, getting to a negotiated settlement, implies first regaining a degree of influence over the parties to the conflict. That could be done through an effective campaign against the war economy but also by making strong commitments to those regions whose populations are distrustful and even hostile toward successive central governments.

A. *Dealing with the Issue of the Armed Groups*

Faced with the thorny question of the armed groups, the government and its partners find themselves in a double bind, both military and political. In reality, the international forces have only a limited ability to apply pressure from a position of strength on the armed groups, to incite them to negotiate, and there is little prospect that this situation will change. The hurried redeployment of the Central African armed forces would not change this reality.⁹⁷ Even before the crisis, the territory of the CAR was receiving military support from seven foreign powers. Moreover, the government has virtually nothing to offer the armed groups in political terms that is likely to satisfy them and the AU and Sant'Egidio initiatives. Although well-meaning, they have sometimes had a counterproductive effect as they tend to encourage the groups to step up their demands rather than moderate them.

The government, helped by its partners, must face up to the fact that these obstacles exist and refrain from devoting all its energy to the implementation of a DDRR program that is desirable but only hypothetical. As Crisis Group has already recommended, it is time to adopt policies that reduce the attraction of the criminal economy and armed groups, particularly for young people, and which allies the use of tools for applying pressure with encouragement for armed group leaders to cooperate.⁹⁸

committees", "social cohesion committees" and "public education committees" and the religious structures. These days, local peace committees exist in many towns. But it is not easy to create a public space where the various players can discuss local problems. The (peace) accords that are expected should include proposals for arrangements that could facilitate these discussions.

⁹⁷ *La reconstitution de l'armée centrafricaine: un enjeu à hauts risques*, op. cit.

⁹⁸ See Crisis Group Africa Report N°219, *The Central African crisis: From Predation to Stabilisation*, 17 June 2014.

1. Tackling the finances of the armed groups

The first challenge is to fight against the most lucrative trafficking activity because these economic predation has been a powerful personal motivation for the leaders of the armed groups for the past fifteen years. Up to now, the mandate of the UN peacekeepers has made only vague reference to trafficking. Security Council Resolution 2301 merely envisages “to support the CAR authorities to develop a nationally owned strategy to tackle the illicit exploitation and trafficking networks of natural resources which continue to fund and supply armed groups in the CAR”. Yet there is no prospect of making progress on the ground without the direct involvement of the international forces. While the mandate of MINUSCA should be renewed in November 2017, its force contingents should be assigned specific missions to erode these networks. This is a necessary prerequisite if the international forces are to regain influence over the parties to the conflict.

The international forces recapture of the main mining sites that the armed groups are fighting over in the east would produce several benefits. If this was linked with the return of the staff of the Central African state’s mining administration to these sites and a relaunch of the Kimberley Process certification mechanism for the diamonds produced in these areas, this would both deprive the armed groups of this revenue and, perhaps, erode support for the ex-Seleka groups among the actors in the diamond sector, who are among the main business people and local notables in the eastern mining towns. The regulated restart of the trade could provide work for young people relaunch the local economy and erode sympathy for the armed groups among economic actors.

But it is also important to control trafficking in other assets, particularly cattle, through closer cooperation with neighbouring countries including Cameroon, which is one of the main channels for selling on the cattle stolen in the CAR. In May 2017, the Cameroonian and Central African defence ministers discussed proposals for a joint military commission to improve border security. Intelligence and police should also be planned, to dismantle these networks, particularly through cooperation with the owners of stolen animals, to carry out surveillance in border markets.⁹⁹ The Blue Helmets should be entrusted with the task of monitoring the border locations where stolen Central African and Chadian cattle are known to cross into the territory of the neighbouring state.

2. A blend of pressure and incentives

The policies pursued in dealing with these armed groups should combine both stick and carrot – controlling measures and incentives. When progress was made in negotiations in the past, in the cases of the Birao agreement of 2007 or the Libreville accord of 2013 this was the result of the pressures and balance of strength applied in each case.¹⁰⁰ More recently, in Bambari, the work of the Portuguese special forces

⁹⁹ The Central African defence minister visited Cameroon from 17 to 19 April 2017 to meet his Cameroonian counterpart. “Joseph Yakété visite les structures de Défense et le musée national”, Cameroon Radio Television (CRTV), 17 April 2017.

¹⁰⁰ In 2007, Zacharia Damane’s signature of the Birao Accord came in the wake of the intervention of French forces at Birao, which was unfortunately followed by human rights abuses committed

in the rapid reaction force was generally applauded. Today, MINUSCA requires reinforcement. A fresh effort to secure more troops should be very quickly approved, to secure the deployment of other contingents also capable of applying comparable pressure on the actors in the conflict.

However, even increased military pressure will be insufficient. While it can force a degree of compliance by relatively well-organised groups, such as the ex-Seleka factions, it is harder to make an impact on groups such as the anti-balaka, that are scattered widely and are less easily recognisable, because they are more blended into the general population. It is therefore vital to identify the local leaders and former members of the FACA army who encourage these groups to act and to arrest those individuals who are well known in Bangui and engage in doublespeak toward the government and the UN. If chaos is to be avoided, it is essential to have the intelligence capacity and ability to rapidly make arrests after abuses are committed. In line with Resolution 2301 of 26 July 2016, the Security Council should once again order MINUSCA to arrest the warlords who continue to stage attacks and give the force the means to do so.

But at the same time, the armed groups should be offered incentives to help solve the crisis. Besides the integration of a limited number of militia fighters into the army, it would be worth discussing how local commanders could play a more political role, not at the national level but at the local level. The prospect of such a career change, to become local political actors, could encourage them to play a more positive role.¹⁰¹

But such an arrangement could only operate if subject to several conditions. A vetting mechanism needs to be put in place to avoid the risk of installing the commanders with most blood on their hands in political life, even at the local level. An appropriate training program would then need to be developed, so that the selected commanders were equipped to become civilian administrators. The state would appoint them and should have the power to sanction or even arrest them if they continued to engage in criminal activity.

B. Rebuilding a Better Relationship between Outlying Areas and Bangui

In the past, armed groups took advantage of the absence of the state and its inability to act in the country's peripheral regions other than through indiscriminate repression, which provoked a mood of angry defiance among the local people. The abuses committed by Bozizé's presidential guard against the Gula in 2006 have not been forgotten.¹⁰² To reduce the influence of the armed groups it will be necessary to engage in concrete initiatives for local people, while taking into account the numerous rifts that undermine the cohesion of northern communities. This will not be an easy task. In the east of the country, Touadéra's political career as a former prime

by the Central African army. The Libreville Accords of January 2013 came after heavy pressure from Chad.

¹⁰¹ Mahamat Zacharia, one of the most influential leaders in the ex-Seleka and a longtime leader of the UFDR was in fact a municipal councillor in Gordil in the early 2000s.

¹⁰² Crisis Group interviews, civil society actors, traders, Bria, December 2016; and read "State of Anarchy, Rebellion and Abuses against Civilians", Human Rights Watch (HRW), 14 September 2007.

minister under Bozizé and vice-chairman of his party, Kwa Na Kwa, and the presence of many supporters of the former president among party ranks, arouse the mistrust of a section of the population. Their wariness has only been accentuated by the recent lifting of the judicial supervision that had been imposed on former defence minister Jean-François Bozizé, son of François Bozizé.¹⁰³

To construct a better relationship between the capital and the east of the country the government has got to do more than simply redeploy to the region a few public servants who all too often lack real authority. It should propose a fundamental break with the policies pursued by the previous governments and take full responsibility for delivering this. While the formal recognition of Muslim religious holidays and the president's many trips to provincial areas are positive steps, much more is needed. A planned law on local authorities and administrative boundaries is set to be approved when parliament resumes, but the lack of sufficient resources to implement a meaningful devolution of responsibilities to local institutions does risk causing frustration.

Faced with a shortfall in Muslim representation, rules should be drawn up to encourage diversity in public service recruitment, in terms of both geography and community origin. The training of a new administrative elite in the main fields such as public works, finance and security should be a priority project. The government and the CAR's main donors should implement such a program, with training courses provided both in Bangui and in provincial centres, and they should make sure that Muslims are among the participants.

The reform of Central African nationality was one of the recommendations of the inclusive political dialogue as far back as 2008. At the request of Abakar Sabone, the then mediator, the former Burundian President Pierre Buyoya, expressed a wish for the fight against all forms of religious discrimination to be included in the agreement.¹⁰⁴ But significant forms of discrimination still persist, such as in the issuing of identity documents. So the CAR needs to embark on the task of reconstituting a reliable civil register of citizens, including in Muslim neighbourhoods. The authorities' message has to be clear: Muslims are Central Africans entitled to a full role in national society.

Besides these basic reforms, certain symbolic measures should be implemented. Organising the National Day festivities on 1 December in the north east would help in symbolically tying this region into the nation as a whole, which would certainly have positive political repercussions. The president could also demonstrate political courage and recognise, in the name of the state, the crimes committed by his predecessors in the north-west and the east of the country, in order to draw a line under the past and open a new page. During the inclusive political dialogue, Patassé

¹⁰³ "Francis Bozizé mettra fin à son contrôle judiciaire le lundi prochain", Réseau des journalistes pour les droits de l'Homme – Centrafrique (RJDH), 5 May 2017.

¹⁰⁴ Abakar Sabone is one of the founders of the Union des forces démocratiques pour le rassemblement (UFDR) and the leader of the Mouvement des libérateurs centrafricains pour la justice (MLCJ). Among the leaders of rebellions in the north east of the CAR, he is probably the one who has most often spoken about the marginalisation of Vakaga region and discrimination against Muslim populations. Crisis Group Africa Briefing N°69, *Central African Republic: Keeping the Dialogue Alive*, 12 January 2010.

offered his apologies, although the political context was, of course, different because Bozizé was in power.¹⁰⁵

C. *Building Sensible Cooperation with Neighbours:
The Case of Pastoralism*

The drafting of a new peace agreement or the organisation of an inclusive political dialogue will require the prior establishment of solid cooperation relationships between Bangui and its neighbours. Some subjects – such as the conflicts linked to livestock migration that have exploded in number since the start of the crisis – could, if well managed, form part of the base of shared interests that will be essential for the success of a crisis resolution process. Moreover several armed groups, such as the UPC and “Retour, réclamation et réhabilitation” (3R)¹⁰⁶ which has developed in the west of the CAR since its creation in late 2015, have made the protection of livestock herders an important part of their agenda, even working out a number of proposals for the mapping of livestock corridors and planning the recreation of units of archers to protect the livestock.¹⁰⁷ Progress on these subjects would be more effective than the usual political and financial concessions in helping to contain the activities of these groups.

All of the CAR’s neighbours have an interest in seeing calm restored to the relationship between pastoralists and the rest of the population. Cameroon, the destination for the cattle that is trafficked on the Central African side of the frontier, now hosts many Central African Fulani refugees. Most of these refugees are pastoralists, many of whom have lost their livestock in violent clashes. The movement of livestock from Sudan into CAR is often accompanied by violence, regularly sparking clashes in Vakaga prefecture and they thus contribute to the militarisation of the north east. In Orientale province of the Democratic Republic of Congo there are many Fulani who came from CAR in the 2000s and there is a growing number of conflicts with local people in the Haut and Bas-Uélé districts, even forcing Kinshasa authorities to intervene, under the aegis of the prime minister.¹⁰⁸

For its part, N’Djamena has long been concerned about the theft of Chadian livestock herds on Central African territory. On several occasions, Idriss Déby complained to President Bozizé about his failure to act against highway robbers. That Chadian soldiers have regularly been sent into Central African territory to settle disputes involving herdsmen is evidence of this worry.¹⁰⁹

If the dialogue with armed groups becomes bogged down, Chadians and Central Africans can still work together on livestock migration, which is a question of practicality. It is vital to relaunch the bilateral initiatives on this issue that were originally

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ The group 3R, led by the self-proclaimed general Sidiji Abass, was initially created to protect Fulani populations who were being targeted by anti-balaka militias. Subsequently, 3R has itself committed many abuses against civilians in the area along the border with Cameroon.

¹⁰⁷ *Rencontre de Malloum entre Ali Darassa et les chefs traditionnels des éleveurs et des agriculteurs*, communiqué, Malloum declaration, 8 September 2016.

¹⁰⁸ See Crisis Group Africa Report N°215, *The Security Challenges of Pastoralism in Central Africa*, 1 April 2014.

¹⁰⁹ Crisis Group interview, military expert, Bangui, June 2017.

begun in 2012 within the framework of the Chad-Central African Republic joint commission but were abandoned during the crisis. More generally, the Communauté économique du bétail, de la viande et des ressources halieutiques (Cebevirha – the Economic Commission for Livestock, Meat and Fisheries Resources) and the UN Regional Office for Central Africa (UNOCA) should deal with this subject and organise a regional forum to try to restore peace to cross-border transhumance movements.¹¹⁰ In the CAR, strong support for the Fédération nationale des éleveurs centrafricains (National Federation of Central African Livestock Herders) and work in synergy with the Chadian livestock federations should also be pursued, to inform Chadian livestock herders about the routes that they should use where possible and the farming areas to be avoided. One could even imagine that in the long term they would work together in accompanying herders at certain stages and serve as an interface between them and the local Central African authorities.

If the Central African authorities and the international community want to inject fresh momentum into the mediation that is underway, they should take renewed interest in the issue of transhumance, to build consensus and tackle the more structural causes of conflict.

¹¹⁰ The principal mission of the Cebevirha, an institution of the Economic and Monetary Community of Central Africa (Cemac) established in 1987, is to work on the development of the livestock sector and the harmonisation of the sector's practices across the Cemac area.

VI. Conclusion

The next few months are full of danger for the CAR. The possibility of a resumption of open conflict or a civil war dividing communities can no longer be ruled out, as conflicts flare up in the provinces. Following the meeting between the Central African government and CAR international partners, the latter absolutely must present a coherent roadmap and, in concert with the government, begin a process of effective and rigorous mediation with the armed groups. To ensure that the negotiations reach a conclusion, adequate pressure must be applied to the parties to the conflict, accompanied by positive incentives. At a moment when many national and international actors in Bangui are losing hope, there is still time to show ambition, reverse current trends and avoid the worst.

Bangui/Nairobi/Brussels, 28 September 2017

Appendix A: Map of Central African Republic



Appendix B: About the International Crisis Group

The International Crisis Group (Crisis Group) is an independent, non-profit, non-governmental organisation, with some 120 staff members on five continents, working through field-based analysis and high-level advocacy to prevent and resolve deadly conflict.

Crisis Group's approach is grounded in field research. Teams of political analysts are located within or close by countries or regions at risk of outbreak, escalation or recurrence of violent conflict. Based on information and assessments from the field, it produces analytical reports containing practical recommendations targeted at key international, regional and national decision-takers. Crisis Group also publishes *CrisisWatch*, a monthly early warning bulletin, providing a succinct regular update on the state of play in up to 70 situations of conflict or potential conflict around the world.

Crisis Group's reports are distributed widely by email and made available simultaneously on its website, www.crisisgroup.org. Crisis Group works closely with governments and those who influence them, including the media, to highlight its crisis analyses and to generate support for its policy prescriptions.

The Crisis Group Board of Trustees – which includes prominent figures from the fields of politics, diplomacy, business and the media – is directly involved in helping to bring the reports and recommendations to the attention of senior policymakers around the world. Crisis Group is chaired by former UN Deputy Secretary-General and Administrator of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), Lord Mark Malloch-Brown. Its Vice Chair is Ayo Obe, a Legal Practitioner, Columnist and TV Presenter in Nigeria.

Crisis Group's President & CEO, Jean-Marie Guéhenno, served as the UN Under-Secretary-General for Peacekeeping Operations from 2000-2008, and in 2012, as Deputy Joint Special Envoy of the United Nations and the League of Arab States on Syria. He left his post as Deputy Joint Special Envoy to chair the commission that prepared the white paper on French defence and national security in 2013.

Crisis Group's international headquarters is in Brussels, and the organisation has offices in ten other locations: Bishkek, Bogota, Dakar, Kabul, Islamabad, Istanbul, Nairobi, London, New York, and Washington, DC. It has presences in the following locations: Abuja, Algiers, Bangkok, Beirut, Caracas, Gaza City, Guatemala City, Hong Kong, Jerusalem, Johannesburg, Juba, Mexico City, New Delhi, Rabat, Sanaa, Tblisi, Toronto, Tripoli, Tunis, and Yangon.

Crisis Group receives financial support from a wide range of governments, foundations, and private sources. Currently Crisis Group holds relationships with the following governmental departments and agencies: Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Austrian Development Agency, Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, European Union Instrument contributing to Stability and Peace (IcSP), Finnish Ministry for Foreign Affairs, French Development Agency, French Ministry of Defence, French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, German Federal Foreign Office, Global Affairs Canada, Irish Aid, Principality of Liechtenstein, Luxembourg Ministry of Foreign Affairs, New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs.

Crisis Group also holds relationships with the following foundations: Carnegie Corporation of New York, Henry Luce Foundation, Humanity United, John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, Oak Foundation, Open Society Foundations, Ploughshares Fund, Robert Bosch Stiftung, and Wellspring Philanthropic Fund.

September 2017

Appendix C: Reports and Briefings on Africa since 2014

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Exploiting Disorder: al-Qaeda and the Islamic State, Special Report N°1, 14 March 2016 (also available in Arabic and French).

Seizing the Moment: From Early Warning to Early Action, Special Report N°2, 22 June 2016.

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