

Central African Republic: Freedom of religion or belief

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Introduction

On 10 December 2012 fighting broke out between the Bozizé government and the Seleka rebel alliance, leading to a significant deterioration in the human rights and humanitarian situation in the Central African Republic (CAR). The CAR had no previous history of sectarian violence, but during this time local sources noted the increased targeting of the Christian population by Seleka elements.

In March 2016 the CAR returned to democratic rule; however, the transition period between the Seleka's seizure of power in March 2013 and the election of Faustin-Archange Touadéra three years later saw widespread violations of the right to freedom of religion or belief (FoRB).

The CAR is now plagued by cyclical violence perpetrated by increasingly fragmenting armed groups that operate without restraint across the country. These groups are responsible for the majority of human rights violations, including of FoRB.

Religiously motivated attacks

During the transition period violence was regularly reported, including grenade attacks, bombs thrown into occupied church buildings, looting, desecration of places of worship, destruction of buildings providing essential social services, and muggings.

Muslims in the capital, Bangui, were also affected by this violence. The security situation in Bangui has improved significantly in recent months, and churches in most of the city have been able to resume their activities, although churches remain closed in areas where the situation is still volatile.

Religiously-motivated attacks continue to occur. At least 15 people were killed and 100 were injured when gunmen attacked a mass service at Our Lady Fatima Church near KM5 district in Bangui on 1 May 2018. A Catholic priest was among those killed in the attack. Constant gunfire was heard in and around KM5 district from the time of the attack until 3pm. After attacking the church, the perpetrators moved into neighbouring districts, looting shops and homes and attacking civilians. An Evangelical church member was killed outside his home.

Reprisals soon followed, with a local mosque vandalised, and cars and personal property looted and burned. Our Lady Fatima Church had been attacked in 2014 by gunmen who killed a priest and several churchgoers.

On 7 February 2017 three churches were burned and a pastor killed in the KM5 district of Bangui, following the death of a gang leader at the hands of the police and the UN Peacekeeping Mission in the CAR (MINUSCA). On 11 February 2017 Popular Front for the Central African Renaissance (FPRC) leader General Zoundeko was killed near Bambari. Several

churches in the Ouham area were subsequently set on fire in reprisal attacks.

Restrictions on FoRB

Restrictions on the right to FoRB continue to be reported, and as with other human rights abuses, the main perpetrators are the Seleka and anti-Balaka. In parts of the country where the groups operate, the state's control is severely reduced. Both militias have created their own informal administrative structures and exert control over citizens with impunity.

In areas controlled by the Seleka in the north of the country such as Kaka Bango, the local population lives under severe restrictions. The Seleka imposes informal and ad hoc taxes on the movement of persons and goods: Muslims living in Seleka-controlled areas are also required to pay these illegal taxes. Some express frustration at the requirements, but others see it as a way of protecting their lives and business interests from the anti-Balaka.

In Seleka-controlled areas the threat of violence is ever present; those who refuse to comply with the group's demands are attacked, often fatally. Local sources have reported incidents of the Seleka killing farmers who were tending their land without permission or without having paid the requisite taxes. A church leader informed CSW of the impact of the pervasive sense of fear: "It is not easy for the church to live and function and at different times there are still attacks, there are killings and executions which means the Christians are continuing to live in fear. Sometimes people flee to church buildings for refuge but they are pursued and killed there."

Attendance of religious meetings during the week or of special events requires permission. Attendance of church services on Sundays has not been expressly forbidden; however, due to the restrictions on other activities, Christians have limited their meetings to Sundays.

In the Anti-Balaka-held regions in the south-west of the country, Christians are generally free to worship and to express their faith in public and in private, but Muslims face far more restrictions. As a result, very few Muslims remain in the area. The Anti-Balaka have targeted non-Muslim religious leaders who advocate for Muslims, and have attacked those involved in peacebuilding and reconciliation between Muslims and Christians, including an elderly man who was assaulted in his home.

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Fragmentation of armed groups

Since November 2016 armed groups have increasingly split into factions, causing an increase in violence, which in turn has led to large scale population displacement.

FoRB restrictions on converts

One of the most vulnerable groups in relation to FoRB violations is those who have exercised the right to change their beliefs. With the advent of Seleka, religious identity became a central issue in the conflict. Those who converted from Islam to Christianity or vice versa were particularly vulnerable to the attacks of both armed groups if their conversion was deemed to be forced, or were forced to lie about their religious identity. Social hostilities between religious communities have increased, and converting to another faith now involves much higher risk, both for those choosing to change their faith and those who support them.

Recommendations

- Encourage the government of the Central African Republic to work with MINUSCA and the international community to restore security and state operations across the nation, and to facilitate the deployment of a reconstituted national army that has the confidence of the people.
- Urge the government of the Central African Republic to ensure that individuals who have committed human rights abuses during the recent or previous conflicts are brought to justice, and are not given political positions or appointed to the armed forces.
- Urge the government of the Central African Republic to extend protection to key religious and community leaders who are working on peacebuilding and reconciliation initiatives, and who have been targeted by armed groups.
- Encourage the MINUSCA to proactively execute its mandate to protect civilian populations from armed groups, without discrimination.
- Support the establishment of the Special Criminal Court and appropriate justice mechanisms to bring perpetrators of human rights abuses to justice.
- Ensure that protection is extended to key religious and community leaders working on peacebuilding and reconciliation initiatives, and who have been targeted by armed groups.
- As the largest donor to the CAR, the EU should ensure that funds are apportioned to support peacebuilding and reconciliation initiatives that aim to restore social cohesion between religious and ethnic groups.