

Religious Persecution resulting from Conflict in the Central African Republic by Illia Djadi, Former Africa Bureau Chief WorldWatch Monitor

Background Information

Central African Republic fell into chaos six years when several rebel groups unhappy with the government of President Francois Bozizé, joined forces in December 2012 under the banner Séléka and within weeks had taken control of much of the country's north, northeast and the central regions. Then they advanced to the south (predominantly Christian) where the capital lies. What started as a grievance rebellion, then changed over time. The rebels swept into the country's capital on Sunday, 24 March 2013, ousting the president. They targeted Christians and their properties and attacked priests¹. The main Cathedral of Bangui, the premises of the Catholic Caritas Charity, and the houses of a number of religious communities were targeted by armed men.

Because most rebels came from the north or from neighbouring Muslim countries, security analysts agreed that there was a religious dimension and ideology behind the group².

A letter was found from the rebel leader addressed to the Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC) revealing an agenda of being a defender of Muslims in Chad and the Central African Republic and asking for support as being insulted and despised daily³. The rebels pledged to institute a Sharia regime if they succeeded in taking power. The Catholic Bishops' Conference challenged this. The rebel authorities refused to deny the OIC letter and denied any need for protection measures for the Christian population in the south. According to the Archbishop the rebellion was characterised by religious extremism and linked to Al-Qaeda⁴.

Then a self-defense militia named anti-Balaka was formed in opposition to the rebels.

Response of the International Community

12,000+ UN peacekeeping troops were eventually sent⁵. But they failed to restore law and order, or to prevent massacres. UN troops are mostly from Muslim-majority countries (Bangladesh, Pakistan, Egypt, Morocco, Mauritania). They are accused of complicity with armed groups in a string of massacres committed across the country, particularly in 2017.

Here's a timeline of some massacres

Paoua. On 27 December 2017, fighting between two ex-Séléka rebel groups – the RJ (Revolution Justice) and the MPC (Le Mouvement Patriotique pour la Centrafrique) – erupted in the north-western town of Paoua and its surroundings. The violence claimed more than 100 lives and forced some 60,000 people to flee.

In an open letter, dated 3 January and addressed to the representative of the UN General Secretary in the Central African Republic, Parfait Onanga Anyanga, a local NGO, Mekasna, pointed out a recent article by local news site [La Voix des Sans Voix](#), titled 'MINUSCA caught red-handed refuelling militants of General Bahar in weapons and ammunition'.

¹ [Anxiety high as rebels take over Central African Republic](#)

² [Church shelled, seven Christians killed in Central African Republic](#)

³ [OIC letter from C. African Republic President sought support for Islamic republic](#)

⁴ [Top pastor's arrest adds to Christians' concerns in Central African Republic](#)

⁵ [UN troops on their way to CAR](#)

“This supply [by MINUSCA] gave the rebels a smile and strength to complete their despicable acts on the peaceful population,” wrote Mekasna.

“This scene took place in Gouze, 20km from Paoua, where the Séléka elements were refuelled and transported to Boguila, watched helplessly by the vigilante groups, and then deployed on the Boguila-Bemal-Betoko-Bemaide route.

“We do not understand this sudden turnaround of MINUSCA, whose main mission is to protect the civilian population by fighting the armed groups that will attack them. It has never been agreed in any resolution that MINUSCA should cooperate with Séléka, made up of foreign mercenaries, to bring about genocide in the sub-prefecture of Paoua.”

Bocaranga. [On Friday 22 September](#), armed men attacked the north-western town of Bocaranga, forcing the vast majority of its 15,000 inhabitants, including women and children, to flee. Two armed groups: the 3R (Retour, Réclamation et Réhabilitation), a predominantly Fulani group led by Abass Sidiki, and MPC, led by Mohamed Bahar attacked and overran the town, without any reaction from the MINUSCA troops, believed to be a contingent from Bangladesh.

[On Sunday 24 September](#), MINUSCA said its troops had intervened and repelled the attack, but in reality the town was still under rebel control. [MINUSCA eventually launched an offensive, on 7-8 October](#), to remove the rebels from Bocaranga.

Zemio. On 1 September 2017, dozens of people were killed as [armed men invaded the south-eastern town of Zemio](#), despite the presence of UN troops, believed to be from Morocco. The assailants, believed to be mercenaries from Sudan, looted and ransacked a number of properties, including a health centre. They also looted the Catholic Church compound, prompting some 15,000 people who had sought refuge there to flee to neighbouring Democratic Republic of Congo, including Fr. Jean Alain Zembi, the rector of Zemio, and his colleague, Fr. Désiré Blaise Kpangou.

Zemio had been plagued by violence since 28 June, when armed gangs overran it, cutting telephone lines and forcing half of its 50,000 inhabitants to flee. [In a series of messages on Facebook](#), Fr. Zembi and Fr. Kpangou had warned about the presence of militiamen in the area.

Fr. Zembi accused UN peacekeepers stationed in Zemio of “deliberately abandoning” his town and leaving parishioners to be murdered by rebels. “You were warned, but you deliberately decided to abandon this town,” he wrote. He added: “This community is being sacrificed, and I will hold you responsible for all those dead and preparing to die.”

“If you don’t come soon to disarm these people, we will have to organise confessions and a final Mass and viaticum [giving Communion to and anointing someone before death] and prepare ourselves and the rest of the displaced people here for the worst,” Fr. Kpangou told UN forces on Facebook.

On 2 September, Father Louis Tongagnesi was hacked to death by armed men at his farm in Zambagua village, near Zemio. According to local sources, the killing was carried out by a Séléka offshoot, the Union for Peace in Central Africa (UPC), a mainly Muslim and Fulani militia, and one of 13 armed groups that signed a peace agreement broached by the Roman Catholic Sant’Egidio peace group, in Rome, in June 2017.

Gambo. On 5-6 August, [dozens of civilians were slaughtered in an attack by UPC militants in the south-eastern town of Gambo](#). Most of the victims were women and children, and many had their

throats slit; others were burnt alive in their properties. Ten Red Cross workers were among those killed.

An undetermined number of houses and properties, including the Catholic compound, were also looted and burned down. The Moroccan UN troops, who were in the town during the violence, did nothing to prevent the killings or protect civilians.

Bangassou. In July 2017, the Bishop of Bangassou, [Juan José Aguirre Muños, demanded the withdrawal of the Moroccan contingent](#) accused of indiscriminate killing of civilians in Bangassou. His demand was seconded by the President of the Islamic Council in the CAR, one of the country's top three religious leaders and a founding member of its Interfaith Platform.

"The people are witnesses and victims of the activity in [Bangassou] of the Moroccan contingent of UN peacekeepers," said [Imam Oumar Kobine Layama](#), part of a delegation sent from Bangui to investigate the situation in and around Bangassou. "The people want the contingent to leave Bangassou because it has failed in its duty to protect civilians. These troops do little or nothing when the militiamen attack. Some say the Moroccan military are the cause of several cases of murder because they shoot civilians point-blank, calling them militia," he added.

Alindao, May 2017. In a [report published last September](#), Amnesty International denounced the failure of UN troops to protect civilians in the eastern prefecture of Basse-Kotto, including a massacre in the town of Alindao (on 8 May 2017) in which 130 people were killed, though credible sources estimated the toll reached several hundred.

The Alindao bloodbath was attributed to UPC militants. The victims were Christian townspeople and villagers, perceived as supporting armed groups that oppose UPC's rule, points out the report. Annie, 36, recalled how the assailants captured her and her husband in Alindao on 10 May. "We're going to do something to you Christians that won't be forgotten for many generations," she said the men told them, before one fighter raped her and another fighter raped her husband. "After raping my husband, he shot him in the head," Annie told Amnesty International.

During a [visit in October 2018](#), UN Secretary-General António Guterres was questioned by MPs about the mandate of the UN troops in CAR.

"How to explain that 12,000 men of the United Nations force are on the ground and that at the same time the civilian population continues to be massacred?" asked Karim Meckassoua, the President of the National Assembly. "What is the mandate of this force? Cannot we do better and more?" The leader of the opposition, Anicet-Georges Dologué, added: "We have all noted that some officials of the Minusca maintained sympathies with warlords with regards to either culture or religion, either to obscure economic interests."

Catholic Cardinal Dieudonné Nzapalainga has also condemned the ongoing violence. He recalled that he and his two fellow leaders of CAR's interfaith platform advocated for the deployment of UN peacekeepers, but he now says "regrettably, we noticed their failures and limitations on the ground. On various occasions, they have failed to protect those in need of assistance, and many have come to ask questions about their role or mandate in CAR". In March 2017, following deadly clashes in the northern town of Kaga Bandoro (350km north of the capital), he spoke about the same issue⁶.

⁶ https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=9&v=3mv0N77v5Qs

Q&As

Q. Guterres announced an inquiry, but no evidence was found. Was this raised with UK diplomats?
Not sure, but the UN denies any wrongdoing following an inquiry⁷.

UN Office for Humanitarian Affairs expressed concerns over what they called 'a forgotten crisis' and pleaded for more journalists to come⁸. But being a francophone country (CAR) and with a complex situation it was not a priority. Some reporters sowed confusion by referring to the anti-Balaka militia as Christians, But the church in CAR denied this, as many Christians have been targeted by the so called an-Balaka.

Described in Western media as 'Christian rebels', the Anti-balaka are anything but Christian⁹; at best they might be nominal or cultural Christians. Wearing juju (occult charms) around their necks, they fight with knives, clubs, rifles and (ironically) machetes, to rid the south of Muslims. Furthermore, they routinely threaten to burn churches and kill pastors that shelter Muslims. But as the Rev. Dieu-Seni Bikowo explained in 2014, "For us they are not Muslims or Christians. They are people - people in danger."

The Episcopal Conference of the Central African Republic also denounced the use of religious affiliation to justify violence. "The anti-Balaka is the expression of exasperation of part of the population against the numerous abuses committed by Séléka rebels," the statement said. "However, we reiterate that all anti-Balaka are not Christians and that all Christians are not anti-Balaka. It is the same for ex-Séléka and Muslims¹⁰."

Q. Do you have any policy recommendations for the diplomats on how to stop the violence?

Not yet. But security remains the main challenge as three quarters of the country is still under rebel control¹¹.

The weapons came from neighbouring Chad, Sudan or Libya, etc. Foreign powers like France/China/South Africa (interested by natural resources) are also involved in the crisis. Russians are the latest and newcomer. A Russian Envoy, Valery Zakharov, is adviser to the President, and Russian troops formed the presidential guard.

On 23 August, Zakharov organised a one-day meeting with religious leaders for peace dialogue. Russians are also involved in a peace agreement with 14 armed groups under the African Union banner¹².

Q. Are there any diplomatic missions taking action? US, EU, France & Russia are the main players. The country is under a UN weapons embargo, which Russia got partially lifted and was able to send weapons and trainers. More needs to be done to stop the violence, to restore law and order. UN troops need to act according to their mandate to protect civilians. Many, including MPs and religious leaders are asking the UN to withdraw troops involved in massacres.

END

⁷ [UN denies complicity in Central African Republic massacres, but questions remain](#)

⁸ [Five years on, Central African Republic crisis deepens](#)

⁹ <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2018/06/cars-clerics-warn-against-attempts-to-divide-christians-and-muslims/>

¹⁰ <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2013/12/scores-killed-in-central-african-republic/>

¹¹ [Central African Republic: where government rule only runs in the capital](#)

¹² [As Sudan hosts CAR peace talks, Russia offers to get more involved](#)