The Central African Republic in Crisis: Critical Measures to Address Humanitarian and Security Needs

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In December 2020, presidential elections in the Central African Republic (CAR) were marked by a major surge in violence. They precipitated a national crisis that has engulfed the country’s civilian population in a new humanitarian emergency. The eruption of CAR’s newest crisis has damaged the credibility of the December 27 elections and may prove to be the final blow to the country’s 2019 peace accord. But most worrying, it jeopardizes the safety of Central Africans.

Since mid-December 2020, more than 200,000 Central Africans have been forced to flee their homes and seek safety in other regions of the country or across its borders. Before the recent wave of violence, 2.8 million people—more than half of CAR’s 4.9 million citizens—required humanitarian assistance. Now, as armed groups wreak havoc across the country, key supply chains have been cut. The movement of relief aid, including food and medicine, as well as commercial goods, is being drastically limited. Over the next few weeks, the humanitarian consequences of these disruptions will be dire.

Humanitarian organizations must move quickly to re-route incoming relief supplies and find alternate ways to reach populations in need. Such an innovative and costly endeavor will be difficult unless donors take swift action. International stakeholders must come together to provide crucial funding and enable aid groups to mitigate the troubling consequences of the worsening security context.

Despite assistance from Russia and Rwanda, CAR’s national armed forces are likely to continue to struggle to regain control as they confront the upsurge in attacks by armed groups. The United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA) has been in place since 2014 to protect civilians, but the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) must provide this peacekeeping operation the resources it needs to effectively fulfill its mandate. In addition, CAR’s armed forces and other international security actors must guarantee safe passage for humanitarian workers to the best of their ability. At this pivotal moment, international stakeholders must focus first and foremost on aiding and protecting the country’s civilian population.

**COMPOUNDING CRISSES**

CAR is a small landlocked country that has endured repeated cycles of violence since it gained independence from France more than 60 years ago. The current fighting is rooted in the 2013-2014 civil war, when the Muslim-majority Séléka group staged a coup against the Christian-majority government. President François Bozizé’s government responded by creating the anti-Balaka militia to preserve his authority. While efforts to keep Bozizé in power proved futile, tensions escalated into a short but vicious civil war which ended in 2014. Elections were held the following year and in
2016, Faustin-Archange Touadéra, who ran as an independent, took over from his former boss (whom Touadera had served as Prime Minister from 2008 to 2013). By then, Bozizé had already fled the country.

Despite the end of the civil war, armed groups of varying and mixed ethnicities and religious affiliations still control most of the country beyond the capital of Bangui. Any sense of security has proved fleeting. Although the government signed a peace accord with 14 armed groups in 2019, its signatories continue to engage in violence. The government and MINUSCA have remained locked in a low-intensity conflict with rebel groups since the peacekeeping mission’s deployment in 2014. Central Africans find themselves caught in the crossfires, resulting in massive displacement and humanitarian need.

The most recent crisis began in the run-up to the December 2020 elections, when former president Bozizé returned to CAR after six years in exile. Last year, he announced he would run against incumbent president Touadéra. However, on December 3, the Central African Constitutional Court rejected his candidacy because of an outstanding international warrant for his arrest for alleged human rights violations during the recent civil war.

Bozizé responded by creating the Opposition’s Democratic Coalition (Coalition démocratique de l’opposition, referred to as COD), which then backed former prime minister Anicet-Georges Dologuélé in the presidential race. Days later, three rebel groups—the anti-Balaka, who remain loyal to Bozizé since the civil war; 3R; and MPC—formed a new armed alliance, calling themselves the Coalition of Patriots for Change (Coalition des patriotes pour le changement, referred to as CPC) and widely believed to support Bozizé.

Word of these new alliances quickly spread fear across CAR. Within days, the new CPC rebel alliance attacked and took over key towns, including Mbaiki, Bozoum, Boali, and Bossembélé. Other armed groups took advantage of the chaos to capture towns as well. The Central African Armed Forces (Forces Armées Centrafricaine, referred to as FACA)—reinforced by troops from Russia and Rwanda—and MINUSCA were able to recapture most towns. However, seven peacekeepers lost their lives over the course of December 2020 and January 2021.

In disregard of ongoing conflict, the government insisted elections take place as planned on December 27. Unsurprisingly, election day was also riddled with violence perpetrated by groups opposing the government and those loyal to the current President. Across the country, armed groups attacked electoral convoys and reportedly stole and burnt ballot boxes. Many polling stations did not open at all or closed because of intimidation and violence by militias. In Bambari, UN peacekeepers protected voters as factions tried to disrupt voting.
On January 4, 2021, the National Elections Authority announced President Touadéra had won a second term with **53 percent** of the vote. In reaction, the opposition alleged fraud and called for the Constitutional Court to annul the electoral results. As the Court deliberated on validating the outcome, hundreds of rebels attacked the capital.

Though rebel attacks on key towns have been successfully thwarted by military forces, armed groups continue to threaten the safety of civilians and control many key roads, preventing the flow of essential commodities into and throughout the country. Suppliers are unable to replenish markets, goods are becoming scarce and costly, and aid groups are struggling to reach populations. Humanitarian needs are dramatically increasing with each passing day.

In the longer-term, only a political solution can break the cycles of violence. The government, opposition leaders and armed groups must engage in dialogue, or risk further entrenching the country’s political and security crisis. International stakeholders must pressure the Central African government to initiate talks. Donor governments and
institutions should make their assistance to the government conditional on their good faith efforts to participate in talks to quell the violence. By the same token, outside stakeholders should be prepared to press opposition leaders and armed groups to engage as well.

**DISPLACEMENT AND NEEDS**

In late 2020, more than 2.8 million of CAR’s 4.9 million people required humanitarian assistance, 641,000 people were already internally displaced, and 623,000 had sought asylum in nearby countries. From mid-December 2020 to late-January 2021, an additional 100,000 people were displaced within CAR and violence pushed more than 105,000 Central Africans into neighboring Cameroon, Chad, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and the Republic of the Congo. The recent surge in violence brings the total number of uprooted Central Africans—internally and externally—to more than 1.4 million.

As the new coalition of armed groups advanced across cities in the west and center of the country, more than 150,000 people fled their homes. Some did so in the face of
immediate danger, while others left pre-emptively. As a Central African political analyst told Refugees International by phone, “we are witnessing erratic displacement, where every rumor leads to displacement.” Central Africans’ deeply rooted fears, stemming from decades of violence and volatility, are understandable and make it hard to predict patterns of displacement.

According to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), most internally displaced people are in or around the cities of Bakala, Bambari, Bangassou, Bouar, Bouca, Dékoa, Grimari, and Paoua (identified in light blue on the map). Many have found safety in religious buildings or close to MINUSCA bases. However, thousands of others have sought safety deep in the bush—outside the reach of armed groups but also of aid organizations seeking to assist them.

The majority of the displaced have temporarily resettled in places not intended to house such large groups. Many of these sites are overcrowded and lack sufficient water and sanitation facilities. This is particularly concerning amid the COVID-19 pandemic. Staff of non-governmental organizations (NGO) report people’s urgent need for food, sleeping mats, and blankets.

Some relief groups anticipated the deterioration of security surrounding the elections. To mitigate the consequences, they created contingency plans and replenished warehouses beforehand. However, many NGO offices and their stockpiles have been ransacked in recent weeks and, as armed groups block key trade routes across the country, resupplying basic goods is proving difficult.

Human rights violations, ranging from sexual violence and abuse of children to arbitrary detention and execution, are alarmingly common in CAR. The recent intensification of violence will likely further undermine individuals’ access to protection. The aid community must therefore increase protection programming at this crucial time, while also working to mainstream protection across all sectors. For example, when planning displacement camps, aid groups must ensure that shelters, latrines, and showers have locks and that paths to water and sanitation facilities in and outside of camps have adequate lighting. To ensure they maximize the protective impact of their programming, humanitarian groups must identify potential protection risks and mitigate them at each step of project design and implementation.

Not only is insecurity pushing people away from their homes, but it is causing many to lose their livelihoods, including limiting access to their agricultural fields. As the crisis persists, many of the country’s agricultural communities will miss the upcoming February–March planting season. As the financial consequences of this reality begin to affect people, they may be forced to resort to negative coping mechanisms, such as crime and joining armed groups, simply to survive.
While the funding requirements laid out in OCHA’s 2021 Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP) anticipated some of this displacement and need, the current situation likely means that the $444 million USD requested for the current year will be insufficient. Given the rapid increase in humanitarian need and displacement since the 2021 HRP was released, OCHA should launch an emergency funding appeal to cover the additional financial requirements. Considering these pressing needs and the ongoing global pandemic, donors must commit to at least fully funding the existing appeal for CAR’s aid response and fulfill all new and existing funding pledges without delay.

**Regional Displacement**

Some 105,000 Central Africans have recently fled to neighboring countries. As of mid-January 2021, more than 92,000 people had made their way into the Democratic Republic of the Congo, 5,300 in Cameroon, 6,200 Chad, and 1,600 in the Republic of the Congo. Aid workers in all four countries told Refugees International that the newly arrived Central Africans require food, shelter, hygiene kits, and improved access to water and sanitation facilities. However, the host countries’ resources are being stretched in trying to provide for the sudden influx of people. Donors should increase funding for these host countries’ respective 2021 Humanitarian Response Plans to ensure displaced Central Africans’ needs can be met.

**Access Constraints**

**Blocked Roads**

Access constraints have always been a serious obstacle to the mobility and delivery of humanitarian aid and personnel within CAR. Where roads exist, the presence of armed groups and violence often prevent relief groups from reaching displaced people and others in need of assistance. As intense violence erupts, aid organizations are forced to temporarily suspend their programming. Aid workers in CAR told Refugees International that efforts to negotiate humanitarian access with militias are ongoing but extremely difficult in the current context. Tensions are high as armed groups vie to control more land and its associated mineral wealth. Fighting among armed groups—as well as government military operations to quell the threat they pose—complicate the negotiation process. Moreover, many militias are only willing to negotiate with high-ranking UN representatives, leaving very few people to lead numerous negotiation processes. As a result, gaining access is a slow and incremental effort.

In addition to armed factions and national forces, humanitarian organizations reported to Refugees International that the Wagner Group, a Russian private military contractor that has partnered with the FACA for more than two years, has also prevented organizations from delivering aid to communities. Given that the Central African
government partners with this force, it must immediately call on the Wagner Group to cease restricting access to humanitarian workers and come to an agreement with the aid community. International stakeholders, including the UN Security Council, should echo this request.

Efforts to negotiate humanitarian access with the new CPC rebel alliance are proving particularly difficult. The armed faction is not a unified front, which complicates talks and will likely lead to in-fighting and more insecurity down the line. According to humanitarian NGOs, the CPC has allowed aid groups to operate in the central city of Bambari but has blocked the country’s principal trade route—National Route 1—in a dangerous ploy to get the government to concede power.

National Route 1 is the conduit for most of the country’s commercial goods, including food and medicine. It enables their movement from Cameroon to CAR’s western city of Bouar and down to Bangui, from which many of the country’s markets are then replenished. The same is true for humanitarian goods. CAR’s humanitarian Logistics Cluster lead told Refugees International that 80 percent of the country’s incoming aid is shipped to Cameroonian ports then delivered to Bangui via this road.

There are now an estimated 1,600 cargo trucks stuck at Cameroon’s border with CAR. Transport companies have prohibited their drivers from crossing into the tense country, fearing the road’s insecurity. According to OCHA, the closure of this supply route has caused prices of cooking oil, fish, meat, onions, and the country’s main staple, cassava, to double. A UN staff member also told Refugees International that the national water distribution company (Société de distribution d’eau en Centrafrique, referred to as SODECA) will run out of chlorine to treat water in the capital by late January. A local political analyst told Refugees International that without an immediate solution, “Bangui will suffocate, and then the rest of the country will, too.” These shortages could result in an exponential increase in the number of people in need of humanitarian assistance by spring 2021. The severed supply chain could also prove deadly for the 1.9 million Central Africans who are already facing food insecurity.

On January 18, a group of 30 trucks, five of which were carrying humanitarian supplies, crossed the border and were making their way towards Bouar when the CPC attacked the convoy, injuring three drivers and looting the trucks. UN staff explained to Refugees International that MINUSCA is working to secure the road and has been able to provide escorts for small convoys of trucks. Considering the peacekeeping operation’s current resources, strength, and capacity, MINUSCA is unlikely to be able to recapture and maintain control of the road while still effectively responding to threats in other parts of the country.

Using waterways
Negotiating access by road across the country must be the priority of UN agencies and NGOs alike. However, these efforts may not succeed fast enough to replenish Bangui with critical commercial and humanitarian stock. As one UN staff member noted, “it is not evident if there are levers to pull to compel armed groups into cooperating.” The fastest and most cost-efficient solution may be for UN agencies and humanitarian organizations to have basic goods immediately brought to Bangui from the Democratic Republic of the Congo and/or the Republic of the Congo via the Ubangi river. This waterway is frequently used to transport fuel and cement, but humanitarian groups only occasionally use it because of the risks—in the past, cargo has been lost to high water levels. However, using the river could be a lifeline at this desperate time. Humanitarian organizations should come together to hire boats and barges to bring much-needed supplies into Bangui. From there, goods can be transported to other key towns along the river, such as Bangassou.

**Air alternatives**

To reach places inaccessible by land or water, the humanitarian community is likely to turn to the World Food Program’s Humanitarian Air Service (UNHAS) and the Logistics Cluster’s air cargo service. For years, these services have enabled relief groups to overcome obstacles to access in order to transport aid workers and carry out medical evacuations and security relocations. Typically, cargo is transported by land during the dry season and by air during the rainy season, when roads are easily washed out. But if armed groups continue to attack and loot convoys during this year's dry season (which roughly runs from November to March), air travel will become the saving grace of CAR's humanitarian response. This solution will be costly.

Aid groups are already increasingly relying on aircraft to transport cargo. The Logistics Cluster reported to Refugees International that their air cargo service usually operates five to six cargo flights a month. But 15 flights are planned for January 2021, and the service expects more requests. When OCHA published CAR'S HRP in mid-December, it requested $22 million USD for air services to operate at full capacity in 2021. However, UN staff reported to Refugees International that the amount needed will likely increase by up to $5 million USD by spring. Traditionally, funding contributions for UNHAS passenger and cargo services start to trickle in around late March and into April each year. This year, financing will need to arrive much faster. The international community must immediately provide UNHAS with the funds it needs to help aid groups overcome the dangerous obstacles to access.

Bolstering UNHAS can allow humanitarian staff and cargo to travel within the country but getting supplies into CAR will remain a challenge. At the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the European Union launched a temporary humanitarian air bridge to bring vital goods to countries in need on non-military aircraft. CAR was its first destination, in
May 2020. This model should immediately be replicated by the European Union and/or other donor governments and institutions to bring crucial necessities into the country.

**OVERCOMING NEW SECURITY THREATS**

Since mid-December, the security landscape of the Central African conflict has intensified. Recent rebel offensives have been much stronger than those in the past—so much so that the United Nations relocated Rwandan peacekeepers from the peacekeeping mission in South Sudan to support MINUSCA, which has just under 13,000 uniformed troops. This quick action should be applauded, although taking crucial resources away from one peacekeeping mission to assist another is not sustainable. The gaps in MINUSCA’s funding, resources, and capacity have long been apparent, but repeated calls to bolster the mission have been ignored. Instead, as the force’s mandate has expanded over the years, its budget has failed to keep pace.

The protection of civilians is a top priority in MINUSCA’s mandate. However, the peacekeeping operation’s size and limited capabilities mean it cannot be active everywhere civilians are under threat. In an effort to be faster and more proactive, MINUSCA has used early warning and rapid response mechanisms to respond to imminent threats with quick deployments to specific regions. Unfortunately, these systems are not as developed and effective as they could be. MINUSCA must identify current shortcomings in these systems and then identify how they can be addressed to better its ability to protect civilians. The recent intensification of violence demonstrates that such improvements will be crucial going forward.

Armed groups’ escalating tactics affect both armed forces and civilians. An aid worker told Refugees International that armed groups have broken and stolen lampposts in towns and nearby displacement camps to perpetuate a feeling of insecurity, intimidate civilians, and decrease the likelihood of their movements being detected. To counter these attempts, MINUSCA should increase nighttime patrols in the towns under its duty of care.

During a recent briefing to the UNSC, Mankeur Ndiaye, the representative of the United Nations secretary-general and head of MINUSCA, made yet another plea for the tools necessary for peacekeepers to fulfill their mandate in CAR. Ndiaye called for “a substantial increase of uniformed troops”—especially special forces—from other UN peace operations to support MINUSCA on a short-term basis. He explained that, to address the evolving scope of the security situation, MINUSCA needs additional capacities, such as drones and attack helicopters. The UNSC members, troop-contributing countries, and the UN General Assembly’s budget committee all have a role
to play in bolstering MINUSCA. They must heed Ndiaye’s call to facilitate the successful fulfillment of its critical function. The temporary deployment of additional troops should be approved without delay. However, given mounting insecurity, the Mission’s strength must be reassessed to identify and provide peacekeepers with the resources needed on a more permanent basis.

**THE VIABILITY OF THE KHARTOUM AGREEMENT**

There was reason to hope for peace when the Central African government and 14 armed groups signed the *Khartoum Agreement* in February 2019. But a mere six months later, the *Report of the Secretary-General on the situation in the Central African Republic* noted that, on a weekly basis, “50 to 70 violations of the peace agreement are reported, committed mainly by armed groups against civilians” through the use of “[v]iolence against civilians, illegal taxation, the obstruction of the deployment of State authority,” and other tactics.

These violations have gone unpunished as armed factions increasingly disregard their commitments under the accord. President Touadéra has also failed to adhere to the agreement in good faith, reform national security forces, and to end widespread impunity. Instead, rebel leaders now fill government positions without ceasing their leadership of the militias that fuel conflict and corruption.

As the Khartoum Agreement’s two-year anniversary nears, the recent episode of electoral violence must compel the African Union, MINUSCA, and the Central African government to assess the accord’s relevance and viability in order to determine ways forward that avoid future spirals into violence. The answers may be elusive, but Central Africans have seen that the alternative to political dialogue is untold human suffering. In the meantime, critical measures must be taken to address humanitarian imperatives and the security situation that so dramatically impacts them.

**CONCLUSION**

A swift response from humanitarian groups—bolstered by the necessary funding and peacekeeping enhancements—will limit the number of Central Africans forced to resort to negative coping mechanisms to provide for themselves and their families. From insufficient humanitarian funding, to inadequate resourcing of the peacekeeping mission, the international community has avoided giving CAR the tools necessary for peace and security.

Without immediate action from international donors, the next few weeks could prove disastrous for the people of the Central African Republic. As insecurity spreads and
rebels obstruct the movement of people, humanitarian assistance, and basic goods, communities across the country will suffer.

RECOMMENDATIONS

THE CENTRAL AFRICAN GOVERNMENT MUST:

- Engage in dialogue with political opposition parties and rebel groups. A purely military approach to CAR’s current crisis will only perpetuate violence. The government must initiate talks with all parties to the conflict and political opposition to address the roots of the conflict.
- Require Russia’s paramilitary company, the Wagner Group, to come to an agreement with the aid community to improve humanitarian access to communities in need. If the Central African government continues to receive support from the Wagner Group, it should demand they do not prevent CAR’s civilian population from receiving crucial humanitarian assistance.

UN AID AGENCIES AND HUMANITARIAN ORGANIZATIONS MUST:

- Immediately re-route incoming goods to the Democratic Republic of the Congo and/or the Republic of the Congo to be imported into CAR via the Ubangui river. Given mounting security threats along the principal trade route from the ports of neighboring Cameroon into CAR’s capital, humanitarian organizations and UN agencies must bring much-needed aid using the country’s waterways instead.

THE UN SECURITY COUNCIL MUST:

- Approve the temporary deployment of additional UN peacekeepers to support MINUSCA, then reassess the Mission’s strengths and gaps to identify permanent solutions. Recent events signal an intensification of the country’s conflict. MINUSCA has requested more troops to keep pace with CAR’s increasingly challenging security context but requires both immediate and targeted long-term solutions.
- Encourage the Central African government to initiate talks with the armed groups and political opponents.
- Echo calls for Russia’s Wagner Group to allow for humanitarian organizations to have unrestricted access to populations in need of assistance.

THE UN MULTIDIMENSIONAL INTEGRATED STABILIZATION MISSION IN THE CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC (MINUSCA) MUST:
• **Increase nighttime patrols through towns.** To limit the possibility of attacks on civilians, peacekeepers should increase their nighttime patrols of the locations in their duty of care.

• **Bolster its early warning and rapid response systems to strengthen efforts to protect civilians.** These improvements would allow the Mission to protect populations under imminent threat, rather than arriving to these regions after they have been attacked.

**DONOR GOVERNMENTS AND INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTIONS MUST:**

• **Condition bilateral assistance to compel the Central African government to engage in dialogue.** The government must be incentivized to stop its purely military approach to addressing the current crisis and, instead, engage in mediated talks with opposition groups and armed factions.

• **Be prepared to press opposition groups and armed factions to enter into dialogue with the government.**

• **Immediately fully fund UNHAS.** As armed groups and violence continue to restrict road travel, aid organizations are becoming increasingly reliant on in-country flights. The international community must provide UNHAS with the $22 million USD it requires for 2021 to help aid groups overcome these dangerous obstacles.

• **Create a humanitarian air bridge to bring vital goods into CAR.** As the country’s main trade route from Cameroon remains blocked, basic necessities, such as food and medicine, are soon expected to run out. Flying these goods into CAR would help overcome this challenge.

• **Fully fund OCHA’s 2021 Humanitarian Response Plan for CAR.** Considering the urgency of the humanitarian situation and the ongoing global pandemic, donors must engage and commit to fully funding the $444 million USD humanitarian response plan for 2021 without delay.